

The term “analog” has come to popularly mean doing something the old way. I suppose it came from the transition in timepieces from clocks with numbers and hands to digital displays. This has already resulted in some children of an age to have learned how to tell time unable to do so except on a digital display. “Quarter past seven” isn’t understandable anymore. Now, it is 7:15.

And those clocks may even have Roman numerals. I wonder if schools teach anything about that anymore. In some states, if Roman numerals made someone feel “uncomfortable,” I suppose that would be enough to do away with teaching about them.

I wonder if there is some sort of universal rule that learning something new inevitably results in losing something old. Perhaps there is no danger in that. For certainly, going in the other direction doesn’t pose such a problem. In learning something old that one knew nothing about before, a person can still absorb the new. For example, I can turn a switch to light up a room, but I can still also use a match and light a kerosene lamp.

That leads to all sorts of old/new pairs that many of us encounter regularly. I could still compose this essay on a manual typewriter, hitting the keys hard enough to transfer inked letters from the keys to the paper. And, I would soon revert to automatically “throwing the carriage” to start a new line of type. I can set the digital clock on the electric oven without looking up the directions, but I also wind the old 7 day clock with Roman numerals. And, once set, I can tell time on that clock.

And then, there are books. Some people read e-books on their computers, phones, or Kindles. I can see reasons for this—eyesight problems can be addressed by making print larger or darker, and if there are no libraries close by, e-books can be a way to easily keep reading material available.

But, there is something about a real, physical book—or several “somethings,” when one thinks a little about it. A book is nice to hold, it smells good, it doesn’t need re-charging, its design makes it easy to go back to check on something one may have missed in a first reading. Also, the pages can be dog-eared, or the reader can mark a place with a slip of paper—anything from a corner of yesterday’s newspaper to a fancy bookmark.

I am not ashamed of dog-earing pages in our books. I can easily find my favorite Robert Frost poem, “The Star Splitter,” by riffling through the pages until I reach the dog-ear. Then, I know

that “You know Orion always comes up sideways” and the lines that follow will come alive in the black and white print on the smooth pages of the Robert Frost book.

An unread thriller, a long-awaited novel by a favorite author, or a nonfiction book of adventure, politics, or memories can lie unread on the shelf under the book case, becoming either an incentive to finish some task or a lure to leave that task for another day and open the book. And, a Margaret Atwood novel is waiting for me right now.