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Fatal Error

It's been just one month since I switched from my trusty day-timer notebook to a PDA. I have never been known as an early adopter. And now my biggest fear has just become reality. While talking on the phone with my business partner, I fiddle with my PDA, change out the batteries, and turn it on. "Fatal Error" appears on the screen. Calmly, I switch out the batteries again, getting a fresh pair. The screen is splattered with black dots that look like Morse code gone bad. I push the power button but nothing happens. I think I'm screwed. My business partner is naturally sympathetic but I hear a tinge of "this wouldn't have happened if you had stuck with paper." She is still using paper.

We hang up and I call Mary, another colleague who is expecting my call. It's been months since we've talked and we decide to catch up today. I tell her about my situation—one that sounds like I'm screwed but oddly enough, not really feeling like I'm screwed. It turns out that Mary is the PDA Queen. She's on her fourth PDA, one of the early adopters who upgrades to the newest technology before the product announcements are finalized.

"Well, at least you have the backup on your PC. Just remember when you do the sync'ing that you want the PDA to sync to your PC, not the other way around. Because your PDA has garbage now and the good stuff is on your PC."

Sync'ing? Oh my. I hadn't gotten that far. I always thought the sync'ing stuff was a nice frill. I could clearly see now why this overlooked feature was important. Lack of sync'ing was now manifesting as a sinking feeling in my stomach.

"You mean you don't have a backup of your data?"

"Nope."

"I think you are S.O.L."

We talk about going to the manufacturer's website. And getting help from online tools to recover the data. But it comes down to this: Risk Tolerance vs. Convenience.

Mary tells me, "I've lost all my data 3 or 4 times. But I always go back to the PDA because of the convenience."

If someone had told me to expect this to be a natural occurrence, one that was inevitable, a rite of passage for PDA users, I don't think I would have made the switch. I feel the urge to rush out to Borders and buy a traditional day timer, one that won't crash but still runs the risk of getting lost. Mary senses that I'm on the verge of going 10 steps back on the technology maven scale.

"I was tempted to go back to paper after my first PDA crashed. I've been where are you going and it's not good. I vote for the PDA. Go to Office Max and get a great deal on the newest technology. It will be fun to put in your data into the new PDA!" I was getting annoyed with her perkiness.

"And when you get the new PDA, use it like you mean it. Commit to it. Hot sync it!" Oh, sure, easy for you to say. You know what you'll be doing for the next 31 days. I have no idea what is happening this month. No idea when coaching clients will be calling for appointments. No idea when I'm scheduled to do a workshop. No idea when my son's birthday is. Okay, maybe I'm getting a bit carried away.

It was not lost on me that my calendar was wiped clean at the beginning of the month. What kind of God would play such a cruel trick? Hmmmm....maybe this catastrophe was informing me of something larger. Here's what I noticed:

- In the face of setbacks, it's easy to go back to our comfort zone. It's even easier to never leave our comfort zone, to be always playing it safe. Choosing risk means allowing the possibility of a different result, both good and bad.
- Having a clean slate causes me to remember the stuff that really is important to do, and to chuck the rest. Spend your time on the stuff that matters and skip the rest, even if your PDA shows a full schedule.
- What we fear may come to pass. And then again, it may not. Conserve your energy and let go of the fear. Save your energy for the recovery.

Maybe all of this is meant to provide a little space. Space in my life to let go of fear, take a risk, and if need be, recover. A friend once told me that it's not the screw-ups that matter, it's the recovery. The PDA manufacturer got it wrong when they programmed in the error as "Fatal Error." The fatal error is in not playing to begin with.

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