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"7:30 dinner wt. Jeanne, Call re. septic sys."

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am what is called an "early adopter." The term refers to people who are quick to acquire the newest technology. I can always imagine how much easier and more productive my life would be if I just had "one of those." In 1983 I had to have a personal computer. It was very expensive (about $2,000 for a machine with a five inch screen and 64 kilobytes of ram—I'll bet your sports wrist watch has more memory), but I wrote several books on it and did almost all my normal paperwork. Once the price of cell phones dropped from the stratosphere, I got one of those also. It has worked out as well, especially as an insurance policy against being late for meetings or stuck on the highway in need of AAA help. But I'm afraid my latest techno-purchase is not working out.

My electronic calendar is a wonder of technology. It's a three-by-five inch plastic clamshell case with a typewriter style keyboard, calculator pad and an array of special use keys fitted around a small, easy-to-read screen. I can record in it seemingly endless appointments, memos, notes, expenses records, phone numbers and addresses. I can't imagine I'll ever need to keep track of 40,000 acquaintances, but I got the one megabyte model just in case I get really popular one day. I now have so much vital information on the thing that its loss would require a year of work reconstructing my life. In fact, I now lock the doors of my car when I get coffee at the Java-Jump drive through fearing that one of the strangers walking past the car could reach into the passenger side seat and steal my briefcase and, with it, the dingus. Like everyone else I marvel at the little thing, but I've decided that I like my pocket-sized paper calendar books better.

It's not because the Sharp OZ-650 Electronic Wizard with 1MB of memory has a learning curve steeper than the stairs of a Mayan monument. ("To accessing day/date/month of year in future/past of non-present date, to press "schedule" key while down holding desirable entry select for,") And it's not the weekly ritual I call the "dumping of the data" in which for fifteen minutes my desk computer is connected by its rs-232 port to the little machine via its docking station. ("Sharp Desk Commander searching for link. Link achieved. Reading calendar information. Uploading calendar information. Information shared." I always feel so fulfilled after a session of electronic sharing.)

I prefer my paper calendar books because they have soul. They are alive with my past and, by comparison, the electronic calendar is cold comfort. I wouldn't have found out about this if it hadn't been for the IRS. Here's what happened. I was putting together some records for a meeting with the agency that cares, when I found I needed information about a trip I took in 1995. Was it business, and if so, did I also have any non-deductible fun? Since I got the electronic calendar in 1997 I needed to search the detailed archives of personal information among the papers in my file cabinets, cardboard boxes, top drawer of my dresser, piles of outdoor clothing catalogs and (when extra desperate and losing will) the kitty litter bin. You never know. I once found my glasses in the freezer.

In a closet, behind the accusing Nordic Track, under a few shoe boxes of actual shoes, was a shoe box containing my old calendar books covering the years 1975-1996 almost inclusive. (Missing is the book for 1982 because the world's least competent crook broke into my Toyota and stole my briefcase which contained said appointment book, a set of exams, my collection of fine-point felt tipped pens and assorted lint-covered lozenges.) "I think I took that trip in March of ninety-five," I guessed out loud, thumbing through the appropriate book. If I had been searching in the electronic calendar I would have punched in a search command for the calendar listings for March of that year and in an instant the green, back-lit entries would have covered the little screen. Efficient, accurate, time-saving. Instead, I
worked my way through the blue pages of the worn "Week at-a-glance" calendar, stopping to interpret the entries on the way toward March. Tuesday, Jan. 17: "8 A.M. Classes resume." Ah, cruel end of Christmas break. Thursday, Jan. 19: "Call re. jury duty." 4 P.M. "Call re. dishwasher repair." That day I waited two hours for the appliance repair guy to call me back, and two days later I sat for three hours in a room full of potential jurors before being dismissed. Saturday, Feb. 18: 8 P.M. "Chili Bros. at Tryworks. Jeanne 7 P.M." Our first genuine date. Of course this discovery led to a discussion with Jeanne about whether the dinner we had the week before qualified as an official date. We looked it up. My book said "7 P.M., Dinner with Jeanne, Hunan Kingston." Hers said, "Work with Bill Levin on Mass. Cultural Counsel grant." Date, I concluded. No date, said Jeanne. It was a no-decision contest, but from these entries we surely relived the events.

Back to the IRS task. Ah. Wed. March 14. "6 A.M. Boston-Charlotte (seat 7A) and Charlotte-Tampa. U.S. Air $196.50. Bring data sheets, transparencies, paprika" Paydirt! This was the trip I needed to confirm. I went to Florida to visit my mom in Sarasota and, while there, I was to drive to Tampa to the University of South Florida campus to give a talk on some research I was conducting, and to sit in on a dissertation defense on which I was an outside reader. "What percent of the trip was deductible?" I wondered. Hmm. "Is the entry in my pocket calendar proof of the cost of the airfare? I'd better find the charge plate bill." Also, I should buy mom more of that paprika she likes and send it to her.

Since I had the calendar book opened, I just kept thumbing along. What was going on with Jeanne and Me? Lots of entries for dates. Saturday, March 26: "9:30 A.M. Cape Walk." Then, in ink rather than pencil. "Spenser damage." We had, in fact, walked along the beach in Plymouth under the cliffs of the Ellisville area, and Jeanne's 90 pound hair-monster of a dog had rolled in a tidal pool just before getting into the back of my car, leaving pounds of wet sand on the seat and quarts of canine slobber on the insides of the windows. Obviously my relationship with Jeanne had entered a new, more "earthy" phase.

I can't count the number of discoveries I made over the next few hours as the entries rolled by. One book led naturally to another and memories of events I long forgotten were jumbled together, then put in context. What I was doing at work was next to what I bought to cook, where Jeanne and I went on dates and trips, the boat we bought to fix for sailing in Buzzards Bay, how my mom was doing and on and on. The past came back in its own pace and proportion. Often the smallest details were recovered, sometimes recorded on the pages (the cold drizzle on the day we launched Otter in Sippican Harbor), sometimes remembered by association with an entry.

But more important than the recovery of small details was the way browsing through these books gave me a broad view of what happened in my life over months and years. Things change in our lives, and I think we are usually so busy with the daily details of life that we seldom have time or attention for the long view. When we sit still with the records of our lives these events can be recovered, at least in memory. Look through your appointment books (if you have them), your check stubs, photographs, letters home from the kids at camp or college, the logbook of your days on your boat, even the collected drawings and toys from your children's lives and you will see what I mean. Perhaps one day my Sharp Wizard OZ-650 with 1 MB of memory will give me another look back at the years 1997-1998. ("Search for all entries containing the words Jeanne and Dinner"), but in the meantime, I'm going back to a pocket-sized calendar, like the ones that are stacked in the back of my closet.