

Back to the Lake



A READER
FOR WRITERS

**Thomas
Cooley**

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MONICA WUNDERLICH

My Technologically Challenged Life

Monica Wunderlich had no computer at home while she was growing up and, until 1995, no touch-tone phone. Her family is still not connected to the Internet. Her “technologically crippled” condition plagued Wunderlich as a student and when she went to work at a health-care facility for elderly patients. She has finally purchased a computer, but Wunderlich wonders if she will ever catch up.

“My Technologically Challenged Life” appeared in 2004 in Delta Winds, an anthology of student writing published each year by the English department of San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California. Wunderlich first wrote the essay as an assignment for an English course. It gives many humorous examples of the difficulties she has encountered with ordinary technology (or the lack of it) in her everyday life. At the nursing facility where the author worked while attending college, however, the lack of up-to-date equipment was no laughing matter—as Wunderlich’s more disturbing examples make clear.

IT PROBABLY SEEMS EASY for someone to use a computer to solve a task or call a friend on a cellular phone for the solution. I, however, do not have access to such luxuries. My home, workplace, and automobile are almost barren of anything electronic. It’s not as if I don’t want technology in my life, but I feel as if technology has taken on the role of a rabbit, and I am the fox with three legs that just can’t seem to get it. And after many useless attempts at trying to figure it out, I have almost given up.

In my house, technology does not exist, at least not for my parents. In fact it was 1995 when my father finally had to part with his beloved rotary phone,¹ not because it was worn out, but because it would not work with the new automated menus that companies were using. Reaching an actual person was difficult the old way because of the physical impossibility of being able to push 1, 2, or 3 when a phone possesses no buttons. It was quite embarrassing, especially since I was fifteen and all of my friends had “normal” phones. My dad’s biggest argument was that “It’s a privacy issue. No one can tap into our phone calls and listen to our conversations.” Well, the last time I had checked, none of us were trafficking dope.

I also had the privilege of not using a computer. It was hard going through high school without one, for I had many teachers who demanded many essays from me.

1. *Rotary phone*: the type of telephone in widespread use throughout much of the twentieth century until it was replaced by the now-familiar touch-tone phone. While a touch-tone phone has a keypad, a rotary phone has a dial.

Yet I had no way to type them. My sister was in the same boat, so we tried tag-teaming² my parents into getting us a computer. But to no avail. We kept getting things like “They’re too expensive,” or “We have no room for one,” or “We’ll get one later.” Later! My parents should have just said NEVER! So my sister and I resorted to spending hours at our friends’ houses, because their parents were nice to them and bought computers. The only problem was that our friends had lives and weren’t always around at our disposal. So Plan B for essay completion was using a cheesy electronic word processor that my dad had borrowed from my *grandparents* to supposedly “help us out.” This beast of a machine wasn’t much help, though, because it was a pain in the neck to use. It had a teeny tiny little screen that wouldn’t show the entire typed line, so by the time the line was printed, I’d find about ten uncorrected mistakes, and I’d have to start over. However, nothing is permanent and walls do come down, and so be it—the Wunderlichs buy their first computer! Two years after I graduate high school. As of yet, we still do not have the Internet.

My job is another place where technology is lacking. I work in a home for the elderly, and I take care of about eight to ten patients a night. I have to take some of these patients’ vital signs, and I speak on behalf of anyone who has ever worked in the medical profession when I say that the most efficient way to take vital signs is electronically. However, my employers do not grant us the equipment for electronic vitals. We are still using glass thermometers, which are not only a waste of time (3 seconds vs. 3 minutes for an oral temp), but they are extremely dangerous. Residents are known to bite down on the thermometers, exposing themselves to harmful mercury. I can’t even begin to count how many thermometers I have dropped and broken since I’ve worked there. One time I dropped a thermometer and didn’t realize I had broken it. So I picked it up to shake it down, but instead I flung mercury everywhere. An electronic thermometer just makes more sense when trying to make the residents’ environment as safe as possible.

We also have to use manual blood pressure cuffs. They’re just the normal cuffs that are wrapped around the arm, pumped up, and read using the bouncing needle. The problem is that none of our blood pressure cuffs are calibrated correctly, and the needles are way out of kilter. This makes it impossible to get an accurate reading. An ingenious solution would be digital cuffs, but that is highly unlikely. Actually, the home did try to supply some digital cuffs, but they were stolen. One man’s sticky fingers equals inconvenience for the rest of us, and the home no longer supplied us with such time-saving technology. Using manual equipment is hard not only for us but also for the nurses. The care home does not allow feeding machines

2. *Tag-teaming*: a wrestling term, now in common usage, referring to two people working as a team in alternate turns.

in the facility, yet people who need to be fed by a stomach tube are still admitted. This means that the nurses have to allot a special time from their med pass to hook up a syringe to the patient's stomach tube and pour their "steak dinner in a can" down the tube little by little. This tedious process takes about twenty minutes, and nurses don't really have twenty minutes to throw around, so it really crowds their schedules. If we had feeding machines, the nurses would only have to change a bag when a machine beeps. Problem solved if things went my way.

Another part of my life that is technologically crippled is my car. As much as I like my car, I still think it could use a few more bells and whistles. I drive a 2002 Volkswagen Jetta, which would probably make the reader think "Oh, a new car. There must be plenty of technology in that new car." My answer to that is "No, there isn't." The only technology is the 5 billion standard airbags for when I do something really stupid. Other than that I have to shift it manually. If I want to roll down my window, I have to turn a crank. My car did not come with a CD player, so I shelled out \$500 for one. I've had this stereo since last May, and I still can't figure out how to set the clock or preset stations. Volkswagen technology could not stop my car from exercising its "check engine light" once every three weeks. Even though the design techs included a cute warning light, my blood still boiled every time the light would come on proudly, and I made yet another pilgrimage to the dealership . . . on my day off. It would be nice if my car came equipped with one of those Global Positioning System things as well. I am really good at getting lost, and if I had one of these systems a year ago, I would not have found myself driving over both the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge when I was supposed to be on the Richmond Bridge. (Ironically enough, I did this during the weekend that terrorists were supposed to be blowing up the Bay and Golden Gate Bridges.) And if I had had any passengers while tempting fate that day, I could have kept them distracted from the fact that we were lost (and possibly going to die) by letting them watch a movie on one of those in-car DVD players. But of course I don't have an in-car DVD player, so my hypothetical passengers would probably have been frantic.

No matter how much technology is out there, I seem to be getting through the day without most of it. It would seem hard to imagine someone else living without such modern conveniences, and, yes, at times I feel very primitive. However, I am slowly catching on to what's new out there even though incorporating every modern convenience into my day is out of the question. I am learning even though it is at a snail's pace. Hopefully I'll have it all figured out by the time cars fly, or else I will be walking.



READING CLOSELY

1. What role do Wunderlich's parents play in limiting her access to technology? How do they explain their behavior to her and her sister? Does their reasoning sound familiar to you? How so?
2. At times, Wunderlich blames herself for her technological difficulties. Who or what else is at fault, especially at the health-care facility? What three examples does she give about serious technological problems at work?
3. Why does Wunderlich refer to the weekend when terrorists were "supposed to be blowing up" two of San Francisco's main bridges (6)? What does this observation have to do with technology?

STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES

1. Since Wunderlich's essay was written as an assignment for an English class, her main **PURPOSE** was to amuse her teacher and classmates and to inform them about the technological "challenges" she faces every day. How well do you think she achieves this purpose? Explain.
2. Wunderlich's title tells the reader that her life is "technologically challenged," a point she supports with **EXAMPLES** throughout her essay. Should she have made this main point more explicitly in a **THESIS STATEMENT**? Why or why not?
3. Wunderlich organizes her examples by grouping them according to each "part of my life" (6). What are those parts? How and how well do you think they help her to structure her essay?
4. What is **IRONIC** about the example of Wunderlich's car?
5. *Other Methods.* When she writes about the lack of technology in the facility where she works, Wunderlich is also presenting an **ARGUMENT** about working conditions and the quality of patient care. To whom is this argument addressed? Are her examples sufficient to support it? Why or why not?

THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE

1. Look up the term *Luddite*. What does the name mean, and where does it come from? Who might Wunderlich consider a Luddite?
2. Wunderlich compares herself to a three-legged fox chasing a rabbit (1). How effective do you find this **ANALOGY**?
3. What does Wunderlich's **METAPHOR** of "tag-teaming" (3) imply about the extent of her and her sister's persistence?

4. “Hopefully,” says Wunderlich about her attempt to catch up with technology, “I’ll have it all figured out by the time cars fly” (7). Where else in her essay, and for what purposes, does Wunderlich use **HYPERBOLE** like this?

FOR WRITING

1. Is your personal life or work “challenged” in some way, technologically or otherwise? Using examples, write a paragraph or two about a particular *challenge* and how you deal with it (or fail to do so).
2. If you could have the latest technology in every field, what specific devices, gadgets, and gear would you go for? Write an essay giving examples of the choices you would make and why.
3. What is a *Global Positioning System* and what does it do? Write an essay giving copious examples of the functions and uses of GPS technology.