

From the Kitchen

12 August 2009

Yesterday I came upon a poetical prisoner. It was right there in front of me, on my computer screen. It started life as a poetical prisoner in Word and the program offered me two possible corrections. I clicked without looking carefully. Many such corrections, and some 'auto correct' solutions don't get discovered and reprimanded until the second or third proof-reading.



Some words make it through to the final printing, because they are words (a common one from me is ... oops, just that), or because Word thinks they are not and doesn't raise its Microsoft® eyebrow. I might have to send the program to the Department of Corrections for re-education.

Until I attended a writing workshop a month ago, my first drafts were done on sheets of once-used paper or straight onto the computer. I learned the value of using a paper notebook and now I wouldn't be without it. It's accumulating ideas, first paragraphs, quotes, drafts, rewrites and reminders to pick up the dry-cleaning when I next go to the shops.

It's not that when writing I avoid modern technology – I take a photo with my mobile phone of each page as I fill it, as a back-up.

Because I always have the notebook with me, I can write when having a cuppa somewhere; I can jot down ideas when at a red traffic light; I can read over a draft when waiting for my dry-cleaning.

'Old' technology can be useful when the new fails, although I no longer have a manual typewriter. I do have a hand-drill for times when there is no electricity or my extension lead won't reach. I even still like writing with a fountain pen. For reasons of nostalgia I have two slide rules and an abacus in my desk drawer. Actually, the pocket-sized slide rule is handy when travelling overseas, for instantly comparing prices at current exchange rates.

Some modern technology doesn't grab me. I use a physical diary rather than a computer-based or electronic organiser. To me the diary is the ideal indexed database with random-access memory and it doesn't need to be plugged in and booted up. I also prefer to look at a street directory or map – it gives me an overview of geographical relationships, an understanding of how the land lies. Not that I'm totally averse to GPS – last year, in San Francisco, it saved a lot of petrol, because the maps we had didn't help with choosing the correct lanes for changing freeways and a missed exit meant miles of circuitous driving.

I'm not a Luddite. I do not want to go back to the (good) old days, but I think we can invest too much in having the latest technology to fulfil all our needs. We can lose valuable older technology and the skills to make it work. The more we rely on things that take us ever further away from understanding the principles on which they work, the more vulnerable we become. I used to be able to get a car engine going again with some tinkering; but now? Forget it.

A bicycle is a good example of older technology that still works, still fills an important niche. How it works is easy to grasp, as is why it sometimes doesn't. In the latter case, remedial action is straight-forward and relatively inexpensive.

I can build a computer from parts, but each of those parts already incorporates technology that I have no hope of building. Okay, I also can't build a gear for a bike, but the means to do so are probably more readily at hand.

What I realise I'm saying with all this, is that I'm most comfortable with technology that I can see working, that has gears and levers. A watch built from these makes more sense to me than one based on a little black chip. I understand the switching of electrical currents to count in a binary cascade, but it's not the same as seeing something move, which in turn moves something else.

My life is a mixture of the latest technologies and older ones that still fill a need. I still have a record player for my vinyl disks and a cassette player for the scores of workshop tapes I collected in the 1980s. I started transferring cassettes to mini discs, but these are now also becoming 'old' technology. I have thousands of 35 mm slides and a special scanner to convert them to digital, but I'm not sure I want to put the time into that project.

My low-tech dog is wining, wanting some fresh air, so I'd better hook him up to his old-technology lead, do up my primitive shoelaces, and take him out.