

Life in a Box

By Doris H. Goldstein

“You need to get a computer”, advised our adult children some years ago.

“What would I do with it?” I asked.

In late October, 2020 with Covid still raging that is an absurd question.

Now the more appropriate question is, “What would I do without it andall the other square machines that have invaded my life?”

My first box was a television that now is as much a part of every household as a spoon or a bed. From a tiny square perched on a skinny metal stand that emitted grainy black and white images a few hours a day, it has evolved into a large, wall mounted object whose vibrant colors, full sound and images of the world entices the viewer to believe what they see and hear are not on a screen but three dimensional animals or humans who could walk into your living room.

The early days of this phenomena were initially spellbinding...imagine a ‘movie’ every night from your sofa.....there were at most two or three options. Now for a monthly fee, there are hundreds of choices every minute of the day or night. The next addition to this magic box, again, for a fee, was ‘streaming’ where another plethora of content spills out of the screen.

Initially, it wasn’t too hard to manage. One knob for On & Off and another to change the station, now known as the channel. The invention of the remote, however, complicated matters a bit...accidently press the wrong button; the picture disappears and other words, pictures, charts, dots and lines come into view.....yikes, I don’t know what to do. The more buttons you press, the worse it becomes. This little wand is a mini computer programed to do certain things in certain ways that sometimes my brain is still not privy to.

This 24 hour square/oblong has the power to entertain, distract, annoy, inform/ misinform, teach, console, depress.....a full range of human reactions to the world. Neither age, gender, race nor nationality is a barrier to embrace this box.

What a gift for the lonely, elderly or disabled. An essential in a hospital room for distraction from illness, pain, fear or boredom. Beginning education and entertainment for toddlers/preschoolers. A range of political perspectives/opinions that depend on

which broadcaster is watched. Life altering events such as the moon landing, social upheaval or natural disasters can be seen in almost real time. There are very few unknowns these days when everything appears in front of your eyes 24/7. News, weather, drama, comedy, sports, romance, cooking, mystery, religion, science...everything can be found in this box. The entire world revealed instantly at the command of your fingertips.

When the avalanche of coronavirus covered the world in the winter/early spring of 2020 forcing millions into their homes for weeks at a time, the box became indispensable. Physically separated from family, friends and neighbors, the men and women whose faces became ubiquitous on TV morphed into our constant companions/ best friends. Eager for updates on the spread and advice on how to protect ourselves, TV's voices and images were with us for hours on end. Sometimes, they even helped us locate a source for toilet tissue, pasta, flour and other basics when impulse hoarding and disrupted supply chains made everyday item scarce; an unexpected bonus.

The lockdown immediately cancelled all forms of in-person entertainment...movies, concerts, sports, stage productions....venues that previously could be accessed at will. Never mind; I have the Box. The monthly cable fee which previously seemed at times to be a waste of money since I only watched a few of the possibilities available now seems to be a bargain. Merely choosing from a long list of channels or for another additional fee, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu etc. I can find a dizzying array of possibilities in every genre of creative expression.

Next, enter the computer.....in essence a virtual Aladdin's lamp that, when its secret is known, magically reveals endless worlds. However, this box requires a whole new set of skills and vocabulary a lot more challenging than a simple on/off. Upload, download, gigabyte, memory, right click, left click, virus...all of these new, sometimes puzzling terms could fill a small book. A set of steps to activate this box, a 'mouse' to move from place to place, email, an array of strange icons on the screen, popup instructions and notifications that are sometimes unintelligible and/or frightening to a novice, a gaggle of wires under my feet..... a steep learning curve for those who grew up with a typewriter.

While worldwide, millions of people in every line of work have been using this vast technology for years, it was and is a constant puzzle and at times frustration to me.

In this new state of isolation, however, this potent box-like fixture becomes the vehicle with which to remain engaged in life. No longer a passive square that one merely

watches, now it requires interaction between the human and this inanimate object sitting on a desk. A revolution of epic proportions.

Consider the term 'email.' What does the 'e' mean? I presume electronic but perhaps something more exotic. Writing a letter without a pen or paper and sending it without a stamp anywhere in the world at any time of the day or night; imagine that! Even before Covid, checking for, writing, deleting and reading email became a quotidian routine for millions of people. As a 'senior' deemed one of the most vulnerable to the virus, my normal outside activities were curtailed so there was more time to rely on email to know there were fellow humans somewhere out there. Previously, I used it only on occasion because I relished my personal interactions but now it became an essential part of my day. The downside was the never ending stream of advertisements, unsolicited messages and potential scams. Wading into this jungle every day is an unwelcomed but necessary chore.

Something called the 'internet' and its partner Google are integral to the magic box. Imagine, a lowly mouse can take you everywhere and anywhere. Let's find Dirico on the map of Angola. How about the definition of tryptophan? Want to find a hair stylist in Moscow? Who was the Secretary of the Navy under President Millard Fillmore? Where can I buy a refurbished bicycle pump? Login to Raddit and learn how to be an expert juggler or learn what breed of dog is the cutest. Dictionaries, encyclopedias reference books on any subject are unnecessary enabling all of us to become intellectually lazy and spending the entire day chasing down one rabbit hole after another. After all, I have a lot of time during this pandemic.

The production of 'webinars' is now a major industry. Originally used by business to communicate remotely when personal contact was not possible, in the Age of Covid they have engulfed everyone. Invitations and notifications from organizations, museums, philanthropies, universities, businesses etc. crowd into the 'inbox' competing for my eyes and time. In this era of the inability to be physically present, no one wants me to forget them and, incidentally, remember to make a donation.

'You are invited to register for a webinar on November 20, 2:30 pm, EST for Topic XYZ' is the headline. An invitation...wow...I must be special. There must be several of these that appear every day; it is impossible to keep it all straight. How could I not click in so I can remain engaged? Will I become an uninformed citizen on a crucial topic if I miss this one? Must I spend my time learning about the ancient Assyrians or I'll be considered

behind the curve in general knowledge? That one sounds like fun....let's do it. I'm home, I have nothing else to do..... why not? CLICK.

Zoom and Live Streaming have become the king and queen of the internet. These royals make it possible to actually See and/or Talk to others in the box. Faces appear in little squares while voices can come with them. I can know what you are wearing and what's on your bookshelf or what pictures are on your wall. 'Unmute myself' and I can actually have a conversation. Someone miles away can be as intimate as the next room or next door. From kindergarten classes to a PhD. Seminar they are now on Zoom. Religious services, business meetings, family gatherings, legal hearings.....anything and everything can be with Zoom or Live Streamed. Buried in a mass of emails there will be something called a link to all these riches.....**don't lose it, without it, you are lost.**

The smallest and most potent of these boxes is the iPhone. It seems to be a portable combination TV, computer and telephone rolled into one. My old 'flip phone' sat mostly unused in the bottom of my purse. I carried it around for the sole purpose of calling AAA in case I had a flat tire. It never rang because no one except my husband had the number and I barely remembered that number myself. But now I have the ultimate box. Read and send emails, listen to CNN or Fox, peruse a newspaper, tell the time or see the weather forecast, watch a musical performance or infomercial on U Tube, call for Lyft or Uber, watch a movie on Netflix; the list is endless. The majority of these wonders, I have no idea how to use.

On top of all of that, it really is a telephone but with a difference. Press the right icon and it becomes what I call 'phone-a-vision but the phone calls it Facetime. Yes, I can see the person or persons on the other end anywhere in the world. A different symbol and I can take a picture or record a video. Want to send the photo to someone? No problem. Click the arrow, put in a name and bingo...there it is. Of course, it can be a plain telephone...you know, dial a number and hear it ring. How boring.

It is almost Thanksgiving, a uniquely American holiday that embraces the full scope of the mixed multitude of ethnicities, religions, political persuasions, family makeup and financial status that defines this country. Because of Covid-19, public health experts advise us to spend the day alone or with a bare minimum of others. My husband and I will mainly heed that advice but we will Zoom with our distant children and grandchildren, watch TV and be grateful for all the boxes that have allowed us to persevere these past months.

Life in a Box isn't so bad.

