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RED & BLACK ... & Computer Trauma

Happy New Year!

That's wishful thinking. This is NOT how I want to be starting the New Year! I tried to spend the last days of 2013 getting organized so as to start the New Year right. Instead my computer decides to have a "mini-crash" and I'm sitting here freaking out. I can't believe this is happening.

Is "mini-crash" a technical term? It is never a good time to have computer problems, but the timing is actually good.

You must be kidding!!! Not now, with our Orlando trip to Share Fair just days away. It's an amazing opportunity to be invited to be presenters at this innovative education conference, but to say "I have so much to do" is a huge understatement.

You must admit, there is some irony having computer problems while preparing for a conference that focuses on STEM - science, TECHNOLOGY, engineering and mathematics.

I don't need irony - I need my computer to be fixed!

I understand. But, from what you have told me, although you initially thought you had lost everything, Shawn (our new computer consultant) was able to "find" almost everything. All you are missing is about a week of emails from your Microsoft Outlook file.

Fine, but what if it happens again? I never want to experience that "oh my G-d, I've lost everything" feeling again. At the worst of it, I sat there watching Shawn do whatever it is he does and I just wanted to crawl up in a ball and cry.

I thought you had gotten away from your "run and hide" approach to problems.

Very funny. You understand computers so you don't freak out. But I know just enough to do what I need to do. I can't handle it when things start to not work properly or, in this case, just stop working and all my data disappears. Between Red & Black and my personal stuff, my life's on that computer.

First, we already determined that almost no data was lost. But, more importantly, you need to understand that your computer helps you to do things in your life, it is not your life. It is a tool, nothing more.

Says the woman tethered to her Crackberry, who seems to live on the computer, or are you still using multiple computers simultaneously? Plus I must get hundreds of emails a day and the majority are from you!

DISCLAIMER: We are real people. We are not claiming to be experts in any given field, but rather are becoming experts of our own lives.

"Hundreds" is a slight exaggeration, but email is much more efficient than telephone calls. Especially with you, since you have a tendency to blah-blah-blah. However, I do a lot of things with good old-fashioned pen and paper. In fact, most of my "To Do" lists - and even my calendar - are handwritten. Unlike you, I do not rely heavily on the computer for keeping and organizing "my life," as you put it.

It just seems easier since I'm on the computer a lot, and once upon a time it all looked great. I know it sounds stupid, but I love the way a nicely printed "To Do" list looks.

Style over substance. I prefer a list that is functional. You can spend a lot of unnecessary time and energy making something "pretty." I would rather spend that time being productive.

I thought you used to use Franklin Planner. Which, by the way, is part of my current trauma as it looks like Franklin Planner is "missing." That means all those "Master Lists" and "Daily Tasks" may be gone forever. If so, I have no idea what I'm going to do.

You are using a VERY old discontinued version, so you may have to reload it from the original disk. I started with Franklin Planner years ago because it forced to me stop and think about how to organize my time and tasks. It is the "thinking process" that is critical, not whether it is implemented on a computer or on paper.

Hmmm. I remember reading that in a book once. OUR book.

Well, maybe you should go back and re-read the chapter. It is a function of determining what works best. I am on the computer so much, that typing something does not embed it in my brain - whereas writing it by hand does.

Funny thing is that I use colored Post-it notes to write down the most critical items that have to be done. They surround my computer screen like a colorful frame. But now that I'm thinking about it, I haven't updated or even looked at my "Master Lists" in years. Although one of the things I really wanted to do this week was to clean up my "Daily Tasks."

Which goes back to why I think this was a good time for your computer to "mini-crash." It gives you the opportunity to start the New Year with a clean slate.

Only you could see a computer crash as a good thing. Although I have to admit that after I got over the initial trauma of possibly losing Franklin Planner and all the years of data contained there, I felt almost a sense of relief.

Yes, because now you will not feel compelled to "clean up" your old Franklin Planner lists. Now, you can start new. Think of the hours, probably days, of time you have claimed back.

Yet again, I find myself saying that you don't think like the rest of us. I guess I was just so used to how I've been doing everything that I forgot to stop and think about what I was doing. And why.

Exactly.

Which is what we tell other people to think about. I guess I need to "do as I say." Although my computer forced my hand, it probably was time to think about a better way of organizing my life. Maybe paper and pen IS the answer.

What about your assortment of Microsoft Excel worksheets you use for data management?

I only use those for Red & Black and I don't update them daily.

Well, what about creating some for personal use? Print them and add handwritten notes when needed. Use an old-fashioned three-ring binder to organize them. I am sure there must be a few of those around the house.

Even better - a few years ago I bought a really nice red leather one from LeVenger that I've never used. This might be the perfect time to pull it off the shelf.

So now the only thing left, in terms of your computer trauma, is you are missing about a week of emails from your Outlook?

Yes, but considering the holidays is a relatively "quiet" time in terms of important emails, I can live with that. It's funny, for months I've wanted to clean up my thousands upon thousands of emails, but I never have the time. Well, now that the very real prospect of all those emails being gone in a "puff of smoke" has happened, it makes me realize that the world probably wouldn't have ended if Shawn hadn't been able to recover most of them.

So another good thing has come out of your "mini-crash" - a new approach to how you manage your emails.

Yes, but I must warn you that I'll be asking you lots of "How do you organize your emails?" questions over the next few weeks. Since Shawn had to create a new Outlook mailbox and plans to archive all my old emails, I can truly go forward in 2014 with a clean slate, and I'm determined not to repeat my old mistakes.



Tina "Red" Pennington and Mandy "Black" Williams are sisters and co-authors of "What I Learned About Life When My Husband Got Fired!" The informative, entertaining book discusses values, priorities, relationships, financial literacy and much more.

- Jan. 10 - University of Central Florida
- Jan. 11 - Share Fair - Orlando
- Jan. 17 - Mt. Ararat Baptist Church
- Jan. 18 - Region 4 Social Studies Conference
- Feb. 4 - Spring Branch ISD
- Feb. 10 - Houston Community College

UPCOMING APPEARANCES

For an up-to-date listing of all upcoming public appearances, please go to "Future Appearances" at www.redandblackbooks.com.

Any other "lessons learned?"

I knew you were going to ask that. And although even you have to admit the thought of losing data is very scary, it has made me realize that while the computer is a great tool, I've probably been too reliant on it. Especially given my lack of technology skills. The reality of it, ironically enough, is that it hasn't been helping me as much as I thought it was.

For some things, computers are great and accomplish many tasks efficiently and precisely. For other things, they are a time drain. And, they are not a substitute for thinking. I cannot help but wonder if everyone's reliance on technology may actually be reducing critical thinking skills.

Not to mention the effect on communication skills. But that's another subject entirely.

As I said earlier, a computer is just a tool, nothing more. Similar to my mantra that you have two choices in life - you can let your life control you, or you can control your life. It is no different with technology. You can let your technology (computers, smart phones, etc.) control you, or you can control your technology.

All makes sense. And with that I'll simply say, Happy New Year!