UT professor on the human need for storytelling in a digital age

By **Tracy Dahlby**

If you're like me, you're having a harder time watching a three-minute news video these days without caving into the urge to check your email or text messages at least once. Sustainable focus in steep decline, I find myself wondering what my maternal grandmother, Alice Brasfield, would make of our generally clueless behavior toward information technology.

Of course, our iPads, iPods, Droids and other screen-based devices serve us well, supplying apps and scraps of data to organize and enrich the daily slog. But I'll go out on a limb and say that Alice, an indomitable woman with a foot firmly planted in pioneer times and an eagle eye for danger, would be gobsmacked. How the dickens, as she'd put it, could we have let our machines so thoroughly get the drop on us, devouring our short-term memory and, with it, our capacity to hear ourselves think?

Easy for her to say. Back in 1957, when she moved into our family home in Seattle, there was only one new screen in town, the TV. And Alice, a shrewd old bird who'd survived a gothic girlhood in western Canada, the Great Depression and two world wars, was a pushover for the tube's endless gifts of diversionary hokum — "The Ed Sullivan Show," "Gunsmoke," Red Foley's "Ozark Jubilee," you name it.

Yet there were limits. Let TV's magic trample the boundaries of Alice's inner "peace and quiet," and she'd cry, "Turn off that blasted radio" — never did fully adjust to the paradigm shift — "so I can hear myself think!"

Today, it's too early to tell exactly where our digital addictions are taking us. Yet we're indubitably along for the ride, and so I think we need to ask whether our eclipsed capacity to hear ourselves think isn't eroding our ability to honor the importance of storytelling in our lives — and the tools it provides for probing the old mysteries, a la the philosophers, of where we come from, where we're going, what we're doing here, and in the process helping to chisel the boundaries of character.

In a PBS "Frontline" interview (excerpted last year in Nieman Reports), MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle said: "I would feel bereft if, because technology wants us to read short, simple stories, we bequeath to our children a world of short, simple stories. What technology makes easy is not always what nurtures the human spirit."

And it's not just our foreshortened focus; quality is also a concern. "We're on the edge of the knife in terms of storytelling," said Bethany Bear, a doctoral student in English literature at Baylor University who is also an accomplished amateur storyteller. "One of the biggest dangers is not that the impulse for storytelling will go away but the quality of the materials is impoverished." Yes, there's the occasional stellar feature film or "Harry Potter" book series, and people will still rally to quality. But Bear points out that stories proliferating online and on reality TV, for example, serve up the same cookie-cutter character types and anemic plotlines over and over. Whether the story is about baking a cake or catching a fish, she says, "it's the same narrative and not particularly a good narrative."

It stands to reason that the fast, the cheap and the dumbed-down help weaken the storytelling patterns that traditionally have been hard wired into our cultural DNA. In his 1995 book "The End of Education," the late Neil Postman likened the role stories play in modern society to the gods our ancient forebears invoked in the glow of the communal fire. "Our genius," he noted, "lies in our capacity to make meaning through the creation of narratives that give point to our labors, exalt our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future." Charming though it may be, we instinctively know that a 140-words-or-less tweet — "Just ate the biggest pancake ever!" for example — is not a godlike story.

Home-cooked stories, on the other hand, tell us about what it means to be human, with the accompanying idiosyncrasies and contradictions the term implies, and the more human the setting, the more the message is likely to sink in. Back in Alice's parlor, for example, having iced the competition from TV, she'd typically give her rocker a defiant rock and then use the moment she'd wrested from technology to introduce me to tales of the strivers and shirkers, saints and oddballs that inhabit our family tree.