Sold on incarnation

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the November 1, 2000 issue

I am an unwilling explorer of cyberspace. For years I managed not to go there. My handwriting was adequate for everyday purposes, my avocado green IBM Selectric sufficed for more formal projects, and I happily received my mail through the post office. As the world warmed to personal computers, I began to tune out conversations about microchips the same way I tuned out conversations about professional football. I did not understand either language and I did not want to learn.

In 1992 I broke down and bought a laptop. If you have ever tried to type a book manuscript on an IBM Selectric, then I do not need to explain. A machine that produces perfect copy with no Wite-Out fumes is impossible to resist. The laptop was much more expensive than a desk model, but at least I could close it when I was not using it. That way my study still looked like a study instead of like an air traffic controller's post.

When the Internet became available, everyone I knew began plugging in. One colleague in ministry became so enamored with his computer's new capability that he pretty much stopped doing ministry—with people, at least. Instead he spent hours downloading ministry software, visiting Web sites on ministry and ordering books on ministry from online distributors. Using his absorption with the computer as my defense, I declined to plug in.

I was comforted by an article that said the dividing line was age 50. If you were under 50 years old, the author said, then you had to learn how to navigate the information highway. If you were over 50, you were excused. You were so close to obsolescence yourself that there was no sense overloading your circuits. I still had three years to go at that point, but I thought that if I kept a low profile I might be able to squeak by.

Then I took a teaching job at a local college and the jig was up. Everything from departmental memos to the college catalog was posted on the school Web page. Faculty conferences took place online. Library holdings were displayed online. I

surrendered and went online too. It has not been a pretty sight. On the day that I decided to visit my first Web site, I typed the address into the box at the top of the Navigator page (The First Church of Cyberspace at www.godweb.org). Then I clicked on every icon I could find that might take me there, but nothing worked. Finally I asked a philosophy professor what I should do. "Press 'Enter,'" he said.

I do not know where anyone lives anymore. When a friend moved from Michigan last summer I asked her to give me her new address. Only where is worldnet.net, exactly? I correspond with people who live in little backwaters such as brainiac.com and hemc.net, as well as the larger provinces of aol.com and mindspring.com, but I have no idea where their physical bodies may be found.

Sometimes when I am answering them I hit the wrong key and my machine arrests me on the spot. First it emits a guttural "bong" and then it flashes a big red X on the screen. "This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down," it announces, and I am as stricken as if I had just been caught drunk at a roadblock.

Every month there are technology workshops at the college to help people like me. At the last one I attended, the topic was teaching online. I learned how to post my syllabus, establish a chat room, monitor discussions and grade student assignments—all without leaving my office! While I can appreciate the democratic and ecological advantages of online courses (single working mothers who do not live anywhere near a college can pursue an education without burning a single gallon of gas), I cannot imagine teaching people whose faces I never see, whose voices I never hear, whose breathing bodies I never stand near.

Last semester, Meichell showed up twice in flannel pajamas for my 8:00 a.m. class because she had overslept and did not have time to change. When Allister walked in smelling like baby spit, I knew he was telling me the truth about why his paper would be late. His infant daughter had the flu, and he had been up with her all night. Meanwhile, Rhonda was so taken with the unit on Taoism that she went out and got a yin-yang symbol tattooed on her left arm, which she was eager to show me.

When I tried to explain to my colleagues why these things mattered, they looked at me the way my dog looks at me when I sing. "Some introverted students really blossom online," one of them ventured. "You can reach so many people," another said. I believed them, but at the same time I was up against some fundamental conviction that was still swimming its way toward speech. All of a sudden my ears

popped and I knew what it was.

"The problem is that I'm a Christian," I said. "I am absolutely sold on the value of incarnation, and there aren't enough pixels in the universe to convince me otherwise." It was not the witness I had always hoped I would make, but there it was. My trouble with computers was not only my incompetence and paranoia. It was also my faith in the redemptive power of flesh-and-blood relationships, which cannot be simulated on any computer screen.

I will continue to improve my computer skills. I may even figure out how to set up a Web site for one of my courses. But I pray that I never have to give up the high thrill and privilege of sitting in a room with other living, breathing human beings. That is where the Christ has promised to show up, and so far he has not missed a class.