Really Thinking About Things

WEIGHTY STUFF Sherry Turkle, who has studied people’s relationships with computers, has turned her focus to how people relate to common items.

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IT is heartening to learn that a member of the cyberelite cannot figure out how to turn off her iPod, and that she sometimes fumbles new programs on her laptop. “That’s why they invented 16-year-olds,” said Sherry Turkle, a psychologist and M.I.T. professor who has been studying the folkways of computer culture for over two decades (since long before the rest of us knew to put “culture” and “computer” in the same sentence).

It was the day of the Red Sox’ victory parade; Professor Turkle’s own 16-year-old, Becca Willard, wore an Ellsbury jersey and gently teased her mother about her technological
deficiencies, such as they are.

“Let’s just say that Becca has been my Beatrice in navigating certain innovations,” said Professor Turkle, who before her daughter’s arrival had been sketching Bentham’s panopticon on a yellow legal pad and sipping coffee at the table in her French country kitchen.

She was using the objects in her 19th-century town house, which was bought and renovated by Professor Turkle after her divorce from Becca’s father 10 years ago, to explain the premise of her new book. “Evocative Objects: Things We Think With” (M.I.T. Press) is a collection of essays, edited and introduced by Professor Turkle, about how everyday objects tell stories about their owners.

Objects and artifacts have long been Professor Turkle’s stock in trade. When she arrived at M.I.T. in the 1970s, fresh from Harvard, Paris and years of studying French philosophy and psychoanalytic thought, Professor Turkle brought a humanist’s eye to the device that her new colleagues had become enamored of: the computer.

To her, it was an “evocative object,” a “companion to emotion, and a provocation to thought.” She looked beyond what the computer could do for us to what it might do to us, as individuals and as a society. As a sociologist of science, she spent years studying hacker culture, child programmers and gamers, groundbreaking work collected in books like “The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit,” published in 1984, and “Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet,” from 1995.

Her new book uses a similar approach to illuminate more familiar objects. A vacuum cleaner, a closet, photographs, a linty pill in an old wallet — each is examined through varying lenses of anthropology, philosophy and psychoanalysis.
For instance, a datebook and that linty pill, an antidepressant no longer taken by its owner, together bring to life Michel Foucault's and Roland Barthes's ideas about a disciplinary society and how its members learn to discipline themselves. As indigestible as this premise sounds, the book is actually a very tasty read.

During the visit, Becca brought her own evocative object into the kitchen: a patchwork quilt made by her paternal grandmother, who died in July. Using the categories her mother presents in her book, you learn that the quilt is a weightier thing than you would imagine.

It carries a triptych of meanings: it is a transitional object (a substitute for a person, using the old Freudian terminology) as well as an object of mourning and memory (a memento of a person who has died) and, finally, an object of history and exchange; in other words, a gift.

Gifts and heirlooms hold particular power for social theorists like Professor Turkle. She writes about how a gift retains something of its giver and so becomes animate, and about gift-giving as an ancient form of social glue.

For Professor Turkle, the book is a kind of memoir.

"I have a long history of looking to objects to find myself in the world," she said, "because the people around me weren't talking."

Her essay in the book is about a closet, and the key chains, bibelots, photographs and old high school textbooks it contained. Until she was about 14, Professor Turkle said, she spent most of her weekends in her grandparents' apartment near Prospect Park, Brooklyn, often sorting through the contents of a kitchen closet that held the family's pictures and heirlooms.

She once found a photograph of a man in tweed pants with lace-up shoes; there was a hole, neatly cut out, where his face had been. Here was the family secret: Professor Turkle's father, whom her mother left when she was 2 for reasons unknown. Naturally, she grew up to be a detective.

"My search for his face made me who I am," she said. "It marked me forever. What did it mean to get rid of all his things, to erase his face?"
What's really unbelievable is that she never asked about him.

"No, it's not," she said. "When something is literally unspeakable in a family, you don't even feel permitted to think about it. Or I didn't."