

# Techwit: E-piphanies on the computer

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E-piphany. It's defined as a moment of revelation experienced in cyberspace. Like when I figured out that all that junk e-mail we get about home refinancing and Viagra is part of a plot by conservative pro-family forces to keep us at home making babies. I think their real agenda is to expand the consumer base. Anything for the economy.

(<http://>)

Techwit By Jason Ohler

One of my earliest e-piphanies happened back in the technological stone age, about 1985, when the only reason you went online was to use this magical thing called e-mail. My revelation was that people would say things to each other using e-mail that they would never in a gazillion years say to each other in person, even if they were a foot away. I saw this with my own eyes in my computer training lab one day. I



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was standing behind two people exchanging e-mail messages who were fully aware of the fact that they were sitting next to each other. Their conversation went something like this:

Him: Hello. I'm a Libra. What color are your eyes?

Her: Green.

Him: I'll bet they look like turgid peas.

Her: Is that good?

Him: It is to me. I'm a vegetarian.

Her: Be right back.

She stood up and hollered to the class, "Does anyone know what 'turgid' means?" She could have turned and asked her e-mail partner, but that would have broken the silent code of schizophrenia that allowed them to be someone different online. They were living parallel lives online and off and didn't want them to intersect. They were both at the same Disneyland of the mind and didn't want to leave.

No one in the training lab volunteered a definition. They were all too busy clacking away on their keyboards and living out their own virtual fantasies. I handed her a dictionary that she quickly shuffled through until she found her word. "Ah hah!" she shrieked triumphantly before sitting back down in front of her terminal. She started typing frantically, never once acknowledging the e-mail partner who sat next to her. The entire time she had been chasing down the definition of "turgid" he had said nothing. He just stared at his screen, waiting.

Her: I'm back.

Him: Where did you go?

Her: I had to look up the word "turgid." It means swollen or bloated. So, you think I have bloated eyes?

Him: I don't know. But if you do, it would be fine.

Her: I don't understand how bloated can be fine.

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Him: Maybe I should have just said "big."

Her: So, does that mean my eyes are like big green peas?

In those days good typing skills were about as rare as a successful startup company today, so their conversation took place in a kind of comic slow motion as they hunted and pecked on noisy, non-ergonomic keyboards. They could have resolved the eye issue much faster if they'd simply turned and looked at each other, but what fun would that be? Besides, what if her eyes did look like turgid peas? Could have been ugly.

I knew both of these people. And as I watched their online conversation unfold I couldn't help thinking, "This is not them." They were too intellectual to discuss turgid peas. However, an old but true saying came to mind: It's hard to be yourself, but then again it's harder not to. In cyberspace it's no less true, though it gets a bit more complex. Not only is it hard not to be yourself, but it's hard to know which self to be when there are so many to choose from.

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