

In praise of things old and inconvenient: Transcending the reality of inefficiency

by [Gordon Atkinson](#)

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Someone left a beautiful blue box on the front porch of our church recently. A note on the top said “For Gordon.” I opened the box and inside was an elegant, blue fountain pen with gold bands.

The pen was left by an Episcopal priest named Cristopher (yes, that's the correct spelling) whom I met in a coffee shop several weeks ago. We had one of those “You’re a minister? Me too! Isn’t preaching wonderful except when it’s awful?” conversations that ministers often have. The next time I saw him there, I noticed he was writing with a fountain pen. And since he is left-handed, there was ink smeared all over his hand.

Writing with a fountain pen is a choice. And to do so as a left hander, meaning you will always be dragging your left hand through wet ink, indicates a serious commitment. It’s like me using my grandfather’s pocket watch, which loses about 6 minutes a day. It’s not practical, nor does it make sense in an age when cheap quartz watches lose less than a second a month.

And yet I enjoy winding my grandfather’s watch, setting the time and carrying the timepiece in the little pocket made for pocket watches that is still included—amazingly—in every pair of jeans I buy.

As it turns out, Cristopher writes with fountain pens because he loves them. He loves the feel of the ink flowing through the nib and onto the paper. He loves that they are old fashioned. They remind him of a day when people wrote to each other on paper and with distinctive handwriting styles.

I write mostly on the computer. If I have to write by hand, I use little felt-tip pens that I buy in boxes of 12. But by the end of our conversation, my new friend had talked me into entering his dreamy world of quills, parchments, ink blotters and romance. I imagined opening a letter from my beloved that has taken a month to arrive. The thick paper of the envelope pops open, breaking the wax seal. The letter unfolds with the rustle of paper on paper. I recognize the handwriting of my love and my heart breaks a little.

I found myself thinking about buying a fountain pen. But I didn't buy one. After Cristopher left the coffee shop, I went back to writing on my computer, and within a day or so, the magic was gone.

Then the pen showed up on the porch of my church, and now I'm back into a fountain pen frame of mind. You can't believe the dark line of glistening ink this pen lays down. It moves across paper like a wet fingertip on ice. It's seductive and a little intoxicating and it makes me want to write. I've fallen in love with it, and now my wife wants one too.

But really, what is a fountain pen going to do for me? It's a hassle to use, and because it's expensive, I have to be careful lest I lose it. So why do I carry it with me now and use it every day?

Perhaps because there is something intangible in the pen and the paper and in the feel of these things. It is an awesome thought to know that someone will read your words and hold your thoughts in her mind. Something about the fountain pen settles me and brings me down into a writing kind of place.

Things like fountain pens, old tools and pocket watches transcend the reality of their inefficiency (at least these days) and ascend to a higher plane of existence. They bring to mind bygone eras. They have a rich quality that is worth the trouble, certainly worth a little ink on your fingers from time to time. These old, well-made items of quality feel good in our hands. They feel solid. They leave stains on our fingers and marks on our souls. It is good to use them.

I regularly meet people who reject the Bible just as they'd reject a fountain pen. Yes, some of the stories and letters seem clunky, old-fashioned, difficult to understand and hopelessly out of date. What wisdom you find must be mined from its first-century context and translated into the language of the modern mind. It's a lot of work, which is why we pay preachers—specialists—to unpack these scriptures for us.

If you're looking for spiritual wisdom, it's a lot easier to pick up a self-help book at your local Precious Moments Christian store. If you can buy your wisdom predigested, why do battle with the Bible?

And why hold my grandfather's watch in my hands and listen to the clicks as I wind it? Why run your hands over the slick, wooden handle of an old hammer? Why buy old furniture? Live in an old house? Write with a fountain pen?

The Bible will lay heavy in your hands. It is not easy. It is not practical. It might not even be desirable all the time. But it is good. It is good to read it.

You may come to love the Bible the way you come to love all things old and worn and time-tested. The beloved stories of Jesus, of his clumsy disciples and of the stumbling early church stand tall in the world of literature, polished smooth by centuries of pilgrims.

Reading the Bible will be hard. You pick it up knowing that it doesn't keep time the way we keep time in the modern world. Parts of it are dated, so it must be wound regularly with study, and its time reset at the morning of every new age.

But the stories glide across your heart like a fountain pen with a generous nib. They lay down a rich, glistening line of history and archetype and meaning that feels good on the soul. Is there anything written by humankind that leaves a deeper stain on our lives?

Read the Bible for the age of it. For the work of it. For the pain and sorrow of it. For the truth of it. And yes, for the love of it.