This story is about a radio-dialing, non-video-gaming, book-reading, low-tech family who call their friends on this corded device:

Welcome to a technology-free home. This family is part of a growing movement of people who believe that in order to enjoy life to its fullest, you need to do some things the old-fashioned way.

BY JANELLE BROWN | PRODUCED BY JESS CHAMBERLAIN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS J. STORY
The first thing you notice about the San Francisco Mission District home of Laura Jo Wegman and Donovan Corliss is that there seems to be an awful lot of space. Wall space, counter space, floor space. It's as if something is missing. Like TVs, video games, laptops, smartphones, and iPads. That's because Wegman and Corliss have designated their home a technology-free zone. Their kitchen boasts a basic fridge, dishwasher, and stove—all with no LED interfaces. The phones are rotary dial, and even the clocks are analog, like the 1940s schoolhouse clock they restored with sons Lev, 4, and Ezra, 6, before displaying it in the kitchen.

"I've never been into screens and displays and flashing lights. I find them distracting from the things I really care about," explains Wegman, design director of the organic home-textiles company Coyuchi.

"I think TV and Internet and phones become such a time suck that people feel that they don't have time for anything else," says Corliss, a developer for the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency. "They don't have time to do artwork with their kids or read books or have a conversation with one another."

Corliss and Wegman always tended toward a low-tech lifestyle but became even more invested after Ezra's birth. Since minimizing technology in their home, Corliss says that he feels restored. "I feel like I can be more present and that I'm more refreshed." He says he even sleeps better.

Sure, maybe they get "some eye rolls" when people come over, but what they also get is time. Time to read The New Yorker in its entirety every week; time to bake bread from scratch; time to take their kids hiking and biking.

Wegman and Corliss are at the purist edge of a technology backlash that has been gaining momentum over the past few years. The idea? Unplug yourself and reconnect with an analog way of life. Oddly, the epicenter of this movement is the San Francisco Bay Area, also home to the tech-saturated Silicon Valley, where a smartphone is practically a requirement for residency.

But what "unpluggers" like Corliss and Wegman have decided is that technology, despite its promises to improve our lives and make it more efficient, often distracts us from more meaningful interactions. At the heart of the unplugging movement is a desire, à la Thoreau, to get back to a purer way of living: to rediscover hobbies, use your hands, get outdoors, have a conversation that isn't mediated by bits and bytes.

Although technology frees us up, it does so almost to a fault. It actually takes us away from the physical act of doing anything, Wegman says. So, for example, she and Corliss grind their own flour for pancakes, then flip through a print edition of the newspaper over a hot breakfast.

The most visible manifestation of the unplugging movement has been the National Day of Unplugging (see "Looking to Unplug?" on page 80), now in its fourth year; and the related Technology Shabbat movement, which advocates a 24-hour digital hiatus every week. Filmmaker and Mill Valley, California, resident Tiffany Shlain started using the phrase "Technology Shabbat" in 2008; in 2010, she decided she wanted to practice it more deeply, after realizing she was inundated with technology. At the time, her father was dying and alert only one hour a day. "During that hour, I would turn off my phone and focus on him," she recalls. "I began to think a lot about how to be present with the people we live with."
Every Friday night, Shlain’s family now powers down all their cell phones, laptops, and TVs. Where Saturday mornings used to be fragmented and solitary—the kids watching TV, the parents consuming email with their coffee—it’s now their favorite day of the week, filled with gardening, hiking, and writing (long-hand) in journals.

“It’s a deliciously long day,” Shlain says. “Technology speeds up time, and time is relative to your state of motion. When you are moving so quickly with all these devices, time passes really fast.”

Three years into her experiment, Shlain has motivated thousands of others nationwide to start their own Technology Sabbaths, many interpreting the term with their own rules and boundaries. But the common refrain that she hears from everyone? “They feel they got their balance back.”

Many unpluggers, like Shlain, begin the technology power-down after having kids, concerned about the impact of ubiquitous technology on developing minds. This was also true for the Corliss/Wegman family. They wanted their kids to have a tactile and immersive childhood. Instead of video games, the family plays board or card games. Ezra and Lev enjoy classic toys like marble runs and wooden trains. In the kitchen, they experiment with old-fashioned cooking gadgets like flour grinders, a hand-crank ice cream maker, and a handpress juicer. Upstairs are two “art studios”—one for the kids, one for Wegman—crammed with imagination-inspiring supplies, the fruits of which decorate every wall of their house.

“I don’t think of it so much as subtracting as adding,” Corliss explains. It’s as if eliminating the physical clutter of cords and monitors has freed up more empty room in their minds for creativity.

Many of the pleasures of their low-tech life are simple ones that are frequently lost in the hustle of digital living. The daily subscription to a print newspaper, for example. And when friends come over for dinner, conversations tend to linger, uninterrupted by cell phones, while the kids build forts, put on puppet shows, or kick a ball around outside. “We have dinner without the TV and the Internet, and this blinking and that going off. I can complete a whole phrase and idea,” Wegman says.

Still, both parents insist that they aren’t puritans. Both own laptops and iPhones, lightly used for things like Google Maps or booking flights online (at a minimum in front of the kids, though, because they like to keep the home space pure). They even have a TV stashed on the floor of their closet, which gets pulled out of hiding every two years. “I’m an Olympics junkie,” Wegman confesses. But do they miss technology in their home? Not at all.

Okay, maybe a little: “Heating up milk for the children, in a pot at 3 in the morning?” Corliss recalls. “Oh my goodness. I wished I had a microwave.”
WHAT'S MISSING
- Phone
- Fax machine
- Paper shredder
- Cable modem

WHAT'S HERE
- Paper and notebooks
- Colored pencils
- Fabric swatches
- Art supplies to kick-start creativity, like yarn and paintbrushes
WHAT'S IT LIKE TO GO UNPLUGGED FOR 24 HOURS? FIND OUT:
sunset.com/24hoursunplugged
Our story (January, page 74) about one family’s quest for low-tech happiness stirred debate. Post your own reaction (and watch a slideshow of the family’s old-tech tools for living) at sunset.com/unpluggedhome

A really good idea?

I was so excited to read about this family because sometimes I thought my husband and I were the only people balking at the frivolousness of so much technology. We are both public school teachers and we want our own children to be able to use their imagination and appreciate their interactions with people. So many of our students have difficulty visualizing scenes from novels and using images to portray their ideas because technology does this for them constantly. Limiting children’s exposure to technology is beneficial because they must use their imagination to visualize, and interactions with technology become a treat, not background noise.

—KATHLEEN JAY, POSTED AT SUNSET.COM

Many of us out here in the world go about our lives the old-fashioned way. We raised our kids outside with imaginations. They were healthy and thin naturally because they were so active. I have noticed each generation seems to collect more problems with more technology. It is fine to use as a tool, but when you have children and adults sitting at the dinner table, texting or talking on a cell phone, it is time to do something. Hurrah for this couple who have realized the problem and are trying to fix it!

—JOAN MAC, AT SUNSET.COM

Slowing down and simplifying life to enjoy pleasures such as music, reading, good food, conversation: It’s a bit like bringing a spirit of vacation to daily life. And none of the above involves a gadget.

—PAMELA BEERE BRIGGS, AT SUNSET.COM
Time to get real?

Your "Unplugged" house article had to be the most privileged, pretentious article I've seen in your magazine ever. Rich people in a large San Francisco house, with plenty of money and time (apparently), grinding their own flour and eschewing LED lights (but keeping the fancy appliances and marble countertops)? Why?

I'm all for DIY, but this is ridiculous. The smugness kills me. If you are going to include articles about unplugging, can we keep it down to earth? I read Sunset for practical, stylish inspiration. Yuppies in San Francisco pretending to be back-to-the-landers is not what I am looking for. —DAPHNE PHILLIPS, LIVERMORE, CA

I recently had to replace my stove. I chose one with the kind of distracting LED interface the subjects of your article avoid. We are a struggling family, like most these days. Do you know how much a cool, retro, non-LED oven would cost? My point is: It takes a lot of money to live like you have no money.

Can you imagine a typical working-class family with no television? They are likely so exhausted from working a double shift at the hospital or the restaurant that the hour off their feet while their children are babysat by Disney is likely the only way they can get through the week. —JENNIFER KNOX, LA MESA, CA

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CREATIVE PLATES

Thank you for filling your recent issue with a variety of veggie-filled recipes and the feature on chef Aaron Woo (January, page 82). With the West's wonderful produce, it's easy to melt into plant-based eating habits. I loved reading about the creativity of cooking with vegetables for the love of vegetables, without the strictures of a structured diet.

—MONICA DENNIS, LOS ANGELES