

Before computers: How we spent our time

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [July 13, 2010](#) issue

Over the past year I have been speaking with different groups about biblical narrative in the age of Twitter. As more and more people find Facebook updates, text messages and 140-character tweets adequate for their communication needs, who will retain the skills to read the lengthy, complex, ancient stories that have given rise to three major world religions?

When I ask questions like that, many in my audience assume that I am attacking new media, which is why I leave time for them to come to the microphone to tell me how churches use Facebook to reach the young or the bereaved, or that anyone who does not know how to use social networking will soon be irrelevant to the political process in this country.

I know, I say. I know all kinds of people who have found community through social networking. One young pastor has begun “twitnessing” the unchurched via her cell phone, with results she finds gratifying. Other friends who live far from population centers are able to work or go to school on their computers. I am not attacking the new media.

My concern is with those who have lost their freedom to decide when to use the media and when to turn it off. A woman I know says she learned to network in order to spread word of a new nonprofit, then found herself up all hours of the night on sites that had nothing to do with her ministry. Another says she shut down her Facebook page but is having trouble handling her anxiety since most of her family and friends are still heavy users. Those of us who limp along on e-mail know how many hours vanish in service of ever-growing mountains of mail.

Does anyone remember what people did with the hours we are now spending in front of screens?

When I recently asked a mixed-age group this question, I realized that only half of those in front of me had any frame of reference for answering it. Those who were 25 or older remembered a time before cell phones and laptops. Those who were younger had no such memories. They developed their motor skills on video games, not swing sets. They registered their stuffed animals online so their virtual pets could play with other children's virtual pets. They grew up with computers and could not imagine life without them.

Alarming as this was to me, I must admit that my own memory is fading. How did I keep up with my friends when all I had was a land line? How did I work away from home without a wireless connection and a laptop? What did I do with all the hours I now spend in front of computers? My answers are bound to be laced with nostalgia, but if I do not write them down now I may forget them altogether.

I remember listening to music while driving the car and looking forward to long airline flights as extended downtime. I worked less because the tools of my work were not always at hand. I read maps to get where I wanted to go, took wrong turns that required me to recalculate my position on my own, and discovered things while I was lost that I would never have found by staying on course.

When I needed to know something I went to the library, sitting for hours on the hard floor in the stacks pulling books off the shelves. Some of them were so old their covers were hanging by strings, with dedications written in the faded brown ink of a fountain pen. When I could not find what I wanted, I filled out a request for interlibrary loan or accepted the fact that there were things I could not presently know. I learned to work within such limits, which often led me to create things I might otherwise have copied from someone else.

I wrote letters with nice pens on thick paper, which I occasionally decorated with watercolors. I was in touch with fewer people, with whom I shared things of more substance. I put colorful stamps on envelopes and walked them to the mailbox. When I bought things, I bought them from people whose hands touched mine when they gave me my change. PayPal never showed up on my bank statement.

I made lunch dates with people I cared about, practicing the art of conversation. When they lived too far away for that, I longed for their physical presence—their smell, their touch, the sound of their voices—acknowledging no adequate substitute for that. I accepted a certain level of longing as belonging to the human condition. I

brushed my dogs, went for long walks with my partner, did volunteer work in my community.

I could go on, but if you are old enough, perhaps you have begun making your own list. Who knows? Maybe it will be in a museum some day: Things People Did Before Computers. Or you could rescue the things on your list from obscurity right now by continuing to do them. This is your God-given freedom—even in the age of Twitter.