Pause! We Can Go Back!
February 14, 2017

This title of an article in the New York Review of Books caught my eye. I am attuned to helpful *pauses* in my life and work these days. And being increasingly awkward and having a feeling of being left behind in the digital world being forced upon me, I felt fortified in some of my apprehensions about this world of the tiny screen that used to be called a phone. Now it is a veritable handheld computer.

The reviewer, Ben McKibben, first cites the example of "going back" in the surge of interest in **vinyl records**. Why buy a record when Spotify can "deliver virtually every song ever recorded to your phone." He says sales of vinyls are rising—and among the young. And he says it is not superior sound they are looking for, but "the tangibility of the actual physical platter that appeals."

The author Sax goes further to explain the uptick in buying these records which "are large and heavy; require money, effort and taste to create and buy and play; they cry out to be thumbed over and examined. Because consumers spend money to acquire them, they gain a genuine sense of ownership over the music, which translates into pride."

 By contrast, he adds, "nothing is less cool than data."

Something clicked in me at the word *data*. Numbers. I have been filling out a grant application this week. The grantor has changed the wording required in the section on "Strategies and Activities" — suggesting that where possible we supply *numeric* data.

I remember my conflicted reaction. I had come across a document titled The Performance Imperative—emphasizing the importance of philanthropy being extended wisely to nonprofits like our own—indicating that goals and strategies be substantiated by actual performance.

This raised for me the twin markers: quantitative and qualitative. And which is more substantive? Or is it simply a matter of both, with the numbers saying something—but needing to be interpreted. I had inserted in our own application promises of "qualitative results" but I also know that quality can rest in the eye of the beholder.

Quoting Sax, McKibben writes, "Creativity and innovation are driven by imagination, and imagination withers when it is standardized, which is exactly what digital technology requires—codifying everything into 1s and 0s, within the accepted limits of software." The need I and others have been experiencing in our work often centers around our use of technology in keeping track of time and hours and numbers—the 1s and 0s. We thought it progress to learn to master these skills—buying the online version of QuickBooks, for example and discovering what it can do with data.

I got caught yesterday morning in a tech-related issue: my wireless mouse simply ceased working, leaving the computer screen a blank black. I changed the batteries, assuming

that to be the problem, but my poor little mouse flashed its green light frantically, clearly trying desperately to connect me to my computer screen.

I knew I needed to call Tech Support, and fortunately Apple has proved responsive. So the tech guy began work on my problem from the distance, giving me a few instructions which I had already tried. He seemed to be learning as he talked. "Can you get another mouse to connect? He asked. Happily, I could walk down the hall and disconnect the office computer's mouse with its little cord to plug into my computer. Presto! I was home free. The "Bluetooth" icon in Systems Preferences was able to "instruct" my mouse to reconnect on its own.

I am happy to have a wireless mouse; but even happier to talk to a person about how to keep me and my mouse happy and connected.

And it is the personal relationship that is often missing in the digital era. McKibben goes a step further in describing Sax's take on the quality of human connections that have developed for a generation able to reach out to the whole world from the bedroom at any hour of the day or night, but who remain alone in their room with a laptop. Sax found that there was a rise of board games being played in small cafes. Board games, he said, are "the polar opposite of the shiny digital experience." In video games, a person "shares ownership of that experience with the software. The program and device restrict our ability to shape the experience of play to our imagination." So the young reach out to "play" with others in these cafes sprouting up in lots of places.

Again, I am stopped in my musing: we are proud of having changed our contact with our larger community from print to e-mails, using Mail Chimp—because we know people now access information on their screens, not through reading letters from the mailbox. We dare not trust this "improvement" to do something it can never do. And so we plan a trip west to sit down with members of that community in person and exchange more than brief lines of updated information. That is our version of a "board game." We are happy to contact people on screen through Skype; but meeting face-to-face still triumphs in quality of connection.

These are a few thoughts that made me pause. I share them here, without suggesting any particular application —except, for me, to "pause and pay attention."