

When Gadgets Go Bad

A plan for disposing electronics responsibly | **MARIANNE PETERS**

My husband and I score high on compatibility quizzes. Our mutually ideal vacation is a beach, a book, and peering up from the page only long enough to discuss our next meal. We relish silly British sitcoms and ballroom dancing.

We disagree on one thing, though: I'm a "pitcher" and he's a "keeper." I would recycle anything not nailed down—even important household documents. (I admit I'm a little hasty at times.) He keeps the envelopes of bills long paid and old ticket stubs. What can I say? I married a sentimental guy.

My latest project is getting rid of old electronics cluttering the house. The ancient VCR gathering dust. The radio/cassette player that went kaput. The electric pencil sharpener that refused to sharpen a crayon and perished shortly thereafter.

And I'm tossing the cell phones that we finally replaced after years of use. At the phone store, the curious sales representative inspected Tim's old device and mused, "Yeah, they used to make them that way." He looked at my phone and just shook his head. We felt as if we were waiting for an appraisal on *Antiques Roadshow*.

We now own new phones, but what do we do with the old ones? Millions of people throw them away in regular trash, destined for landfills. In fact, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Americans throw away 130 million cell phones every year. In one five-year period, Americans trashed 250 million computers.

There is a new term for this:

e-waste. Electronic waste now represents 5 percent of our trash; it even tops beverage containers and disposable diapers! And no wonder. As technology continues to advance at a faster and faster rate, new upgrades tempt us—who doesn't want that hot new iPod or flat-screen TV?

The problem, however, goes beyond overflowing landfills and wasted resources. E-waste is often loaded with heavy metals like lead, mercury, and cadmium that could leach from landfills into our groundwater. So what do we do with our old electronics?

Here are some strategies for handling these gadgets:

Don't upgrade right away. Resist the urge to possess the latest and greatest. I hung on to my old cell phone for years; it took me that long to figure out the functions. We own a Bose CD player as old as our marriage of sixteen years. The music still sounds great. Why upgrade when what you've got still works?

The deeper principle here is contentment. I often buy new things to impress others, not because I really need them. As a suburban child of the eighties, I grew up at the mall, steeped in consumerism: "I shop, therefore I am." Time and prayer have transformed my thinking, but, like a former addict, I still can get a powerful urge to go buy something—anything! It's a strange, irrational habit. I've learned that cultivating contentment, trusting God to provide, is a hard-won battle.

Use local waste management services. If you do decide to throw out the old stereo, remember that it



doesn't go in the trash. I keep a box in my garage just for e-waste. Drop off your old electronics at your local solid waste management district office for recycling and safe disposal.

Donate your old electronics. Local charities will accept your electronics as long as they are still in good working condition. If your computer still works, don't just toss it: there are nonprofit organizations that refurbish old computers and give them to people who can't afford a new one. The Department of Women Ministries is partnering with the Good Deed Foundation to recycle used cell phones to help women in poverty, and to reduce landfill waste. For more information go to www.gooddeedfoundation.com/wmc. You can also contact your waste management service for local or national groups that accept electronics donation in your area, or go to www.earth911.com for information on recycling electronics.

Pitcher versus keeper controversies continue at our house. I wanted to replace our twenty-five-year-old Sony TV; the color gave out long before the set did. I whined. My children watched *Clifford, the Big Blue Dog*. My husband just couldn't part with it.

Finally, one day, it emitted a loud "pop" and went dead. I poked the "on" switch. Nothing. Yippee! Time for an upgrade at last. ■

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