

Press 1 for Pig Latin

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First Edition

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to the people whose lives have been made  
weary because of the wonders of technology

also by Robert S. Swiatek

***The Read My Lips Cookbook:  
A Culinary Journey of Memorable Meals***

***Don't Bet On It*** – a novel

***Tick Tock, Don't Stop:  
A Manual for Workaholics***

***for seeing eye dogs only***

***This Page Intentionally Left Blank  
– Just Like the Paychecks of the Workers***

***I Don't Want to be a Pirate – Writer, maybe***

***wake up – it's time for your sleeping pill***

***Take Back the Earth – The Dumb, Greedy  
Incompetents Have Trashed It***

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## Introduction

I really am not fond of terrorists. Soon after September 11, 2001, when our president mentioned that the citizens were either with the gub'ment or against, I assumed he meant that either we were fans of those nasty people mentioned in the first sentence or not. My feeling is really personal, as those suicide bombers have made my life more difficult by creating more work for me.

Before that tragic event, I could mail a book or two from my condo with no questions asked. The time involved might be about ten or fifteen minutes. Now when I send two or more books, I need to go to the post office because of the Patriot Act since the package weighs thirteen ounces or more. Apparently a bomb can't be made that weighs less than that. This means a half-hour of my time or more is needed now. It gets more ludicrous. My mailman mentioned to me that were the package to result in fireworks on the plane, the post office couldn't trace the cause if it wasn't first brought to one of their buildings. If you figure out that logic, let me know.

It gets even more bizarre. On a trial basis – one year, that is – I am renting a mail station from Pitney Bowes. By doing that, I can now send packages weighing a pound or more from my residence, without being held back because of the possibility of explosives in the package. I don't have to drive to the post office. Apparently those who fly planes without being able or caring to land them are not allowed to use these gadgets of metered mailing.

On the weekend before the middle of the month in April of 2008, I modified the home page of my web site and loaded it to the Internet. I viewed it and everything seemed in order, including the counter for hits. The next Monday when I checked the site, I noticed that the counter was on strike – that is, it vanished for some reason. I went and loaded what I thought was another reliable one, made the needed modifications and it appeared that all was right with the new web counter, which displayed, “5801.” The next day when I checked the site, the counter hadn’t changed. Is it even worth the effort to have these accounting gizmos? I did check a few days after that and the counter had increased, so perhaps the counter needed a boost that took a day or so.

Like just about everyone reading this, I have a PC – if you read my other books, you know what I think those two letters represent. I have a spreadsheet of addresses that I use in conjunction with a Word file to produce address labels. I “simply” go to the address file and place a “!” in column G of the spreadsheet for the names and addresses I want on the labels and then close the file. Then I open the Word file – one I have already created for the spreadsheet – and click on *Tools* on the top row and from there, press *Mail Merge*. I then get another small screen on which I press *Merge*. After that, I get another screen and I then press *Merge*. Finally, I see the labels and if they are what I want, I can print them. As you may have guessed, I did a mail merge. You also see why the word, *simply* was in quotes above.

When I want to sign off my PC, I have to press *Start*. Then I press *Turn Off Computer*. I then

get another screen and have to press *Turn Off*. Now you know why so many people are turned off by computers, instead of the other way around. If you still love technology, especially relating to PCs and the Internet, let me mention a few of the features with which you should be familiar: *passwords, just do a restart, system is not responding, system processing, file not found* and *give up?* That last one I haven't seen yet, but it should be featured soon. It's probably coming with the next version of the software.

Today, automobiles are so much safer than they were in decades past. There are more airbags and stronger material in the body to preserve the occupants. At the same time, because of these advances, an accident may result in death or a more complicated injury since rescuers can't extricate victims of a car crash in the way it was done before.

I bought a new Subaru in 2005, having had good experiences with that product on two other occasions. About a few weeks later, I heard a car horn sounding and discovered it was accompanied by blinking of the parking lights as well, and that this greeting came from my car. This happened too many times, so I took the car to the dealer, who replaced the alarm system. Things improved, but there were still a few recurrences of these unwanted symphonies – I prefer the music from my CD player, which on occasion has behaved badly. The difficulty was finally gone in 2007, when I bought a Prius.

Someone said that many times you trade one problem for another and unfortunately I found that out with the Toyota vehicle. When I put the car into reverse, I hear a truly annoying sound of warning

and see a camera-dependent screen on my dash with a view of what's behind me. This is so I don't back into another vehicle or some building. One day while I was backing up, the screen indicated I had plenty of room ahead of the car behind, so I kept going and ran into the vehicle. I left the scene quickly so as not to have my insurance premiums increase. Obviously, I'm kidding, but I would have made contact with that automobile and I'd have to pay for my bad judgment had I relied on that camera.

Printed on my passenger-side mirror are those wretched words, "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear" – a possible book title for one of my books – and it seems that they apply to that other view that you shouldn't bother with. Unfortunately you can't turn either the sound or picture off, something you can do with your TV.

I own a Sony television with a remote that has too many buttons. One of them is for muting. It can really come in handy on occasion, but I don't use it that often. Most of the time I press other buttons, such as the volume control or channel selector. On more occasions than I prefer, I depress a button that is far away from the *mute* thing and the sound goes off. You might ask why I don't return the remote for another, but it's past the warranty – in years, not months. That usually happens with guarantees, with the rule being that once it expires, the product will break down or fail. There should never have been such a problem with the remote anyway. It's too bad we can't use this remote on politicians, lawyers, realtors or businessmen.

If your video recorder – if you still have one – is a relatively recent model, you know that the

technology inside is sophisticated enough so that when our clocks need to be changed in April and October, you need do nothing. With older machines, you had to make two adjustments, but then you were relieved of doing that. However, in 2008 things got messed up with two simple changes having to do with when the clocks change. That year, I had to adjust the VCR four times so there'd be agreement with the time displayed on my VCR and the actual time.

If you own a DVD player, you know that it may not play all DVDs. The remote for my DVD player wasn't the easiest to figure out relative to subtitles. Usually you get the captions by doing it through the DVD, but you may need to get them through the player or even a combination of the two. When you think about it, the idea of subtitles is not that big a deal. They're either on or off and then you need to make a choice about the language, which probably will be English. It shouldn't be a hassle or require a linguistics degree in order to see a movie that has people speaking in French with their words underneath in English. I'll talk more about a feature of our language in another chapter.

I have devoted an entire chapter to what has been referred to as a vast wasteland: the world of TV. If you feel that that device is so phenomenal, I can only offer these words: *reality TV*, *news entertainment*, *Jerry Springer*, *Survivor*, "*we provide the news, you decide*," *balance*, *Judge Judy* and all her associates, *The Shopping Network*, *infomercials*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *American Idol*, overanalyzed sporting events with all the accompanying hype and those atrocious commercials, even on cable.

Corporations have chosen to install automated phone systems (APS) instead of having someone answer the phone. I don't think they want to be contacted. On one occasion, I called a number and heard the message, "The person who you are trying to reach is not available," followed by the dial tone. Wouldn't it cost the company less to simply have the phone ring since the caller would get the same information? What I just described wasn't common in the past, but seems to be usual today. On too many occasions, you will be put through one menu followed by another and most likely all the choices will not apply in your case. Still, you could eventually get to what seems like the last menu and hear the message, "Thanks for contacting us," followed by the realization that you'll have to try again.

You may be blessed and actually speak to a humanoid, but you could also be put on hold and hear, "Your call is important to us." You won't hear these words, "But not that important," but you'll probably hear some music by Kenny G. APS seem to have succeeded because rarely is the desired contact made and so many people complain about what really is a complicated semi-answering system. In many cases it appears as though all you will get is neither information nor any chance to speak to anyone. If things couldn't get any worse, we now are blessed with technology that tries to converse with you and then go to a menu based on your response. Perhaps that acronym mentioned stands for **Agitated People Screaming**.

The phone of today has really *advanced* – I believe that's the wrong word entirely – since talking to others is worse than ever despite all the

technology, including email. I'll get into that hemorrhoid later. My editor inquired what the purpose of text messaging was, and I couldn't answer. You could ask someone in the know, but I believe my response is more accurate. You may have seen the Seinfeld episode where Jerry, in his monologue, discusses calling someone to talk to the machine. In effect people want to leave a message and not converse with the owner of the hardware, not unlike text messaging. As I said before, communication has not progressed accordingly.

These are merely a few examples of how technology has failed and throughout this book I will describe many more. Not long ago a friend and I were discussing what were the four worst inventions of all time. We came up with the television, personal computer, phone and automobile, in no significant order. Obviously, each of these has done more harm than good to the earth but they have had positive effects on society. You might say that somewhere along the way to great potential, screw-ups occurred, big time. There is one innovation that we overlooked: gunpowder and all its derivatives. It does have a good use, since it can put food on the table – even if a bit gamey – but this is the ultimate worst creation of all time and little good resulted from its introduction. I won't spend more time here since I have discussed it in great detail in *Take Back the Earth*.

*Press 1 for Pig Latin* will cover each of these four additions to our society and a few others. This treatise will also indicate why the industrial revolution turned out to be a revolting development for too many people. You won't have to travel far to hear your family and friends complaining about

their PC. Email and automated phone systems should be accompanied by PCs to the trash heap and all our lives would improve greatly. This book will discuss the technology's failures but will also indicate what can be done to remedy the situation since technology in general has made our lives better. We can't ignore recent advances as well as the fact that there are so many great possibilities. It may be broken, but we need to fix it. With each passing day, the situation only gets worse – for everyone. I hear stories about problems daily from too many people. Fasten your seat belt. Things will get worse before they get better.

## 1. A week of technological troubles

In just a short period of time one can see numerous failures of technology. During a period of about seven days, I was bombarded with more than I could bear, but needless to say, I got over it. Before describing these events, let me remind you that we wouldn't have all the advances we have today without people getting involved. This means that not only do people come up with an idea, but also human beings contribute to mess up what should be to our advantage.

I belong to St. Joseph's University Parish in Buffalo. At the church from June to October or so, I am blessed with a bag of vegetables from Porter Farms, which is about forty miles from where I live. Whatever they harvest, they give us for less than three hundred dollars for the entire season. That's a bargain considering that the food is grown organically and above all, it's local so the goods don't have to be shipped across the country, saving the planet.

Nonetheless, someone has to drive and procure the produce – but people take turns. One Friday, my friend Jerry phoned me and asked if I wouldn't mind picking up the vegetables. She was having a difficult time contacting the person who signed up to do that, since the latter's phone was disconnected. She mentioned that she would try to contact her again, and if I had to go, she would call sometime the next morning between nine and eleven.

It was about 10:40 the next day and I thought I was off the hook, but then the phone rang. I agreed to hop in my car and head out to Elba, the

site of the farm. When I got there, all the vegetables for pickup were gone. I did get some extra lettuce and squash, and as I was exiting the farm via the rutted driveway, another car approached. It turned out to be some of the help and they asked if I was Bob and then apologized since the woman had made the trip after all. They gave me a handful of cucumbers freshly picked and I could have had some onions and beets besides, but I told the women that they wouldn't have to bother since what they gave me was fine.

The problem turned out to be a huge communication failure, but what more could have been done? Had the woman picked up the stuff earlier than she did, I wouldn't have had to make the journey, since Jerry was in communication with the farm. An email may have helped unless the woman didn't read them or had no Internet access. There's no excuse for the phone being out of service, but maybe that was the fault of the phone company. The only saving grace is the fact that my Prius – just purchased in April 2007 – gets about fifty miles to the gallon so I used less than two gallons of gas and I did get some extra produce.

Karrin Allyson performed at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 2007 and I emailed a few samples of her music to my sister Pat to entice her to attend the concert. I also sent it to myself to make sure the files could be opened and she could hear the songs. I had no difficulty doing that but my sister had problems because of copywrangling. I thought of a few solutions around the problem and emailed my sister with these options but she was too busy to try to retrieve the songs again. Eventually I made her a CD with a few songs by

Karrin as well as some other selections, mostly by female artists. She didn't make the event, which featured a wonderful singer, who also played piano, accompanied by three very talented musicians on drums, bass and guitar. Pat liked the singing of Karrin Allyson as well as the rest of the music on the CD I gave her.

Unfortunately, too often we get emails with attachments that can't be opened for a variety of reasons. What happened in this case is inexcusable since there is technology to send data and music, but it doesn't always work. All the time I spent working around the problem meant I omitted doing something else, even if it was insignificant. The process of getting results in this manner can be referred to as a "workaround." This could mean that something works ninety percent of the time. In my judgment, that means it doesn't work. So instead of fixing a problem, you patch it. You know what happens when patches fall off – you need to apply more. In the future, you may wind up working around the clock because you took this approach today. Getting back to the emailing of Karrin's music, it would have saved me a great deal of time and effort had I just made the CD in the first place.

I mentioned my hybrid and I even added a page about it on my web site. You can add your comments by emailing me after clicking on "The Prius Report." I will be updating the page from time to time. The same day of the aforementioned concert, I had a Prius experience. To really get into what happened, you will need some insight into one complicated aspect of the car: opening the doors.

There is no key to the vehicle. Well, there is a tiny spare key, in case all else fails. Instead, the

owner has a rectangular device that enables the driver to enter the car after getting close to it. This applies to the driver's door but the hatchback also simultaneously unlocks. That's quite convenient – as you can guess – but to open the three passenger doors, you have to click on *unlock* twice on the gizmo. That was my first impression because that's what I did on many occasions. However, on the day of the concert, all the doors were unlocked for me and my friends just by all of us getting near the Prius.

Hence, I really didn't need to click to get the other doors open, not even once. But then, why couldn't I open the passenger door on so many occasions just by approaching it? I was puzzled but then I realized that I was dealing with technology and I shouldn't lose any sleep over the dilemma. In reality, there was a glitch. Fortunately, I can report it to Toyota and in the next model year, it can be remedied. Actually, why not remove the unlock button from the device completely, but leave the lock button. After all, the improved car will result in all doors being unlocked by having someone with that box in his pocket. Of course, to lock all the doors, one click of the lock button is called for. You can read more about these technological advances and my feelings toward my vehicle on my web site.

Returning to the telephone problem at the beginning of this chapter, I had two more encounters with similar difficulties. I decided to cook dinner for a few friends so I sent a few email invitations – I think Emily Post would approve – but decided to follow them up with phone calls. This was in case people didn't get the emails – that does happen. Making one call resulted in my

hearing the message, “Please dial an area code before the number,” or something to that effect. The only problem was that this was a local call. I couldn’t have yelled out the window to the invitees, but they didn’t live that far away and I knew it wasn’t a long distance call. I dialed the number again, figuring maybe my fingers messed up. Sometimes when I wash them, I can’t do a thing with them. The result was the same, even after a third try so I knew it wasn’t me. For some reason, I did finally get through later and left a message. Obviously, it was a technological glitch of some sort.

The second phone scenario probably shouldn’t be blamed on those service providers but on the health-could-care-less industry. One day before a scheduled routine visit, the doctor’s office contacted me and asked for a referral. However, my provider doesn’t require one – they are doing something right. I had been to this office before without referrals so I mentioned this but the caller insisted that I had to have one. After a short period, I got an apology and the person said that I was right. In August 2007, I had more health care encounters and I may write a book on some of those problems, since we all could use a few laughs. In early 2008, I received a referral in the mail – I thought they weren’t necessary. Shouldn’t it be sent to the physician and not me?

I have mentioned in passing the thought that all emails don’t get delivered and further confirmation of this came in a friend’s email. He mentioned trying to email me but getting a message saying that couldn’t be done for some reason. At the time, I had no disruption in my email setup. He was

worried about me so he sent another email, which I received. When I responded, he didn't get my email. I was going to resend my original email except I couldn't find it in my sent folder. Obviously, at least two emails – most likely a great deal more – never got sent or maybe weren't received and you may not even be notified of the failure. I think we straightened our problem out, but you never know.

With Internet problems, sometimes I wonder why I even consider paying bills electronically. I do it anyway because it saves paperwork and subsequently the planet. In the middle of August 2007, I converted all my mother's bills – cable, heating, electric and phone – to online payments. Before that, I did my own to some extent and one day I decided to do the same thing with my electric bill. I logged onto the National Grid web site and as is to be expected, I had to set up an account. I did that and was ready to make a payment, but when I clicked on "pay bill," I got the message, "Invalid option." Instead of wasting time – which you will soon see that I did anyway – I called the 800 number of the company and was told that it would take twenty-four hours for the account to be set up. This was in spite of the fact that I saw the words, "account set up."

I logged on the same site the next day, not without difficulty – for some reason I think I actually had two logon IDs – and once more tried to pay the bill. The result was different from the day before, but still a problem so I called the help desk. They mentioned that it would take a month to set up the account. I hung up the phone and did what I should have done originally. I wrote the check and

sent the payment. Actually, what I had done was all right since I was able to pay the next bill on line, and all bills after that are deducted automatically each month.

After talking about the telephone and email, I need to mention another difficulty, with the U. S. mail. This screw-up is a combination of mishaps. I wrote two letters to literary agencies in an attempt to get an agent. Where I live, the tenants can leave their outgoing mail for pickup in the same area where deliveries arrive of mail too large to fit in the mailboxes. I deposited the envelopes but around lunchtime, they were still there to be mailed. Since my day's mail was there, I could only conclude that someone didn't quite do his job. I brought them back inside, figuring I would put them out the next day. You might figure that with another twenty-four hours, the problem would be solved and my letters would be on their way to their destination. Instead, things got worse.

I headed out the door at seven in the morning and put out the letters. When I returned an hour or so later, they were gone. Unfortunately the mail doesn't arrive until at least eleven o'clock. So then, where did they go? Maybe one of my neighbors was heading to the post office and took them. That wasn't likely. Perhaps one of the tenants thought it was their mail and took it inside. The only reason I say that is because I had witnessed just that scenario in the past. In that case, the correspondence was returned so that the recipient received it after all. There was another possibility – I will never know what really happened – namely, someone took the envelopes inside and thought they

were junk mail and tossed them into the garbage. Somehow, I couldn't rule out that possibility.

This mess would have been avoided had I taken the letters to the mailbox less than a half-mile from my house on my way to the trail, where I walk, or had the mailman simply picked it up the day before. Neither of those happened, so a week later I sent another copy of each letter. That very day, I got a letter of rejection from one of the agencies. About a week later I heard from the agency again with the very same form letter.

I didn't mention that on that second disastrous day, I left the house again around 11:30 and the letters weren't there although a card from one of my neighbors was there to be mailed. This led me to believe at first that the envelopes were trashed, but obviously that wasn't the case since I got that rejection letter. I have a theory to what may have transpired. Someone picked up the envelopes and may even have opened one, realizing it was outgoing mail. He or she didn't return it after taping it right away but did so after I left just before noon.

I conclude the chapter with a realization that I haven't chronicled any technological television troubles. Perhaps I merely forgot, or there weren't any in my home because I keep the monster off much of the time. However, I will mention a few things that I've run into that you probably have experienced as well.

From the listing in the TV topics, I saw that the movie *eXistenZ* was to be shown and decided to do the VCR thing. I usually add a few minutes before the beginning and after the end of the scheduled time for the program, but I should have been more liberal. When I sat down to watch the

flick, it was almost at the end when I saw the dreaded blue screen, meaning the movie was a bit longer than the usual two hours, including commercials. Fortunately, I picked up the video from the library so I did see the conclusion.

The same scene plays out when a program that you want to record follows a sporting event, especially during football season. You need to allow for a messed up schedule on Sunday night after the game, which offsets the movie in some way. The best way to get around the problem is to use the same start time but add an hour at the end. Of course, if the Bears-Vikings encounter goes into overtime, the program may be pre-empted entirely. Isn't technology wonderful?



## 2. He's a re-gifter

If you are not a fan of Seinfeld, you will have no clue to the significance of this title. On one of the programs, Elaine got a label maker from a friend who apparently got it as a gift from someone else, and hence the accusation and title above. This chapter won't be concerned with passing gifts on that you don't care for, but about labels. Let me elaborate. The business world, which dispenses technology, uses language to baffle the rest of us. At the same time, they wind up confusing the help as well. You can really complicate matters by adding a computer. That department – now known as information technology (IT), and who knows what it will be called tomorrow – has its own lingo. With all these corporate efforts, it's a wonder anything ever gets accomplished today.

What the world needs now – besides love – is simplicity. Speak in English and by all means, get rid of all those labels. People rely on them and everywhere you look, they are tossed about and it seems they can't be avoided. There really is no place for them. I wrote a novel a few years ago and in that book I tried my best to keep away from labels. It was my intention then, and I hope to always be free from using them. Of course, when I write satire, all the rules are suspended.

If you read just about anything, say a book or the newspaper, or watch a television news show, the overabundance of labels is obscene. They are misleading, inaccurate, meaningless and only fill up space. The only place for labels is on the return address portion of an envelope.

In the winter of 2005, I participated in a retreat. When we sat down to dinner, one of the attendees asked me if I was one hundred percent Polish. I told her that despite my advanced age, I still need a great deal of polishing. But seriously, someone in my shoes – I'm not sure how he got there – would have said yes to that question if his mother's maiden name was Choinski and father's was Swiatek – the two Polish surnames of my mom and dad. However, doesn't the real answer to this question have to take into consideration the mother and father of each of my parents? We can't stop there as you have to also look at their grandparents and the process goes on and on. Terminating at some point down the road will not give you an accurate percentage. Thus, I shouldn't say that I was one hundred percent Polish. It just wouldn't be accurate.

I could categorically say that I have a bit of Polish in my background. Even then, it would be ludicrous to bring up any percentage. Any number given would be impossible to verify. Along the same lines, consider the relationship of Sally Hemings with Thomas Jefferson. I read somewhere that Hemings was twenty-five percent black. You should be in agreement – if you accepted my premise earlier – that whoever made that statement is no historian. That's because it seems to be obvious that in the calculation, the person stopped at grandparents and went no further into the backgrounds of relatives. That twenty-five percent number is hogwash.

Throughout history, labels have been given to various peoples, based on all types of criteria. People who were unfortunate to be slaves were

called all kinds of names, some very offensive. More recently the term “African-American” has snuck into the vocabulary of the times. As you might guess, I don’t believe those two words should be used. If someone happened to be a proponent of apartheid and a citizen of South Africa who moved to the United States, would you want to describe him as an “African-American?” I think not.

Another obvious label above is the term “black.” While we’re at it, we may just as well consider the term “white.” These are two more meaningless labels. I have yet to see anyone who fits either description. Well, there might be some people who appear to be white – albinos. However, in reality their skin is more apt to be described as pink. Those who are said to be “black” really have dark brown skin. You will never see anyone with black skin, no matter how dark it is.

Actually, each of us has brown skin. It is just that the shades vary from one person to the next. I really find it ironic that the label “black” is given to people based on their dark skin, sometimes called “colored,” while the label “white” is assigned to others, whose skin matches the color of Band-aids. Scientifically, “black” is the absence of color and the union of all colors in the spectrum is “white.” Since most men are colorblind, why is there such a big fuss, anyway? Like I pointed out, labels should be tossed out – they only belong on the groceries in the supermarket.

Some time ago, I watched Martin Mull do a diatribe on the use of words and labels relative to the male / female confrontation. It was quite funny and I wish I had a copy of it. It just pointed out the fact that we have too many words that seem to

apply to only one gender. The result is that a feminist might point out that “mailman” is unacceptable and should be replaced. How about “Person person”? I hope you get it, but both complaint and solution are quite preposterous. A male chauvinist might say that “person” is unacceptable because the first part of the word is “purse,” a womanly device. Then another feminist would argue that the second syllable of the word is “son,” which is a masculine thing. This would only result in this choice being acceptable to no one.

So how about using the term, “communications provider”? That seems to describe the work of Newman and Cliff Claven, but it has a ring of the health care industry. If that won’t do, what about, “enhancement dispatcher”? Despite the fact that it might be appropriate, it’s quite vague and something the business community would come up with to confuse anyone not involved in its world. From the stuff I get each day – except for Sunday and holidays – I think the best term is “trash mover.” I wonder if that would be politically correct.

Those two words, “politically correct,” are also quite annoying. To begin with, that phrase is an oxymoron. I haven’t seen too much recently in government that is close to being right. I recently viewed a DVD of the great comedian Gallagher and he mentioned the fact that “Freedom of speech includes volume, too.” If we brought along the idea of responsibility, not that many people would need to worry if what came out of their mouth or from their pen would be offensive in any way. Note that I didn’t say all people.

I'm sure you have been bombarded with "liberal" and "conservative," two more labels that should be eliminated. Consider the first word and remove the last letter and add the letters "t" and "e." The result is the word, "liberate" as in **Operation Iraqi Liberation**. Of course, that moniker was quickly altered to Operation Iraqi Freedom because of the resulting acronym obtained from the first letter of each word. Let's carry that a step further. I think the connection between "liberal" and "liberty" should be clear. Yet, even though the first few years of the twenty-first century brought endless use of the latter term, the party in power didn't have the designation of "liberal." On the other hand, they did take quite a few "liberties" and were quite "liberal" with the taxes that the majority of people of the nation were handing over to the government.

You can't say an administration that began with a surplus which they rapidly turned into a record deficit is "conservative." What exactly were they keeping? By their actions, they certainly haven't saved very much. Under their tenure, the environment seems to be something to be destroyed and not preserved. Life is never conserved when war is waged. Perhaps the term "liberal" should be replaced with "progressive." Without progress, nothing good can be achieved. The result can only be stagnation. Being familiar with the language, could we say that "progress" is the opposite of "congress"?

A few other terms that we hear too many times are "right wing" and "left wing." Shouldn't we also include, "center"? I'm not a big hockey fan, but I think that's where these three belong. They

certainly should be kept out of normal vocabulary. If someone who is supposed to be “right” is not held in check, there just could be no one “left.” As you can see, labeling people does nobody any good and the result usually is a great distortion.

I should also mention the *red* and *blue* states. This has nothing to do with their color on a political map. Maybe the latter color refers to the down and out, dejected feeling that one party felt after that Tuesday in November or the fact that they *blew* the election. Is RED an acronym for Results Enabled by Diebold? It wasn't many years ago that *red* stood for an evil empire and it was the second choice when compared to *dead*. How times change.

To continue with the idea of color, not long ago I read a book called *The Journey of Man* by Spencer Wells. I did this after watching the PBS special of the same name. Generally speaking, the book is always better than the movie, but not in this case. Though being very informative, the book was too technical for me and probably for most people. View the video or DVD if you can.

You'll probably agree that man – here I include female as well as male – did not originate in the United States but either in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley or in Africa. On his incredible journey, Wells illustrates that man began his existence in the dark continent – another bad label because there's plenty of light in the daytime if you come out of the forest. There's a great deal of desert on the continent as well. He discusses how man and woman – you can't have one without the other – left Africa and settled in Europe, Asia and Australia. Some stayed there, while others headed out to use

their frequent flyer miles and even made it to Antarctica, North America and South America.

You may wonder how they got from one land to another with all the oceans, but remember that these people were quite creative and certainly were capable of building vessels to get from one island to another. Also, you may have heard that many years ago the landmasses were close to one another, not the way they are today. Thus this journey was by no means impossible. It didn't happen overnight, but then these people – without cable TV and PCs – had plenty of time, something that we don't have today. What these people went through was incredible and it required great courage on their part. Their adventure, daring and bravery resulted in the population of the earth.

*The Journey of Man* indicates that each of us had some relatives who lived in Africa. You can't come to any other conclusion. Since these travelers may have gone through Asia and Europe, we could probably conclude that our ancestors came from those lands as well. Wells shows us that the color of a person's skin means absolutely nothing. We are all brothers and sisters. If you haven't seen the program, I highly recommend it.

I close this section with a few observations that should convince you that labels only belong on CDs and DVDs, so that you know what music you are hearing or what flick you are watching. Some of these names you may have read about in my other books, but they are worth repeating.

There is a take-out restaurant in the Buffalo area that brags about its pizza. It's called *Just Pizza*. I finally tried one of their pies and it was quite good, but overpriced. Since the people in town eat a great

deal of chicken wings as well as pizza, you can also get wings at this establishment. This indicates to me that the name of the place isn't quite right. My guess is that at one time they only served pizza and sometime later added the other items. They haven't gotten around to changing their name.

I have eye exams through a company called *America's Best*. I had dealt with a branch in Blasdell, which is south of Buffalo, but then discovered after I moved that I could go to the one in Williamsville, a town north of the city. I ordered a new pair of glasses with sun protection. When they were ready and I put them on, I noticed that something was missing – I couldn't see as expected. Whoever was working on my order left out the prescription for one eye. It looks like it is time for another name change.

One of the banks in town changed its name recently to *Citizens Bank*, with the understanding that the customer would be served better by that alteration. Changing the name will not accomplish anything. Rather, it takes effort. There is no way I could enter that bank and ask for money since I am a citizen and in need. Do businesses consider any implications before coming up with a company name?

Perhaps businesses should refrain from superlatives as part of the name of their establishment. It just could lead to some inaccuracies. Also, if you claim to be "the best," you have great pressure to live up to that name and you can never rest. Just be the best and the customers will spread the word. If you make false claims, the word will get around even faster. If you

are a television station that brags about being  
“balanced,” you probably aren’t.



### 3. Does your television have a spin cycle?

One of the great innovations of the twentieth century is television. Growing up in Buffalo, I remember our family's first set. The screen was unlike the shape of those of today. Imagine a circle, split it vertically and spread the halves out from the center, to the right and left. Finally add two parallel, horizontal lines to connect the two parts of the circle and that was the shape of the TV's screen. The viewing area was quite small – about 12 inches across, diagonally – while the cabinet that held it was about four feet high and two feet wide and long. Of course, for a few bucks more, you could buy larger televisions in bigger cabinets. This invention started to be popular in the late 1940s and in the next decade most homes owned one.

Sometime in the late 1960s, my parents' home saw their first color set, a GE 17-inch model. A few years later, it was replaced with a 25-inch SONY console, and where that set is today, I haven't a clue. When my dad died, my mom moved to an apartment complex and today watches her programs on a slightly smaller SONY set – and I might add, more portable – hooked up to basic cable. The home where my family and my siblings and I grew up never subscribed to cable but was serviced by an outdoor antenna.

I probably should discuss my television habits, relative to the hardware – that's the box, screen and sound coming out of it. I'll discuss the software, or programming, later. When I moved away from my parents' home for the first time, I took no TV with me. I did bring my stereo, without surround sound since that came later. There is no doubt in my mind

that music and books are much better choices than the boob tube. It wasn't long after leaving home that I bought an 11-inch black and white Hitachi television. I purchased my first color TV in 1973 and it was a used console that I sold for the same price that I paid. When I bought a SONY 17-inch Trinitron shortly thereafter, things changed, as I got cable for the first time. When I moved to my first house, I relied on the antenna on the roof for reception. I must also shamefully admit that I subscribed to *TV Guide* for a short time. However, I soon realized that you could be television savvy by reading that publication and not have to turn on your set.

The second time I experienced cable was about the time that MTV made it on the scene. In each case, I wasn't all that impressed with what was available for my viewing pleasure. Perhaps my problem has to do with my life preferences. My first SONY was replaced with a 27-inch SONY sometime in the 1990s and it weighs more than I would like, but is still quite functional in my condo where I currently reside.

Before this last move, I relied on an outside antenna that I could rotate – until the motor died – on the roof of my home in East Aurora, which allowed me to view Canadian broadcasting. I could pick up a few stations, including *Saturday Night at the Movies* on channel 19 out of Toronto, a PBS equivalent. I also enhanced the sound for TV viewing by attaching my VCR – I bought my first one in 1988 – to my stereo with a Bose system and a few supplemental speakers. All right, it wasn't true surround-sound, but it was loud. I dare not do that today but do have basic cable, without which I

could only watch UHF stations, and some of those don't come in that well. I would do away with the cable except that the price is reasonable and I do need to tune in because of my writing.

The small black and white television of the middle of the twentieth century was replaced by color and before long cable and satellite viewing and TiVo came on the scene. If I'm not mistaken, the latter enables you to watch a game on the tube, stop to eat dinner and come back right where you were with the contest. Why not just get out that other piece of hardware, the TV tray? As far as I am concerned, TiVo is merely a fancy television recorder. Today we have huge screens, projection TV, digital TV, surround sound, high-definition television (HDTV), flat screen TVs, televisions an inch wide and plasma – not to be confused with a necessary part of each of us. There was a time when we used videocassette recorders (VCR), including the short-lived Beta-max, but now we have DVDs as well as DVD players and recorders. Who can tell what will come next?

Initially, there were but a handful of stations, and all we had were ABC, CBS and NBC. At the outset, programming took up a few hours each day, beginning at four in the afternoon and signing off sometime around eleven or so. I don't really know, as I wasn't allowed to stay up that late. Once the day's schedule was complete, the screen was taken over by a humming test pattern. You could stare at that for hours on end and it might even put you to sleep. If you were watching a program and somehow dozed off, you could very well wake up to the boring, never changing screen.

That test pattern is gone and you might be thankful, but I certainly am not, because of what took its place. I'll get to that shortly. When television first originated, someone had to pay for the programming. That's where commercials come in. Initially, those short breaks seemed to be honest attempts to sell a reputable product and they were sufficient to keep programs on the air. Today, that has changed so drastically that *false advertising* appears to be a pleonasm. The majority of sales pitches are for beer, drugs and automobiles and an insult to anyone with intelligence. But people still buy the product, no matter what it is, even if they don't need it. Television has been selling for years and will continue to do so, as long as there are buyers.

I mentioned the VCR, in my mind a great blessing compared to the great American wasteland. Some recorders allow the complete bypassing of commercials automatically, while others give you the fast-forward option. As you can tell, I am not a big fan of commercials, but some people actually live for them. After the Super Bowl – if that isn't an oxymoron, I don't know what is – people seem to be discussing the advertisements played between the start and finish of the game. These opportunities for sponsors during the Super Bore run into millions of dollars for seconds on the air. I tape a movie or show so I can bypass the breaks for selling but apparently others do it so they can watch the swill!

You may be aware that the average hour of television has about sixteen minutes of advertisements. Thus watching a movie that is actually two hours long would require you to be around the set for somewhat under three hours. The

VCR is a great tool to record programs that you can't be at home to view. It also comes in handy if there are two great programs you care to watch that are broadcast at the same time – that could happen. The feature I appreciate most is that you can watch a half-hour program in twenty-two minutes and best of all, skip the advertising. The bad news about VCRs is the time is constantly blinking and it never changes. If you have this problem, ask your children – they should be able to fix it. A black magic marker could also be used. Still, VCRs could be a bit more user-friendly.

Unfortunately, what began as a short attempt at selling has evolved into the infomercial, a half-hour of convincing and hawking. In fact there are networks out there that do only this. My basic cable seems to have at least ten percent of the stations selling in this manner. Imagine how many you will be blessed with if your cable gets 250 stations. Someone wondered how an infomercial or the QVC channel could survive. Stop your pondering – they're out there and have been for some time so apparently people must be watching and buying. Most people won't turn on the station and not order something. If that were the case, these selling venues would be history. Infomercials have taken the place of the test pattern of so long ago. Instead of ending the day with the National Anthem, the stations have chosen a capitalistic approach to fill time slots. Why not try to make money at all hours of the day? I will spend some more time later on this all-pervasive annoyance on TV.

Writing this has been very difficult for me because of the numerous issues that arise when

television is the topic of discussion. That's why the chapter is so long. Nonetheless, I'll give it my best shot, without a gun – something that should be applied to television in general today, with bullets. I'm sure you've seen the bumper sticker – KILL YOUR TV.

News in the early days of television doesn't compare to what we see today, as those shows in the middle of the twentieth century were fifteen minutes. You may not believe this, but *Meet the Press* was on back then. Pioneer journalists of the day were Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow. The latter hosted a program called *See It Now*. One of the nominated movies of 2005 for best picture was *Good Night, and Good Luck*, about the confrontation between Edward R. Murrow and Senator Joseph McCarthy. It didn't get the Academy Award, but I thought it should have. David Straithorn's performance was so incredible that I really believed that Murrow was still with us – if only that were possible.

Murrow was an example of what a real reporter should be. A half century ago, he mentioned that television had great potential, but he also warned that if those in charge didn't use the medium for the higher good, they might just as well forget that it existed. Unfortunately, very few heeded his advice. Murrow was one of a kind – if only we had more journalists with his integrity and courage today. His insight so long ago was profound.

Another thought from Murrow emphasized in *Good Night, and Good Luck* that I myself have been proposing for a long time is that not every story has two sides. If a chemical company has been found guilty of polluting a community or a

company president convicted of looting the corporation, neither executive has a right to try to weasel out of the verdict by “balancing” the issue. There is even a news channel that overemphasizes “being balanced.” People who try to impress me usually don’t. Even my favorite network, PBS, is guilty of providing two sides to an issue when only one is appropriate. Balance is for tightrope walkers.

The national news shows eventually expanded to a half hour. Notice I didn’t use the term *evolved* when talking about what we can glimpse on our screens today. Initially there was very little coverage, but today with CNN, it is non-stop, all day and all night. Unfortunately most of the news is bad, depressing and sensational. If you tune in for a short period of time, you will hear the same story over and over and there will be spin, and the news won’t be tops. On one of my last contracts, when I entered the building, I couldn’t avoid a television monitor that was tuned into one channel and that was CNN. I usually went past it as quickly as possible.

There are other dedicated news channels besides CNN and various news programs. You can watch the local news – on at least three times each day – the national news and news programs like **60 Minutes** and all its derivatives. Maybe spin-offs is a more appropriate word. These programs fall into the category of “sensationalism,” but even the national news tends toward that same outlook. Each of the networks is in competition with the others, so just about anything goes. And along with that goes the truth. It’s aptly referred to as *news entertainment*. These programs have become a competition to get viewers, whether you’re talking about ABC, CBS,

CNN, FOX or NBC. PBS has the news too and probably does the best job as they try to be objective. The others do all they can to maximize market share. Minimizing the truth is not a concern. Sure, there are plane crashes, scandals in government, shootings and war that can't be avoided. Nonetheless there are positive things that shouldn't be neglected on the air. Also, there are times when one particular event is covered when another similar one is neglected because of some demographic. Skipping one is not right when maybe both should be passed over.

Today journalists seem to be out for the big story but along the way forget that someone was affected closely by it and should be afforded some privacy. There will always be time later to talk to witnesses about what took place. I'm sure that interviewers would feel different if they were in the victim's shoes. Maybe the public is desirous of all the coverage because of the violence and gore, but don't the media have celebrities to cover?

At times there is just too much coverage, which causes other people to repeat the original scene, all in the name of grabbing the spotlight. Take the case of the April 1999 Columbine tragedy. The devotion to details resulted in disaster duplication in other places across America. The trouble was that the major news services almost made the murderers into heroes, when that was the last thing that should have been done. Mention their names, but there is no need to put their pictures on the tube. Instead, honor those who perished if you need a photo. I have no desire to see what a person who takes so many innocent lives looks like. Another criticism is that the coverage never ends.

We all had enough of OJ, Monica and the Bobbitt heads and Menendez Brothers. Don't tell me there's no other news. I think the ulterior motive is that trash sells.

In the early days of television, news was minimal and probably more objective. There was still a great deal of bias until we experienced the four W's: the *Warren Commission*, the *War in Vietnam*, *Woodstock* and *Watergate*. Today we have another W. Before that time, even with television, many truths were glossed over. It was felt by many that these things were not that important to the public. Consider John Kennedy's health and sexual indiscretions. A few other presidents had affairs that weren't reported. We somehow survived, perhaps better than if we had known the truth. Television and the war in Vietnam had a huge impact as the images of war and all its carnage made their way into the American living room. From that point on, things would never return to what they had been. The war may have ended but healing may never come.

Not long after that war, we had live coverage of the First Gulf War – truly a misnomer if you speak to the people of Iraq – followed by the bombing in Kosovo. Today, there are wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, still going on even though you saw the sign that said, "Mission Accomplished." I certainly don't relish watching any of this and yet many people tune in to see the bombs dropping on a foreign land. I'm sure they wouldn't feel the same if these munitions were falling on their heads.

Because news has become entertainment, what can we say of its validity? When referring to

the Vietnam War, journalist and soldier Malcolm Browne, in his outstanding book, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks: A Reporter's Life*, states, "War news may be factually correct but very unrealistic in context, and therefore misleading. (I could add that all news, not just war news, necessarily distorts objective reality to some degree.)"

This quote applies to any war. As far as the war against terrorism goes, we probably won't know what really happened, and what is happening for years to come. Truth will eventually come out, but it will take time. Watching television gives us about as much information as watching a soap opera. I watched none of the events of 9/11 because my television was being repaired after a construction accident. Even had it been functioning, I would not have been watching. As it was, I still had as much information about what was happening on that day as people who sat glued to their TVs for the entire day. As everyone knows, war brings with it the disappearance of truth. Why then are we so obsessed with watching the news?

Besides the news, there are a handful of other live shows – that is, what you see on the tube is happening at that very moment. Many shows today are taped. The percentage of shows that were live back in the early days of television is probably the same as those that are recorded today.

Real comedy was not taped in what was called the Golden Age of television – perhaps rightly so – and led to great adlibs. You could get some great laughs on variety shows, such as *Ted Mack's Amateur Hour*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Texaco Theatre* with Milton Berle, *I Love*

*Lucy* with Lucille Ball, and the *Colgate Comedy Hour* with various guests. This was the time of Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner and Red Skelton and others too numerous to mention.

I have to mention a show that was live when it originated in 1975 and is still on today. *Saturday Night* – also referred to as *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) – featured some great comedy. I described my attempt to get tickets for the show in 1978 in *Don't Want to be a Pirate*, my journey as a writer, so I won't repeat it here. I used to watch SNL but the comedy is not what it once was, even though the show is still one-and-a-half hours in duration. Getting new writers and shortening the program to an hour could help.

In the Golden Age of television, you could see some very talented people, whose performances on *Playhouse 90*, an excellent show, led to great careers. That early time even had the soaps, a kind of opera without the music. Some looked on it as drama. I believe the first ones were *Search for Tomorrow* and *Love of Life*. *As the Stomach Turns* wasn't one of the early offerings. These were on in the afternoon and you can still see them in that same time period. When I was home recuperating from my hospital visits, I didn't watch any of that swill. Susan Lucci would be very disappointed. Since I never turned the set on for those programs, I can't comment on them, although I have an idea that they have almost no boundaries. We were also blessed with soap opera at night with the introduction of *Knots Landing* and *Dallas*, a show that hung around for years and proved that there are

good people in Texas. *Soap* was an even better program that spoofed them, which I thought was hilarious.

You can find *Soap* on DVD, and it also represented a type of show that had an early beginning: the sitcom. *I Love Lucy* and all its derivatives were comedy but also sitcoms. When the 1970s rolled in, there were more of these programs. Some programs were taken off the air, but new ones replaced them that were just as good, such as *All in the Family*, *Mash*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Cheers*, the various shows with Bob Newhart, and of course, *Seinfeld* – my favorite comedy.

The early shows that tickled our fancy toed the company line and were in black and white, but the 1960s brought color to the picture as well as to the characters, such as the host of people on *Laugh-In* and the Smothers Brothers, who introduced such stars as Glen Campbell, Pat Paulsen, John Hartford and Mason Williams on the *Smothers Comedy Brothers' Hour*. That apparently wrong juxtaposition is really the way we saw it so many years ago. It was a program that I hated to miss – it was that good.

The music of Tom and Dick was top-notch, as was their comedy, but they got bounced from CBS because of their political commentary. They were censored and you can watch the DVD about their adventures, *Smothered*, an appropriate title. Their courage for speaking what they believed in was commendable. It was also what changed television over the years, in some cases not for the

better. *All in the Family* and its spin-offs also led to great advances in making television what it is today.

There was another show in this same vein, the animated comedy or what is known as the cartoon. Initially, it could be found on the air on Saturday morning with programs such as *Tom and Jerry*, *Roadrunner* and the Disney clan, *Mickey Mouse*, *Donald Duck* and *Pluto*. These evolved into other ideas, such as *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle* – this program’s first season is one of the few DVDs I own – which really was intended for adults, but the young ones could watch it for other reasons. Before long, *The Simpsons* – not the Juice and his family – opened our eyes with their innovation. Then came *South Park* and *The Family Guy*, a program that doesn’t discriminate. It offends everyone. This caught us up to the twenty-first century, but long before that, public television used animation to teach children in many areas, going so far as to blend real live people with cartoons in an outstanding program called *Sesame Street*. The network even added a big bird and a few other characters that would mesmerize children. Walt Disney was a huge influence in this type of program and eventually animated movies made it big.

Around the 60s, all types of movies made their way to the small tube. Classics were shown, if they were available, as well as movies that had been out and left the theaters. If you missed the feature at the show, you had another opportunity. It wasn’t long before the networks dedicated evenings to movies – some were made for TV as they produced their own and were viewed for the first time. There

would be a single movie per night, but it seemed like every network had a night at the movies.

A very successful show of another genre originated around this same time. One cooking show made its way to a new network called PBS, the Public Broadcasting Service, paid for by the taxpayers. The other stations had other sources for funds, which I will get into shortly. The world-renowned chef Julia Child hosted that cooking program and it paved the way for many food shows that were to follow over the years, including food networks. For a delightful and informative read, I recommend *Appetite for Life: The Biography of Julia Child* by Noel Riley Fitch. There was a cooking show in Buffalo even before Julia did her thing on PBS, called *Meet the Millers*. The only thing I recall about it is the title, that it was in black and white and hosted by a husband and wife team whose last name was Miller.

The early days had quite a few westerns, such as *The Cisco Kid*, *The Lone Ranger*, with his good friend Tonto, and *Roy Rogers* as well as some serials like *The Black Hand* and the futuristic *Buck Rogers* – no relation to Roy and Dale or Mr. Rogers, I don't believe. The latter was in another neighborhood. As time progressed, there were a few more westerns, but these were eventually replaced by shows dealing with cops and robbers. The field of forensics wound up on television in various crime scene investigation shows, ingenuously titled, *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: NY*. I believe that *CSI: Mosul* is in the works. There are a host of shows about hospitals, lawyers and ideas that hadn't been

conceived decades ago. In this case, some people feel that abortion was a good idea.

Hospital and police dramas have been around for some time. Perhaps I don't watch the former because I am not crazy about going to hospitals, either as a patient or as a visitor. I also am not thrilled at the sight of blood, which you can find in either drama. Any gore and mutilation – if I had a choice – I would choose to visualize in a good novel rather than see on the screen. And that brings me to the point that years ago you could watch a program with a murder and not need to see all the “bloody details.” Violence had made its way onto the flat screen without any wars, as various shows had featured it because the networks felt that people were entertained and cared for it. With high definition television, the explosions and blood become even clearer.

Today not only do we have the police dramas but also the hour programs such as *Cops*, *The World's Worst Car Chases* and other obscene shows. I don't like to see other people's misfortunes, so I don't tune in to these shows. There are even shows in which the home audience can win cash by submitting home videos of unusual, but humorous events. Some of these might be funny to one person but embarrassing or even harmful to the person being videotaped. Over the years many laughs have been produced at the expense of others and it doesn't appear that this will stop anytime soon.

The biggest sport on television in the early days may have been boxing and it featured individuals getting beaten up. That would soon simultaneously change (the popularity) and

continue (the injuries) with the arrival of the American Football League (AFL). I also think that the advancement of color was a huge influence on TV sports. The AFL struggled at first but it wasn't long before it had a great deal to do with broadcasting football to more viewers. Initially, the game was to be played and the televising crews showed up to broadcast the event. That changed as soon the networks dictated start times, timeouts and anything else to do with getting the "game" on the screen. It wasn't long before the airwaves were inundated with baseball, basketball, hockey, golf, tennis and wrestling, which the great sports writer Frank Deford calls the only true sport.

Another type of game made it in the early days of television as game shows were big for a long time, including such offerings as *You Bet Your Life*, starring Groucho Marx, *Beat the Clock* and *The \$64,000 Question*, which we not that long ago discovered was rigged. The movie *Quiz Show* covers all the dirty details, if you haven't seen it. Game shows are still around today with *Jeopardy* – a trivia pursuit game where you can earn cash – and *The Wheel of Fortune*, where you can buy vowels, but amazingly, they don't charge you for them. Ted Mack is gone but *Star Search* and *The \$1.98 Beauty Pageant* were here for a time in its place. Today we are blessed with another talent show, *American Idol*, not too much different from all its predecessors, specifically *The Gong Show*. The gong is gone now, but the hook is there, so to speak.

The early days in many ways have seen great advances but from what you can see today, improvements are necessary. Over time some shows

started out so slowly and there was so little audience approval that they were almost cancelled. Fortunately they were allowed to stay on the air and that proved to be a good choice as they eventually ranked at the top – and they were viewable. Yet other shows that weren't as good didn't get cancelled – some remained longer than they should have. That was the case before and will continue to be so in the future, as is quite obvious even today.

This leads to another offering called *Survivor* that really took off and before long its spin-offs took over the airwaves. Another program, *I Want to be a Millionaire*, was actually an offshoot of the game show and its viewing made for conversation at the water cooler at work the next day. Reality TV had arrived. Some may feel – and I agree – that that is an oxymoron along with “Live TV” and “News entertainment.” The sad news is that these productions are with us today and when you read this, they probably won't be retired to the junk heap. They're on the air because they are so cheap to produce and people tune in.

If you find that I missed one of your favorite shows, it's because there were and still are so many of them and I really have never been a big viewer of television. Also, I rarely watch shows except those on at night and my viewing is predominantly of videotaped programs. I mentioned the length of the programming day when it all began. Well it didn't take the business world long to put on programming for the entire day – all twenty-four hours. If they could do it longer than that, they would. The networks increased in number and you now have the option of getting 250 stations – why anyone would want that many, I haven't the foggiest. There

are numerous sports stations, news channels, food networks, religious stations for you zealots, comedy channels, channels where you can watch a test pattern all day – just kidding – and various HBO stations. That’s just the beginning and there’s more to come.

As you can imagine, early television was quite addictive, and that continues today. One of the books I read in early 2006 was Jack Finney’s *Time and Again*, a trip back in time to the 1800s. When Si brings Julia into the twentieth century, she is completely mesmerized by the boob tube, not unlike the feeling of our first encounter. This was true even though cable, satellite dishes and high definition television and even color TV were far down the road. Moreover, there weren’t that many programs from which to choose.

I had the pleasure of hearing Ralph Nader speak a few years ago at Canisius College. He gave a serious talk but did entertain us by talking about the weather forecast on the evening local news. First he mentioned the early weather capsule at a few minutes past the hour and then the full forecast fifteen minutes later. Finally, as the news was signing off, there was a brief weather summary. Did the meteorological conditions change so much over the course of ten minutes?

We rely too much on television even for news about what the skies will bring. If you watch the forecast, what effect will that action have on tomorrow’s climate? The simple answer is none whatsoever. Perhaps there is an occasional prediction that would be nice to be aware of, but I can assure you that if you don’t hear about the oncoming hurricane on the news, you will be

informed of it by some other source. It also doesn't mean that the storm is coming just as the groundhog seeing his shadow doesn't assure six more weeks of winter. The only sure thing about ***Groundhog Day*** is that it is a movie that will make you chuckle.

Returning to news addiction – one of many caused by the introduction of TV – those who spent too much time watching the events of 9/11 wound up with a health bonus. They became traumatized and many are to this very day, still not over what they witnessed. Viewing the news more than a few minutes a day is a huge waste of your time. It won't change that often and you must have better things to do.

Television has also delivered some other addictions. It has led to couch potatoes, obesity and passivity. The need to have a satellite dish or cable with 350 channels will only lead to many hours in front of the tube and nowhere near enough exercise. This in turn leads to high blood pressure – you get that from watching the news – heart attacks and stomach problems. In general, health suffers and the flab increases. Just inhaling all that junk food will increase your hospital visits. This will happen even with the TV off. Once you get to your bed in the emergency room you can watch ER.

I mentioned the long-gone test pattern of the early days. It has been replaced with a bit louder sound multiplied by 450 channels. The outcome is noise – unending, mind-numbing and annoying volume. Some people walk into their home and the first thing they do is turn on the television. It won't be shut off until they retire for bed. They may even fall asleep in front of the set. The sound parallels five minutes of the first quarter of the Super Bowl –

that is how intense it is. With this jarring assault on the senses comes a shortening of the attention span. It is no wonder that humans have such high blood pressure and can't sleep at night.

The never ending commercials for beer and drugs is one of the pitfalls of advertising, where the warnings of side effects are completely glossed over or mentioned nonchalantly. This sales marketing has led to dependencies, such as alcohol addiction and drug addiction, even for over-the-counter drugs. Family life will suffer too. Years ago people sat around and watched the same program – I mentioned they didn't have much choice. Today, there's no need to worry about variety as each person has a personal boob tube. The various sports networks have created another kind of addict. People actually plan a day around watching the professional football draft. Someone needs to get a life!

Another effect that we seem to gloss over is the influence of the advertisers on children, which along with the programming has led to the corrosion of the young. They are a captive audience – and that's a huge understatement. Soon mothers will be hearing pleas to buy this Barbie doll or the cereal being displayed. That is hard to combat. The other problem results in trying to raise children today with some control of television viewing. If a child doesn't watch this show and that other one, he feels deprived and can't keep up with his classmates at school. It's difficult enough raising kids, and parents don't really relish the extra challenge posed by the networks.

The following few observations have to do with shows I refuse to watch. A big happening on the

tube not long ago was the “instant millionaire” program, *I Want to be a Millionaire*, which I mentioned earlier. The program was on multiple nights and there were other reality shows, some of which I have already described. One I didn’t mention was about the “marrying a rich man” scenario. These shows were on because people continued to watch them. The person who won big on the first show I described was the individual who had the best trivia knowledge that night. Some say that you learn so much from the questions, but go to the library and get some books and you will increase your knowledge even more. I guess it’s probably better than watching a porn flick or a soap opera. I don’t think there was a question on that program about the “Moops.”

There’s a news article about some of the plot ideas for the coming fall TV schedule. Some of them sound completely ludicrous and we laugh at them. We stop smiling when October comes around and that is what’s on the screen, and it’s not funny. As I said, I don’t watch much television and so I probably shouldn’t be criticizing a show without watching it. Once in a while I do sit down in front of the set to see if there is anything worthwhile. That’s probably why I don’t think many of these shows are worthy of any of my time. People who watch night after night will disagree with me.

One of the first priorities for people is to have a television in their home, and along with it, cable or a dish. I saw an ad recently that said, “Get a satellite dish for more channels.” So now you can receive 550 stations instead of 450. How many of these can you watch? There may be many choices but how many of them are worthwhile? I don’t

think there will be that many. That seems to be the trap. People first buy the set and then they need to get cable, since they won't have any good reception to speak of without it.

That happened to me when I bought the Trinitron and the same scenario occurs when someone invests in HDTV. The picture is so incredible that the viewers can't be pulled away from the set. They are now addicted. There is another justification for not exiting the family room: so much cash was put out for this device that it needs to be justified by increasing the hours of watching. Add surround sound and increase the size of the screen and the situation is now hopeless. This family better go buy more snacks – they'll need a credit card.

The software may be toxic, but don't think the hardware isn't. There are concerns for TV addicts for another reason: emissions from the set. Many years ago, we were warned about being too close to the screen while watching. What we don't know is if any of the latest innovations in our dens and family rooms are even more hazardous. There is further worry when the television bites the dust. Technology created it but somehow forgot one little detail. What will happen to it after it perishes? The answer most likely is that it will be tossed into the trash, which eventually winds up in the landfill. Electronic goods have so many chemicals in them that a once contaminated dump will only become more dangerous to society. The land, air and nearby creeks and rivers will only be rendered useless to the people, near and far.

The vast array of addictions, the apathy, laziness, brainwashing and distortion of the truth by

way of *news entertainment* can only result in the decay of society. Sitting in front of a huge screen with surround sound can only cause us to regress into a nation of zombies. Don't get me wrong, I thought the *Zombies* were a good group, but once again my preference for music over TV is showing. Obsession might be a good thing, but not when it results in the decline of intelligence.

The television has probably been more influential than any other innovation of the twentieth century. In some respects it mirrors the PC – which may be worse – since each puts an individual in front of a screen to be mindlessly entertained. Both can be rather impersonal and both can be a waste of time. Each can result in a person spending hour after hour and being completely deprived of vitamin D, since he never goes outdoors. If you sit in front of a television long enough, you will see a decent program. In the meantime, you could spend a lot of time in anticipation of that gem. Do you really want to wait so long for something that may never come? Personally, I don't have that much free time.

Television may be one of the worst inventions of all time. This is due to the beast as well as what is shown on it. It experienced the Golden Age some time ago and unless drastic changes are undertaken, those days will never be repeated. When it was first introduced, it seemed as though there were no limits to how high the medium could soar. Over the years, there have been great innovations – programming-wise as well in the hardware – and it seemed that there would be no end to the greatness of that box.

The advantage of television is that it can enlighten and instruct, something that PBS should be praised for doing for so long. Information can be obtained from so many of the excellent programs. Getting involved in a show may even inspire the viewer to head over to the library to learn more about the subject. That is how I get numerous titles of books that I read. It is through TV that the arts are promoted, something that needs to be done even more so. The medium can arouse passion in people and be a call to action.

I mentioned the almost unlimited number of channels – many to be passed over – but there are good things on *The History Channel*, *Bravo*, *Arts and Entertainment* and various movie channels. I happen to love watching flicks, but since so many of them are junk or merely average, that is what winds up on your TV. *HBO* has a reputation for producing their own highly rated movies, such as *And The Band Played On*, the story of the early crusades against AIDS and *The Rat Pack*, a biographical documentary on Frank Sinatra and his cronies. *The Sopranos* was at the top of the list of highly regarded programs – I didn't care for it – and through the years *HBO* has come out with other worthwhile viewing.

I mentioned PBS before and most programs I watch are from that network, since I contribute to my local station. There are some people who watch but don't pitch in – shame on those freeloaders. In my mind, the best television is on PBS, including WNED-TV in Buffalo. It features one cooking show after another on Saturday. These programs do make your mouth water and I did tune in to a few of

them when I was recovering at home not that long ago. Once you start watching, it's difficult to change the channel unless you don't like good food. Fat chance of that happening.

One cooking show on PBS nationwide is *Ciao Italia*, hosted by my high school classmate, Mary Ann Esposito, but there's so much more. Children's programming is top notch, with *Sesame Street* and *Reading Rainbow* for starters. Ken Burns has done some remarkable work and continues to do so. His series *The Civil War*, *Jazz* and *Baseball* were all outstanding and I doubt that you will see any program he produces that you won't like. Other offerings on PBS include *NOW* with David Brancaccio, *The News Hour*, *Frontline*, *History Detectives*, *Nova*, *American Experience* and *Masterpiece Theatre*. Also provided are fine concerts, movies and stage plays, all worthy of your attention as well as special shows during the holiday season. Once you go over, you won't return to commercial television, except for a few programs. Despite its offensiveness, I do recommend *The Family Guy* – you may turn it off if you tune in – and *Everybody Hates Chris*, the Chris Rock endeavor. They're both full of laughs, something we all need.

I conclude the chapter with a few words about the title, specifically the second last word. Over the years, spin-offs from shows have been prolific. Sequels are usually inferior to the original and many of these second thoughts from hits on TV have been huge failures. Great examples of just this result were the attempts by the cast of *Seinfeld* to make it on their own. Being such a great fan of the

show, I was pulling for them. Another connection of *spin* to television has to do with what we experience when we watch the news. Somehow the truth doesn't quite make it to the surface and *news* of the early days has evolved into *news entertainment* today. Last but not least, *spin* refers to what a spider does to create a web in which to ensnare her enemies. People are caught in the entanglement and they can't manage to escape, even though they have the power to do so. That is the main problem with television and why it is such a huge technological disaster. Nonetheless, it can be salvaged.

#### 4. Take me for a ride in your truck, Mac

You may think that the assembly line was the creation of Henry Ford, but he just stole the idea for his production plants. The meat packing business was actually the originator of that way of moving things along. At first, only the elite could drive the automobile but Ford changed that. Before long, numerous people were on the highways, whether they were rich or not so well off. Being able to drive was not a consideration.

We no longer have running boards on vehicles but the past is reflected in the PT Cruiser and a few other cars that you can see on the road. If you could move back into the 1940s and talk to someone from that time period about some of the features present in cars today, they would probably walk away from you and say you were certifiably nuts. They'd probably be disappointed that there weren't any flying cars – other than those driven by road ragers. By the same token, the cars our grandparents drove – if they drove at all – were interesting and a challenge to get from one place to another. You can read about the accessories and problems of the early automobile in a book that I highly recommend, Laura Hillenbrand's *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* as well as Dayton Duncan's *Horatio's Drive: America's First Road Trip*. Just because Mr. Ford sold you a car didn't mean it came with a Global Positioning System (GPS.) It wasn't even that easy to start the vehicle, as getting it going wasn't as simple as turning over the key.

The automobile has a long history and it has had and continues to have a great impact on society. It enabled people to commute long distances that

could never have been easily done in the nineteenth century. It eliminated the pollution of its predecessor, the horse. I'm sure people with a strong sense of smell were greatly relieved, as well. Shoes were happier too.

I myself have traveled a great number of miles in various automobiles, including way more commuting than I ever wanted to do. However, it allowed me to put bread in my jar – actually I prefer the counter or freezer, as most of my jars are too small. That moving back and forth from where I lived to work on various computer software contracts had a great deal to do with my retirement at the end of 2001. One contract in Orlando forced me to drive ninety miles each way for two months, while a host of work in Rochester resulted in a seventy-mile trip each way from my home outside Buffalo.

The commuting option allowed families to live in a house that they were able to afford. The high cost of living in the city meant that it would be worth the drive from the suburbs in exchange for an affordable home. If you consider the cost today for housing in places like New York City, Boston or Los Angeles, unless you inherited a fortune or have a six-figure salary, you won't have a condominium in the city.

A better deal was being able to get away from work and your home for a vacation from time to time. I saw many parts of the country by driving my Chevrolets, Buick, Audi, Subaru, Datsun, Honda, Saturn and now my Toyota Prius. At the end of November 2005, I returned from a short vacation down south, visiting Daytona Beach, Charleston, South Carolina, Raleigh and Savannah. After that, I

journeyed in my Subaru to Thunder Bay, Ontario and eastern Minnesota for a short vacation. More recently, I escaped the cold of the north when I drove to Mississippi, Georgia, Tampa and St. Augustine, Florida in February 2007. Since I bought the hybrid, I have traveled to Savannah, Jacksonville, Washington, DC and Binghamton, NY a couple times. As you might guess, hopping on a plane is not my first choice of travel.

The automobile also had some side effects. The picture show soon moved outdoors with the advent of the drive-in movie, including first-run showings. Another type of drive-in came along as well – the possibility of banking without getting out of the car. In addition, now, there was no need to get food by entering a restaurant. Maybe it wasn't the healthiest meal, but the fast-food industry got a great boost when the automobile married Burger King and McDonalds.

Another building that would never have existed without Henry Ford is the motel. Hotels did fine, but a place for travelers to rest while on vacation or while they were on assignment away from home was needed. The motel was the answer, which had the advantage of providing the same service as the hotel at a lower price. Similarly, being on the road with the motel option meant that drivers could stop and get a good night's sleep without the challenge of having to find a hotel.

I mentioned Mr. Ed's relatives earlier, who didn't need gas. Even so, the hay may have been quite costly. With all the environmental disadvantages of horses, the early automobile was a great deal worse. When you consider the effects on the planet through travel by horse, they were not as

devastating as I mentioned or as people claim. I hear people complaining about the deposits of Canada geese. They don't have the opportunity to use rest rooms. One of the reasons for this crossover is because builders have driven wildlife from their homes, forcing the animals to move into areas closer to the residences of the people. In the case of the horse, certainly the deposits are larger, but environmentally they don't compare to radiation or toxic chemicals. The fragrances aren't that pleasant but I'm not thrilled with some of the perfume that people apparently bathe in. It appears that the replacement for the horse was not welcome at all by the environment.

Fortunately, time would take care of that problem with advances. Cars eventually got better mileage and thanks to pollution equipment, the air, land and water benefited. Other features eventually were introduced to make traveling more comfortable. Further development resulted in some innovations that should never have been added to any vehicle. Unfortunately, with the good always comes the bad.

The list of the disadvantages of the automobile doesn't stop there. I mentioned the exodus of people from their jobs in the city to their glorious homes in the suburbs. Obviously there is a huge tradeoff. You pay more for a place in the city and have no commute or chose a beautiful home but endure the commute. As I mentioned, in many cases people had no choice due to the cost of real estate. However, this desertion at five o'clock had a debilitating effect on the life of the city. Without question, the decay of the major cities in the United States was a direct result of the invention of this

vehicle. The addition of mass transit entered into the equation as well.

In 1979 I started a software contract at Bankers' Trust, located across the street from the World Trade Center. I lived fifty miles north of there and wound up with a commute of two hours each way. I got to work by a combination of driving, traveling by train and subway and walking. I tried driving to different train stations closer to the city, but I didn't really save much by trying different variations. Finally, I decided the best alternative was to get the train at the place closest to my house and do some reading on the train. My contract ended in six months and I could have had it extended, but I found another gig closer to home.

Those few months on the job made for long days. Assuming I worked eight hours with a paid lunch of half an hour, I had to rise at 6:30 in the morning to be able to work from 9 to 5. I would then arrive home at 7 pm. Thinking about it just gets me tired. Nonetheless, the train I used was loaded with people and it was no different if I hopped on the train a bit earlier. Moreover, many of these people did this commute for years and some may have lived further from work than I or may have had to put in longer days. Why would anyone put up with this absurd routine? The answer is, "You do the routine to get the green."

You could avoid using the train by driving to work and increasing your speed. Of course, that wouldn't do any good in the face of construction, traffic jams or accidents caused by people going too fast. Traveling 70 in a 55 zone – if you could do it – might result in a summons for speeding. You could wind up in the hospital or worse. It could get

messier if the roads were icy or snow-covered. Thus you could conclude that the automobile also generated the need for salt to solve the problem of winter. This in turn didn't do any good for the environment, although there always is the possibility of using ice-melting alternatives that are friendly to the planet.

The automobile created the new communities outside the city along with the rat race. These suburbs just added to the problem as the location of various types of services soon were located in places that required even more commuting. When you do a great deal of driving or sitting on trains, you really don't want to get in the car. You just want to stay home. Going to church or the temple meant more driving, as did shopping or going to the movies or picking up a video. It's no wonder people were tired and the weekend wasn't enough to recharge them. The automobile created a few headaches.

Since more and more people got their licenses, things got worse on the roads, eventually leading to another great misnomer, *rush hour*. No one's moving, let alone rushing anywhere. This doesn't help reduce stress in the least but only increases it. A direct result of that frustration is road rage, which appears even on a weekend when the highways are less congested. Henry never predicted any of these things would be happening.

I left out of this book any talk about airplanes. I will mention only one statistic since it relates to the automobile. It's a known fact that air travel – despite the very concept itself, think seriously about it – is safer than getting behind the wheel of a car. This is based on miles traveled and accidents. The

only reason why this statistic is fact is due to reckless driving, road rage, driving under the influence and the issuing of way too many licenses.

If you happen to be stuck on the highway somewhere for any number of reasons, you could check in to a motel, the home away from home that owes its existence to the automobile. I mentioned my days of commuting but I didn't relate the fact that I saved drive time, wear and tear on my vehicles and on myself by frequenting motels. For me, those places are the last place I care to stay anymore – I guess I just was away from home on too many evenings.

The decline of mass transit is another casualty of vans and trucks. Traveling by train has been reduced over the years – it is still an option but people consider costs and rule it out from a financial aspect when they figure what it will cost to drive. That might change once gas gets to five dollars a gallon. People without cars don't have that choice as they must take the train, bus or plane. The order in which I listed those three modes of transportation is the sequence of my choices for travel.

The automobile has also contributed health problems. Men and woman drive to places when they could exercise their legs. The latter choice would result in less sickness and stress, fewer heart problems and visits to the hospital. You might say that the car put more cash into the pockets of physicians and that's a good thing – for them, alone. The explosion of the fast food industry may have provided a convenience, but it also helped to create a great deal of obesity at the same time. In this

respect a mode of transportation created health problems on a couple levels.

While drive-ins helped advance society, even if the right kind of food wasn't being consumed, the drive-by shooting turned out to be unhealthy in a completely, more permanent way. It is true that if crimes were committed by using relatives of Trigger for transportation, it may have been more difficult holding a machine gun and firing away while being in the saddle. At any time in history, along with progress come challenges.

Another creation of SUVs and cars is DWI. There probably never will be RWI or WWI – riding and walking while under the influence respectively, so Ford gets another black eye. Of course, Henry's not to blame since he didn't chug the beer. However, the impact of combining alcohol or drugs with getting behind the wheel has resulted in too many deaths, injuries and unnecessary suffering on the part of the families of the victims as well as those responsible, who just weren't acting responsibly. Excessive speed and reckless driving bring sorrow and pain for the very same reason.

One obvious byproduct of Mr. Ford's contraption is addiction. Just climbing behind the wheel could have been so intoxicating that the driver was hooked. If this wasn't the case, a person could become that way after doing so much commuting to work. This has created huge problems, as people have no desire to abandon the automobile, even when mass transit is an alternative. The glamour of the car is so pervasive that teenagers eagerly await the chance for a driver's permit and shortly thereafter the desired license.

Statistically, the worst drivers on the road are young people. When a teenager gets a license, by no means is that individual a good driver, which will take a few years. That is why most accidents occur to people younger than twenty-five and why insurance costs are so high for them. With time, each has the potential to be a good driver. There will come a time when the license should be surrendered. Age and experience makes one more proficient behind the wheel but eventually the passage of time leads to deterioration of what's needed for these seniors to keep driving and not endangering themselves and others. There are many people over ninety who are still driving. The way these individuals park a car, maybe they should leave the driving to family members. But how do you get the keys away from advanced senior citizens? Try to take them and they'll hit you with their cane. That is another dilemma posed by Mr. Ford.

One innovation that would not be around except for the automobile is the traffic signal. Initially, there were two options when you arrived at an intersection. The light was either green or red. The yellow was seen as green for the daring and interpreted as red for the cautious, so we need to only talk about the two possibilities. It wasn't a complicated situation but with time, things really got messed up. Now when you approach the light, you can wait for a really long time because of a huge failure of technology. For one thing, there now happen to be at least four combinations – red with a left-turn arrow and completely green, and those two choices repeat for the other side. Note that I mentioned “at least,” because another possibility is

the green with a red left-turn arrow. This only means that if you are about to turn left and there is no traffic coming against you, you're supposed to wait.

This is really a problem because there is no reason for you not to go and it only indicates that the red left turn arrow is unnecessary. That choice is dumb. Because of advances with computers, many signals are timed – which they should be based on traffic flow and when a car enters an intersection. Smart decisions are applauded but if you are on the less traveled road with a red light and there is no traffic coming the other way, why doesn't the system know to change so you can proceed? That would be the intelligent way to handle this. Perhaps that will change with time.

Some time ago I heard about the allowed right turn reaction in New England. This allowed you to turn right on a red signal after stopping. I heard that someone in power didn't care to go along with the idea in their state. Instead of doing the reasonable thing, they spent an outrageous amount of money to put up signs saying, "No right turn allowed." What they could have done to save money was to put up a few "Right turn allowed" signs and mention that right turns were only allowed where posted. Actually, this last option is insane since any "No right turn allowed" sign is dumb. Why not allow right turns everywhere? Naturally, caution and responsibility are needed as well.

Advances in technology aren't always for the better, especially when talking about the features in cars. I have already specified my feelings about alarm systems but there are a few other concerns. First, you can't open the car windows for most cars

if the ignition is off. The addition of a DVD player or separate controls for temperature monitoring in vehicles isn't really necessary. Of course, it does give the manufacturer the opportunity to raise the price.

Nonetheless, I will accept these ridiculous add-ons but I have to complain about some of the failures of the car companies. The automobile giants have been reaping huge profits for years. They failed the American public when they could have done much more for the environment and its inhabitants. Just consider gasoline mileage over the last thirty years. If some cars could get twenty-five or thirty miles to the gallon a quarter century ago, today you would expect advances in technology to result in even better mileage. Look around on the highways today and you will see that the average mileage is less than twenty miles to the gallon. It doesn't look like there have been any improvements.

For a time some cars were getting better mileage and even today some newer models of some lines do improve from year to year. The smaller car was the answer to improved mileage. I bought a used 1989 Honda Civic CRX in 1991 and when I had finished driving it seven years later, the odometer read over 237,000 miles. I myself had accounted for 200,000 of those miles and my total mileage including highway and city driving was very close to fifty miles to the gallon.

This vehicle was manufactured almost twenty years ago and it had a four-cylinder gasoline engine. That was one of the reasons for the great mileage. The other was that it was a small car. There are some cars today that get better mileage than that,

but not that many and not significantly better. Actually if you look out your window as you drive on the highway you will not see that many cars. Instead the majority of vehicles will be trucks, vans and SUVs. This explains why there have not been improvements in gas mileage over the years. Those trucks and SUVs need gasoline to perform, and lots of it. The vans do better when it comes to fuel economy. Unfortunately, gas mileage today is the worst it's been in twenty-five years. A boost of one mile per gallon results in a savings of half a million barrels of oil a day.

Here is an indication of just how little the greedy corporations and people in power have done about increasing gas mileage. In May 2006, I read in *Esquire* about the Honda Civic Hybrid. It was described as having the possibility of achieving up to fifty miles to the gallon. My 1989 CRX ran solely on gasoline and for the 200,000 miles I drove, my total mileage including highway and city driving was almost fifty miles to the gallon. Do you think that any one is looking out for the people and care at all about the planet? If you think that the gas companies didn't gouge the public during the spring and summer of 2006 – the practice continues today – you're watching too much reality television.

The need to consume huge amounts of gas means we use resources, the environment is polluted – many SUVs and high performance vehicles are notorious for pollution – and the process of getting the oil only adds to destruction of the planet as well as danger to the workers involved. There was a great opportunity for advancing society when the gas crisis of the early 1970s resulted. At first people did move in the right

direction but when Ronald Reagan was inaugurated, all that flew out the window. The result is the scenario we see with the high price of gasoline and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Had alternative energy ideas and conservation been promoted a quarter century ago, it is likely that the events of September 11, 2001 would not have occurred.

Unfortunately, the people were just as guilty as the corporations and the government, since they bought the gas-guzzlers. Meanwhile the gas companies gouged the citizens at the pump and automobile organizations went right along with program, encouraging them to continue their driving habits. Some people in government were concerned, and I related this in *Take Back The Earth: The Dumb, Greedy Incompetents Have Trashed It*. It didn't really matter as corporate crooks downplayed the issue and ruled the day.

I have to conclude this chapter with a plea for forgiveness. I will not apologize to those who are responsible for the mess we are in today having to do with this mode of transportation. Henry Ford came up with a good invention, despite its limitations. He also made the car available to the ordinary citizen – granted he wanted to make money – but the difficulties that ensued can't all be blamed on his creation. He had accomplices, whom I have described earlier. Shame on those whose only motive was greed and power and who did their part to mess up the planet when it came to the automobile. If you still disagree with my assessment about technology relative to the automobile, I need mention four words: Pinto, Corvair, Edsel and Yugo.



## 5. Press 8 to surrender

The title of the book is closely related to the title of this chapter. When it comes to the former, I didn't think sows could understand English let alone a Romance language. Maybe they're smarter than we think. Well, you won't hear either the title of this chapter or the book as a message when you get stuck in voice maze, but if you do, we are really in deep trouble. By the time you get through all the menus to talk to a human being in an APS, provided you don't give up, you'll probably want to speak in another language – one that your mother won't be pleased to hear.

We have Alexander Graham Bell to thank for the telephone. That invention has always had limitations as I felt you only got half the story since you were only listening with a single ear. Obviously, you will hear more by using both. As the telephone was evolving, there were other concerns, but many of the problems would be resolved. At the same time, new difficulties would ensue.

Thanks to the phone, we can communicate easier and don't have to wait to hear from someone by hanging around the mailbox. Lost mail is never a concern in this regard. Lives have been saved because of the opportunity of getting help quicker when a fire or heart attack occurs. Today, a phone call can be a great deal cheaper than writing a letter or postcard.

With the telephone, you can converse with someone on the other side of the world. You may want to be sure they're not sleeping because of the different time zones – unless you aren't concerned

about losing a friend. The business world takes full advantage of this situation by not having to worry about where they set up their branches. A company can be headquartered in New York and have offices in Paris, Peking and the Cayman Islands.

One of the byproducts of Mr. Bell's innovation is the answering machine. Personally I hate them but they're a necessary evil. Without them some people could never be reached. It also enables you to leave your residence even if you are expecting a call. You don't have to be held prisoner in your own home waiting for the phone to ring. Another good use for answering machines is to screen calls. Too many times telemarketers, banks, credit card companies and charitable organizations bother you at the wrong time – is there a right time? With the answering machine turned on, this is no longer a problem. The same can be said for obscene phone calls, as these callers don't usually call collect or leave messages.

Some time ago I had a house to sell and I knew that I wouldn't be around most of the time to respond to phone inquiries were I to place an ad in the paper. The solution was very simple, as an answering machine would take care of my dilemma. I purchased one and it wasn't long before I sold the house – I have been with an answering machine ever since. That purchase of my first recording device was over twenty years ago. Today that tool is nothing but voice mail and you really don't need the physical device to have this convenience of phone monitoring.

To remedy the concern I had about a single ear and the phone, someone came up with the speakerphone. Now we can listen with both ears

and should have less of a chance of missing anything. This new possibility also means that three or more people can be on the line together with the conference call feature. On numerous occasions over the past few years, I was part of business meetings in which it seemed a dozen individuals were participating, even though they weren't all in the same room. You could be home and still be part of the proceedings. If I was away from the office, I certainly wouldn't get involved, since I figured I could always ask someone in my group to fill me in on any important details.

The features that we see today don't stop with the speakerphone or conference calling. We have the cell phone, call forwarding as well as the ability to do many more things with a phone that anyone could ever have imagined. I have to plead ignorance in this regard since I don't own a cell phone, don't use caller ID or call forwarding or waiting. Nonetheless, Alexander Graham Bell would be amazed if he could see what his first call so many years ago has become.

Many of these features really aren't necessary and others are truly irritating, especially cell phones going off in public places. In April 2006, I had the opportunity to attend an after tax party, but instead went to a Department of Health report on a cancer survey in my former hometown, which resulted in some very contradictory findings. The evening left the residents shaking their heads and wondering why our tax dollars were spent on this effort at all. My sister was there too with her cell phone. During the proceedings, her device made the sound that most people hate, myself included. I didn't mind it going off that evening,

though. The majority of people claim they can't live without the cell phone while at the same time, over fifty percent surveyed said that this is one item which should never have been invented.

I don't know many people that care for the annoying ringing of cell phones or beepers anywhere. Some day the inventors will come up with a way to notify the user of an incoming call without having to tell everyone else in the room as well. How about having it vibrate? Every week before Sunday Mass in most churches, the greeter implores the congregation to turn off all cell phones and pagers or put them in vibrator mode. Personally I think people should leave these gadgets home, or at least in their car as they can live for an hour or so without them. Maybe people let the device ring just to tell others that he or she is an important person. I hate to say this, but the receiver of that call is not that important. There are very, very few people who need to have a pager or cell phone – doctors might be the only ones. Ironically, with all the proliferation of these devices as well as email – which I will get into later – communication has not improved in the least.

There is a much more troublesome problem with the cell phone. It is very possible that excessive use may cause cancer. Of course, the same is probably true with sitting in front of a television or PC. The difficulty has to do with the fact that since the technology is quite new, few studies have been done and it will take years to get any reasonable conclusion. Like most technological gadgets, tossing a used cell phone into the garbage really hurts the environment. It has to be done with care.

The answering machine may have been a great idea, but it created voice mail or the automated phone system, which I mentioned earlier. I like to call it *voice maze*, since you probably won't talk to anyone if you get stuck inside and you will waste a great deal of time. I also think the device we attach to our phone would be more appropriately named the "no-answer machine," since it doesn't talk to you and you won't get an answer since you haven't reached the party you dialed. Yet, these advances were meant to improve our lives. It seems that they have only made them worse.

As great as the speakerphone might be, it's a real pain. I thought of getting one but came to my senses and decided against it. I'm sure that you have listened to people using it and it sounds like they're in a vacuum, and they're not David Oreck. Technology really should be able to remedy this shortcoming. Of course, it probably can't because it has other difficulties.

In early May 2006, I got a call on my no-answer machine that said, "Would you please give a call to...uh." That was all I heard immediately followed by the words, "End of message." A few days before that, there was a message for a Mrs. Nolan to call a specific number. Unfortunately the caller had the wrong number – from whence I don't know. Shortly thereafter, I got an email from my agent saying, "Just an update to my message left on your answering machine." The problem: My no-answer machine never got the message, and I've had it a few months, whereas my first one lasted years and it was quite reliable. I mentioned the truncated call earlier. This is despite the fact that I

set the message length for one minute. What I heard was about five seconds of what the caller said. More recently, someone left a few words on my machine sounding like she was looking for me, but left neither a name nor phone number.

As I described in the introduction, I replaced that defective device – though not that old – with a new one. I hope it lasts at least a few years and doesn't miss too many calls. The first one I owned cost me \$150 in 1983, which a \$30 machine replaced and in turn I replaced in 2006 with one that cost a mere fin. From all indications, it wasn't worth the change in my empty pockets. That is one of the huge failures of technology, as gadgets have only gotten worse as they have gotten less expensive. Perhaps that is the reason: if you don't pay that much, don't expect a lot in return. Even setting up the very latest no-answer machine that I bought wasn't without challenges. Setting up the time on the system took much longer than it should have to put in the day of the week, date and time. Also, the device has more buttons than my shirt, while in reality it doesn't have that many functions. It doesn't have to be that complicated.

I described my *call waiting* feature, which I never paid for, in one of my other books. You may have seen the episode of *Seinfeld* where phone etiquette was the issue. The show was hilarious but also made some great points about the use of the phone. Saying "I have another call," is really something no one should hear when he is on the phone with anyone. If that happens, someone will be put into second place. As far as I am concerned, the busy signal solves this difficulty quite easily and it's a cheaper alternative. I worked with a guy who

had call waiting because he didn't want to miss a call. Unfortunately, he didn't have a no-answer machine. I never said that all the people I associated with were intelligent all the time.

The phone also brought into play caller ID, followed closely behind by caller ID block. I'm not sure if caller ID unblock is here yet, but if so, block of the caller ID unblock can't be far behind. All these special features only tend to make the phone company richer and the user more frustrated. I always wanted to try an experiment. Since I retired, I can't do this, but I thought of forwarding my calls to another office. Optimally, it would be to an unused cubicle. I would then forward that phone back to mine. One thing for sure, the office would be a great deal quieter.

We can thank the phone for some of the most annoying people on the planet, telemarketers. You can try to stop them by enlisting, not in the Army – I would never recommend that – but in the “do not call registry.” You will still get hounded by the organizations I mentioned earlier. However, there are a few things you can do to thwart these clowns and simultaneously have some fun. Refusing to answer the phone is one choice or just let your no-answer machine do its thing. You could also let it ring six times before the message comes on and you could make the message quite long. In most cases, the caller will give up and not leave a message. You can also pick up the phone and when you are asked for specifically, take a message and say he'll get back to the caller. I guarantee they will say, “I'll call back, later.” I have a few suggestions in the books on intelligence on vacation, and I'll come up with more in the sequels.

I don't consider telemarketers very ethical, which brings up another type of criminal. Did you ever check out your phone bill? Take a good look and you will see an endless list of services for which you are paying. I should remind you that I don't have call forwarding, call waiting, teleconferencing and caller ID. Even so, these are some of the expenses on my bill from one month: WireSolution, portability fee, network access surcharge, federal universal service fee, federal excise tax, state and local taxes, state and local surcharge. I don't have the faintest idea what some of these represent, but if I were to call to ask, I am sure that I would be rewarded with "voice mail."

Alexander Graham Bell created a great invention but it seems to have been abused over the years. We have the ability to talk to anyone anywhere today, but communication problems are worse than ever. In his book, *Doing Our Own Thing*, John McWhorter mentions that with the cell phone, communication between people has never been better. I disagree for a number of reasons. Reaching someone is more difficult than ever. There are so many annoyances of the gadget. People drive – and not too well – while conversing on the cell phone, which is against the law. The telephone is a huge technological failure for these reasons, but if you disagree, let me just reiterate a few concerns: voice mail, cell phone symphonies, call waiting, the no-answer machine and calls at dinner time that could be made at some other time – like when you're not home.

## 6. Time for an upgrade

I spent more years than I wanted in the business world, including over twenty years as a software consultant. I have a degree in computer science from the School of Advanced Technology at Binghamton University. In 2002, I developed my own web site and currently maintain it. Perhaps my feelings regarding PCs are slanted because of my knowledge of computers. However, I have always felt that since there are so many branches of the computer business, so many participants trying to make money and such great *innovation* – maybe that's the wrong word, but you get the idea – there is no such thing as a computer expert.

I have already mentioned a few of my experiences in the world of PCs in the introduction, but by no means was that the end of what you'll be reading. Computers have enabled calculations to take place at the speed of light whereas prior to the invention, some could never be done in anyone's lifetime. They have enabled all kinds of data to be stored, processed and interpreted in media that take up virtually no space whatever. They have allowed us to get things done much quicker than if we attempted the same process without them.

PCs have a few purposes: word processing, game playing, getting data – music or information from the Internet – calculations, photography and reporting. I may have missed a few functions and by the time you read this, I'm sure there will be other uses as well. This device can be for business or personal use. I think the designation is inappropriate – I used a personal computer on numerous business contracts. Perhaps we should call it a YUC (Your

Unlimited Computer.) Over the years people who invested in PC's have gotten obsessed with their new tool of technology. Some have spent hour after hour in front of the machine and others have been logged on to the Internet for days on end. It may have reached the point where family or friends had to make a call to PC Anonymous. This machine has caused the breakup of some happy households and some bad feelings. You thought that addicts only got involved with drugs.

Writers first wrote with the pen, followed by the typewriter. Eventually, the word processor took over, much to the relief of many authors, myself included. These writing tools can help to produce a document, but there are limitations to each one. If you are working on a typewriter and make a mistake, your only recourse is to cross out the error, use whiteout or start over. Two solutions are messy and the third is more work and a waste of paper. You won't have this situation with a basic word processor but if your document is a long novel, you could run out of room, since storage may be a problem.

All these challenges seem to be solved when you use a PC for word processing, except that now other problems arise. To begin with, you need to learn the intricacies of the software that is used when editing documents. Some are simple and easy to comprehend while others are so complex that you can be working with the package for some time and still be baffled by what occurs on occasion. But that is not all. You have to allow for the preponderance of bugs that you will run into from time to time.

There is still more to worry about if you use a PC for word processing. One word will sum it up

and bring fear into the hearts of computer aficionados. That word is “crash,” – a great 2005 movie but nothing to write home about when it affects your PC. Users accept this as a normal activity in the life of a computer. If you don’t know what I am talking about, you either don’t own a PC or never worked with one. Come to think of it, “working with a PC” may be an oxymoron. I was under the impression that computers were meant to make our lives easier.

I designed software and always had pride in what I created, but that doesn’t seem to be a consideration today when it comes to PCs or the Internet. There are many reasons for that, the major one being greed. The computer manufacturers – software as well as hardware – only want to make money. Who cares if the software works? The product is rushed out to beat the competitors and the bugs can be worked out later. Just think what would happen if car manufacturers used the same approach. You’d be driving on the interstate when all of a sudden the car exploded. GM, Ford or Chrysler can only hope the car wasn’t financed. For a good laugh, check out the GM / Microsoft comparison that I included in chapter 24 of ***This Page Intentionally Left Blank.***

When a crash does occur, is it hardware or software? It could be either, maybe both. The worse part is the consumer doesn’t know who is responsible and the companies will just blame each other. I will discuss one of my experiences in this regard, later. Today’s computers have too many deficiencies and crashes should occur less frequently, if at all. You have probably heard about all the different versions of WINDOWS. They keep

appearing, along with the problems that need to be ironed out. In fact, by the time you read this, the latest version will probably be replaced with another.

Wouldn't it be better to come up with software that worked and not have to modify it, or at least keep the number of revisions to a minimum? Another suggestion is to have a version come out that doesn't have to be debugged by the people using it. After all, if you pay for something, you shouldn't have problems with the software. If the manufacturer didn't rush the software out without thorough debugging, customers would be happier. A few years ago, Bill Gates was doing a demonstration of the new WINDOWS 98 product when the system crashed. I guess it was ready to be shipped to the customers! You may also have noticed that software can't be returned for a refund. That's really encouraging.

As far as WINDOWS goes, I don't think the majority of people are that thrilled with the product. People buy it because it is just about the only "game in town." It's the best of all the rest or at least they think so, not much different from the choices that are given people when they vote. If you queried people trying to learn WINDOWS for the first time, the consensus would be that of disappointment and frustration. I have been working with that software for a few years and at first I felt just that way. Now that I have some experience with the product, I still feel that it isn't very user-friendly.

The difficulty stems from the lack of a definite structure. There are so many different ways of doing the same thing that it really gets confusing. It's not rigid enough and the mouse is another story.

I guess WINDOWS was created by a space cadet, a nerd or possibly both. They decided to make it as flexible as possible. Anyone designing systems knows that the more flexibility there is in a system, the less chance it has of working. A system with almost no rules or too many will consequently break down. Maybe that's why these systems seem to always have bugs. A simpler system is easier to test and debug. As you make it more complicated, you run the risk of failure.

This is not to say that you couldn't have a successful user-friendly system with WINDOWS and the mouse. It just seems that the way it "works" today, there are many problems and a lot more frustrated users. Maybe the software today is fine for the creators and like-minded individuals. Unfortunately the majority of users are not rocket scientists nor do we ever care to be.

You might say that it doesn't matter what kind of a product you put out since there will always be people rushing to buy it. Just consider the scene when WINDOWS 95 was introduced. Everyone and his brother wanted a copy of the software. Perhaps there will always be a demand but there will come a day when people will stop buying software that they suspect has major flaws in it. It's a foregone conclusion. You can't expect to sell garbage software forever. If what you're trying to sell isn't any good, no one will buy it. More time should be spent in development and this will eliminate problems. The customers will be happier too. I'm repeating myself, but sometimes you need to keep reminding people.

Many gadgets have helped us in our everyday endeavors. This should also be true of

computers, but sometimes the effort is just not worth it. You hear advice to save your document every so often as you edit it to avoid losing your input. That is a nice thought but it shouldn't be necessary and wouldn't be if there weren't so many deficiencies in the software. When something does go wrong, you have no meaningful explanation of the problem. Instead you get some completely meaningless message – in some cases you'll see a dump – that when printed, is only good for lining the bottom of your birdcage. The end result is that a task that should have taken you five minutes results in your spending twice that much time or more because you're using a computer.

Some time ago, I was called upon to do some editing on a grant proposal for a University at Buffalo professor. He emailed the document to me, and a few others, and told us to get on with the process. At first some of the others couldn't read the file that he sent. Well I had no trouble reading it but I couldn't edit it, even after he sent another version. I had a few options, but each one pointed out the burden that the computer had become in our grant process. It may have helped in some respects but in others it just became a nuisance. The problem has to do with all the different formats for documents. Just as we don't need one hundred versions of software when one or two would do, we don't need more different formats for files when a handful will suffice.

I believe in efficiency when it comes to work. Working smart beats working hard any day, despite what some have told you. The former method will accomplish more in less time and be better for your health. It seems that computers have

caused more aggravation and require more time and effort to accomplish tasks. Even if a manual process for getting something done takes the same amount of effort as using a PC, it doesn't justify the use of the latter. It just doesn't make sense.

The different versions of software as well as hardware bring with them the upgrade and update, which are quite annoying. The companies that want us to buy their goods produce these endless versions that keep appearing in the marketplace. These corporations insist that we need the newest version of the PC or word processing software, even if it is inundated with bugs and problems. In turn the consumer discovers and reports them to the supplier, who then charges that individual for a solution. But there is a more serious problem that results if we buy into this plea for upgrading. What happens to the "old" machine that we will be replacing? We may be able to donate it to charity or give it away to a nephew or niece. If no one wants it and we trash it, what about the landfill that now is the new home of this computer?

Because of technology, a new type of toxic environment is being set up to house these computers, in addition to other electronic equipment. There are so many dangerous elements in these machines that I would not want to live anywhere near any of these dumps. A report in The Buffalo News of Sunday, March 24, 2002 mentions that old PCs, televisions and miscellaneous stereo parts can be tossed into a landfill. It also states,

"For now, the law would allow this to happen, despite the possibility that the toxics – the heavy metals mercury and lead chief among them – could seep into ground water and soil, or be

released into the air if they're incinerated. Twenty million personal computers become obsolete each year, but only thirteen percent of them are recycled, according to the Environmental Protection Agency."

Some of the hazards may be known, but there are others that may not surface for years. It sounds a great deal like the landfill outside Niagara Falls, where ignorance was an excuse to not face potential problems. One thing we do not need is another Love Canal or Times Beach.

There are other unfavorable things about computers. People have gotten addicted to a variety of games, some of which are violent and degrading. Sitting in front of a PC for hours on end does nothing for family relationships. Rather it increases the divide. I also don't believe having people glued to the terminal results in finding cures for cancer or heart disease. Getting away from the computer for a while may be the best thing you could do.

The slide rule has been made obsolete thanks to the computer but so have basic math skills for many people. There's a joke about a teller at the bank telling a customer that he couldn't get change for a dollar just now. It seems the computer is down. That may be funny but it is a sad commentary when it comes to declining basic skills. I applaud the idea of a hexadecimal calculator on the PC. However, if you use a calculator you should be able to do the math to verify that it was indeed done correctly, even if it involves base 16. Don't forget it is a finite machine and it can make mistakes. Calculators and PCs are only as reliable as those who created them and don't forget, batteries can fail.

I was at dinner when a friend of mine stated that her school district had just acquired PCs for attendance-keeping and some of the evaluation of the students. She also mentioned that this move was not done with much research and forethought as the instructors seemed to lack the knowledge to answer many of the questions of the people who would be using the computers. With school about to begin, there appeared to be much apprehension and it seemed like there would not be a smooth transition. The reason for this PC install was that some administrator stated that the district would be staying technologically up to date with everyone else. He may also have received some kind of payoff.

The only problem with this situation is that tasks that may have taken five minutes before could not only take twice as long but never be accomplished with this new tool. This then means that people would have to revert to the old way of getting things done. Time is wasted. But what about the costs of the hardware and software? Even if this was a gift, I doubt that the electricity used for this endeavor was covered, and I think you get the idea. Also the frustration for those who were supposed to take advantage of these PCs will not be relieved that easily. If this scenario sounds highly unusual, it's more prevalent than you might guess.

Consider a small corporation that runs their operation quite well without any computer. One day some executive decides that business would improve tremendously with some new technology. The computer is purchased without any feasibility study and brought onto the premises. A consultant is then called in to "bring the company into the 21st

century.” This may sound farfetched but as a consultant, I worked at corporations that did exactly this. Well, before you spend all that money, you better have a pretty good idea of what you will do with that new technology. Return on investment must also be considered. If neither of these is thought out, the small business will get smaller and eventually become extinct. If your company is running quite smoothly without a computer, why even think about buying one?

A company without a computer might feel that it's time to invest in one in order to keep up with the Joneses. Before you go forward, do some research. First, decide for what it will be used. If there's no use for it, why get one? Let us say that you want to use it for ordering, billing and payroll. You have to calculate what the yearly costs are for these three processes without a computer and what the costs will be with one. Also coming into consideration is the total cost of the machine: hardware, software and maintenance. If your operations are now running smoothly and you figure it will take you twenty years to recover the cost using the computer, you may want to keep things just the way they are. On the other hand, if after three years you wind up breaking even by purchasing the computer, it could be a good investment.

Any way you consider it, there are many factors to consider. In the past, big corporations invested huge sums of money in IBM mainframes and I'm sure money wasn't a factor. The costs were part of a huge unlimited budget and no one figured out when there would be a break-even point. The money was there, but this is not the same for a

small business.

To buy or not to buy a computer really gets down to the basic questions, “Will this be worth the investment?” “Will this machine make my life easier?” These same questions can be asked about many of the gizmos all around us, such as answering machines and VCRs. Go back fifteen years and you will notice that many of today’s inventions were nowhere to be seen. Some are good and others are questionable. One thing we can conclude is that all these products will eventually break down and load up the landfills.

Even if you buy a PC for your home, you should think about the same things as above. It can save you a great deal of time doing many tasks but it shouldn’t take you longer because of learning the system and recovering from problems. Don’t forget that when you get that box of equipment home, you will have to get started and set it up and this means reading instructions. Need I remind you that technology manuals may be fine for putting you to sleep but are certainly not the best teachers? Yes, some are good and your installation could be quite simple. Don’t count on it, though. One of the reasons why people don’t buy new PCs is because of the time it will take to set up the replacement for what they had. That seems to be true for many electronic products. I call this technology apprehension.

You can read more about my PC endeavors in a later chapter. These tales only point out what too many of us are forced to do with our PCs – you know what I’d like to do with mine – namely, the workaround, which I brought up earlier. It is equivalent to flying to San Francisco from Buffalo

by going to Detroit and Paris first. Instead of doing a simple task, we are forced to complete four more difficult jobs. I wind up doing exactly that much too often even though the task gets accomplished. Unfortunately it takes longer and shouldn't be necessary. I have already pointed out my *mail merges* earlier.

I stated it before and I will mention it again: PCs just aren't user-friendly. If they were, people wouldn't do so much complaining. You can ask someone how she spent her weekend and she will mention that it was three days of fixing the PC after it crashed, and she only had a two-day weekend. Too many people curse the computer and wish they could simply abandon it. On all too many occasions, I feel exactly the same way.

Menus are fine except I really prefer them in restaurants. You will see toolbars – although I never see hammers or saws – and menus all over the place with a great deal of unneeded duplication. This only tends to create confusion. Since I write, I use different fonts. However, there are way more than anyone needs, especially when they all look so much alike. Who actually uses *wingdings*? Maybe Congress does and that's why they can't accomplish anything.

My first word processor was on an IBM system while at the University at Binghamton. I had no complaints and when I bought my first word processor, it too was user-friendly until it was stolen. When I graduated to WORD, I thought things would improve but the result was more complexity and headaches. The fonts I described above are part of that software and there are so many possibilities with WORD. Unfortunately,

there are too many and consequently, problems as well. I could write a book about the problems with that software, but who would buy it? To give you an idea how bad the software is – based on all those options – a typical book on WORD is 920 pages long. Now remember, our goal is to create a document. It's not to solve the energy crisis.

A few more useless accompaniments to PCs are manuals and *help*. In general, manuals for computers were worthless before the invention of the PC and they only got worse when it arrived on the scene. They are written in English but anyone who tries to decipher the document will walk away in disgust. What is often provided and given the name, *help*, isn't any better. Yet, every piece of software has it, or you can get it through the web. You can also call the help desk but they will either charge you or not be able to answer your question. You'll also be put on hold for a while. Through my experience, I find that technical people who answer the phone for the most part are good candidates for my upcoming books on missing intelligence.

I've heard some unbelievable stories about these people. On too many occasions the tech support person told people to just do a restart – their solution to any computer problem, probably the first word they learned from their first day of training. Restart is a word that brings terror into the hearts of PC users, a dumb way to get something to work. It's true that if your car stalls, you have to restart it or at least try. Let's just hope your vehicle isn't traveling at sixty miles an hour on the freeway. The whole concept of a restart only indicates that the product is truly **P**articularly **C**hallenging. Corporations can save money by not having a

quality assurance division. Heck, they can even be more profitable by replacing it with a help desk that charges for service.

The PC evolved from the huge mainframes of the middle of the twentieth century. IBM and Prime Computer were the leaders in this beginning of the computer age. Soon smaller devices came out, specifically the minicomputer. In most cases, these new products were created by people who had either been with IBM or worked on that mainframe. Consequently, there weren't that many new ideas, just another computer with a different name. In a few instances, people came up with some different and promising ideas. I was fortunate to work on quite a variety of computers so I witnessed some of this innovation.

The big mainframes were huge and expensive but they worked. So did their successors. When the PC debuted, it was different and because of that, some problems resulted. Even more difficulties arose because of the "rush" mentality, that is, the product had to get out to beat the competition. Because of these problems, the alternative of thoroughly debugging before sales would have definitely beaten the other guy, even though the product appeared later. Sadly, that didn't happen.

When I first entered the business world, I worked on an IBM mainframe. If we made changes to programs at the corporation, we used control software to do that, namely *Panvalet* and appropriately enough, *Librarian*. Thus if I had to change the accounts payable register program and Joe did also, we both couldn't do it at the same time. Supposed I checked out the program on

Monday and Joe checked it out later the same day. I then made my changes, tested them and implemented the program. A day later, Joe did the same with his program modifications, including installing the changed program. You can see what would have happened: my changes would have been lost as soon as he implemented his.

The solution is to take turns and *Librarian* would make sure that the scenario just described wouldn't happen. It was just like the episode of *Seinfeld* when George wants to see the video, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but someone else has it. He has to wait until the movie comes back – actually, he took another course. Another option is that Joe or I could make both changes – that would also work, but in either case we need control to avoid disaster, which *Panvalet* and *Librarian* provided. A more recent software that I used on assignments was called *Changeman* and it was everything I just described and more. Unfortunately, it was also complicated and so troublesome that the company had to have a full time person administering it and assisting the programmers using it. Why would any manager replace a product that worked with one with more potential but fraught with problems that only lengthened the workday for the employees? Maybe, someone bought him a new car.

This situation just described can happen on any kind of computer, large or small. It all has to do with software. Any tools that you use can create havoc. A few years ago I was working on the Y2K fiasco and we used some software to test the program changes that were made. I didn't change the programs, but only tested the changes. One day, I was having a difficult time doing just that and

eventually I discovered that the program was indeed changed properly. The software that I was using to determine the accuracy had bugs. It's no wonder we had 2000 headaches.

Another scenario that arises has to do with software that works on Windows XP but not on Windows 98. This is quite common and frustrating. Thus your system may be fine and you buy something for your computer, but it doesn't work. The result might be that you figure that your PC has a problem, but that's not the case. You spend a few hours and finally realize that the solution is simple – you should never have bought a PC. Actually, it's just a compatibility problem. I'll talk about a scanner that I bought for my system a bit later that gets right at that issue.

As the decades passed, people felt good about designing their own systems, including interchanging parts. You could get an IBM PC, but didn't need to use IBM software for everything you did. There were so many vendors that it seemed your choices were unlimited. Today, that is exactly what we have with all kinds of computers. We have so many problems that we really don't know which manufacturer to blame. That is where the frustration comes in and we wind up spending time on solving problems that should never have arisen in the first place. It's not a healthy picture.

Still, any computer you use is reliable, to some degree. The banks use them and you won't find a problem with your checking account balance. It will be exact to the penny. The problems arise because of human intervention. That is, people will cause crashes, bugs, viruses and spyware that will frustrate the users. My highest praise goes out to the

computer and those who came up with its creation. Needless to say, the bad has outweighed the good. If you disagree, let me just mention a few common phrases to convince you otherwise: *just do a restart*, it appears to be a *disk crash*, it sounds like a *compatibility problem*, *system processing*, *system is unavailable* and *can you work this weekend?*



## 7. I'm stuck in the web and I can't get out

Al Gore's invention of the Internet – what did other vice-presidents come up with? – brought with it great things, such as information, sales, communication, music and pictures. It also is responsible for pornography, which had a great deal to do with its success. Thanks to the Internet we also got headaches, misinformation, viruses, spyware, long downloads, email, bug-infested software and spam – not the kind you shouldn't eat. If you care to read a good book on the dangers of the Internet, I highly recommend the work, ***Silicon Snake Oil*** by Clifford Stoll. I agree with much of what he writes and will add my own joys of that adventure here. I am sure that many others who use the Internet have run into similar difficulties.

In the spring of 2005, I volunteered to help produce a poster for a concert. The event was called, "Looking for a Miracle." I took the information I had and came up with a rough draft but figured I needed to add some images. I made the huge mistake of going to ***yahoo images*** for some pictures. I entered the word, *miracle* as well as *angel*. I'll just say that the heavenly images that showed up were not fit to show my mom. It got worse as I soon started receiving vast amounts of spam, including suggestive sexual crap. This I surmised from the subject title in the email – most would not have passed any censor on TV – and I had no intention of opening. To me it was very offensive, it wound up in my bulk mail folder and it was a waste of my time. I believe in free speech but I also believe in responsibility. I solved the problem by filling my mailbox and obtaining another. That

meant a great deal of effort on my behalf, which I shouldn't have had to do. I despise unnecessary work and even wrote about it in both my books on work, *Tick Tock, Don't Stop* and *This Page Intentionally Left Blank*.

I myself am partly to blame because I should have tried navigating on the Web to avoid this scenario. On the other hand, this junk that filled up my mailbox should never have happened and I believe there is something that can be done to stop this proliferation of crap. It's well known that the lowlife that do this sort of thing cannot send this junk without an email address, even if they only keep it for a few minutes. They send some message to a group of people and then use another address for the next installment to annoy others, disregarding the email address they used previously. I will describe a few solutions to this dilemma in the final chapter.

A great deal of the success of the Web is due to slime. In fact, credit card security only came about because some individual wanted to buy some porn from the Internet but wanted it done so as to protect his identity. Thus was born the secure site and the Internet was beginning to flourish. Today, sales on the Web aren't all wholesome and the buyer may not want to be caught during a transaction.

The newspapers have made their way to the Internet. You need not buy a paper as you can get articles by going to the appropriate web site. Personally, I still prefer reading the Buffalo News – as little as I currently read – or a book the same way my grandparents read them. Nonetheless, there is plenty of information online. Just as there are many

inaccuracies in the press, the same can be said for the Internet. In fact, there probably are more untruths, even at a site with the word *truth* in its title. I did warn you earlier about labels.

Not long ago I worked with a guy whose girlfriend was a frequent user of the Internet. It turned out that she wouldn't go anywhere unless there was a hookup to the Web. There is no doubt that she was a slave to the Internet. She is certainly not alone and I already alluded to TV addicts, but there are so many forms of technology that you can be dependent upon. I'm sure that the PC and the Internet have destroyed many relationships.

On one occasion, I tried to obtain the proper spelling of a famous Polish dish by doing a google. I have a good idea how to spell it. It was a recipe in my cookbook, so I believe I obtained the correct spelling, which a few people believe is right. Nonetheless, after the search on the Internet, I found two different spellings for *golabki* or stuffed cabbage, pronounced *gah wum key*. I could only conclude that either there were a few acceptable spellings or else Polish people aren't that concerned about the letters in a word, just as long as the food is good.

Without the Internet, there would be no need for web design software. In chapter 13, you can read about my troubles with TopPage, the web design software I use. I really like it, but there are a few problems with web pages. To begin with, if you design a page, you can't use any font you like because the Internet may not be able to handle it. It might appear fine on your PC while you create the page and preview it, but it could be a blank page or a big mess when you try to view it on the Web. That

wouldn't be a concern if there were only a few fonts, which I mentioned earlier.

There are other concerns about creating a web page and viewing it. As you put the page together, you get to the point where you are ready to load the page to the Internet – what you created is exactly what you wanted. You view it and it looks great. Then you load it from your PC and when you glance at it on your web site, there are a few problems. On your PC, you had about the same number of words in each line for a paragraph – that's how you put it together. When you look at your page on the web, the first line has eight words, the second has two and so on. It looks like you need to do some more work.

Not long ago, I changed my home page. It was fine on my PC even when I previewed it. When I went to the Internet, it was missing the counter that I use to keep track of the number of visitors as well as all the information below it. When I used a different browser, there wasn't a problem. Thus, I had work to do and eventually I solved that problem, but why did I have to go through all this trouble? If I look at my web site at home and then view it at some other PC, the appearance is changed somewhat. It won't be the same using different computers. A different browser might get a slightly different result, including colors.

Another complaint I have about web sites is what has been transferred from the world of PCs. They are in no way user-friendly. For example, if you go to the home page, there just might be a button for "home." This is to go to the home page. But that's exactly where you are, so you really don't need that. It's worthless and only confuses

people. Then you have an option to click at various places on the page and go elsewhere. You just need to know where those hot spots are, or you can try a few and hope for the best. In many cases, a field that is underlined in blue or at least underlined is a link that will transfer you somewhere. That is straightforward but some sites give you linking opportunities without the underlining.

You don't have to be a web designer to get overwhelmed and frustrated by web sites. In March 2002, I had no clue how to create a home page. Since that time, I took a short course of six hours in web design and now have my own site, which I update almost every day. As a result, I see what has been created on the Web and can only wonder if the people responsible for these sites are in touch with the persons in charge. It appears that the user and the producer aren't communicating.

A good example is the online application of any bank. The one I used a while ago had a link on their home page for "web banking." I'm sure they aren't the only institution with those two words. Are they really necessary? If anyone goes to the site, it's probably because they want to look at their checking or savings account – their banking – and moreover, they are online or on the Web. Then, when a person gets to the site, it should be quite obvious that they probably want to look at their account. Each of these is personal or business. However, a person may just want to make an inquiry. All in all, there aren't that many choices, when you think about it. Yet, why is the page filled with so many possibilities?

There is another huge problem. The home page will have a column of choices on the right for all the

possibilities, which is perhaps a half dozen. They will also have similar options in a row at the top of the page, maybe eight choices. Are both of these necessary? Doesn't this setup only confuse? Why not simplify matters and accomplish a few things at the same time? First, it will be a great deal easier to program and there should be less chance for computer problems. It will also be easier to maintain. Another advantage is that the customer will be happier.

The reason for this mess has to do with the fact that the designer never sat down with the user to discuss what the latter wanted. On the other hand, it's possible that the business person didn't take into account simplicity or she let the programmer have the final say when she should be the person dictating matters. Maybe there was no attempt to design the page but instead it was just copied from another bank. The model bank turned out to not be user-friendly and the result is that this is now passed on to another lending institution. If you can make things better, why not do it?

In the design of pages for my web site, I have a few options, as there are numerous ways of doing things. One way is to use frames, which you can think of as breaking up the page into pieces. If I put some text into the first frame, it may not exactly fit. I could make the font size smaller, but it may be unreadable. Instead, the web design software allows the text to fit but it provides what I will call "sliders." These are those gizmos with arrows that you see on web sites that allow you to move the page right and left, as well as up and down. Unless you have a page with minimal information, you can't escape using them. If you have a page with

twelve frames, you could wind up with dozens of sliders. In fact, go to any web site and you will see a preponderance of these things. For this reason I don't use frames at all.

Since people are reading what is on the site, I feel that a web page should be like the page of a book. You read a line on a page and when you come to the end, you go to the beginning of the line underneath and continue. You don't turn the page over, continue reading and eventually go back to line two on page one. For this reason, I use only the slider that enables movement up and down and I actually despise the other, going left and right. It is very frustrating reading anything in which you have to go to the right and then slide back to the left and then continue with more of the same.

At one time, I used my telephone to hook up to the Internet. At first I figured I could live without DSL, whatever that stands for. I know, it means a direct hookup without tying up a phone. Then I was mailed a postcard announcing DSL in my neighborhood for \$5 a month more than I was paying for a dialup. I figured it would be well worth it so I called but I was told that it wasn't available where I live. Then why did they say that I could get the service? I guess the technology wasn't smart enough to figure that out.

In 2007, I finally got DSL. It does speed up downloads – that doesn't sound right – and uploads, both of which I rely on because of my web site. At other times the system fails to react as fast as I would like, for various reasons. Before I got DSL, I went to the library and got some computer time. I figured the direct hookup would speed things up. Unfortunately, I experienced such a slow response

that a letter – even with the post office involvement – would have gotten there faster than email, so I left.

Downloads are a real downer. Some take so long that by the time they're done, you need an upgrade. I downloaded some web design software one day – before my faster hookup – that wasn't even done in eight hours. Fortunately, I left the house and came back. Thank goodness, the connection wasn't severed, but I have had that happen on occasion and that only makes matters more annoying – you wasted a great deal of time and need to begin again. In some cases you're better off loading the software from a CD.

I wasn't sure where I should add this last bit, as it could have fit in quite well in the previous chapter. You may recall the little old lady who screamed, "I've fallen and I can't get up." Well, technology has changed that. What follows can also be found in my first book on work, but it has been updated, since we still have those annoyances.

***I've forgotten my password and I can't get on!***

Years ago there was a television show called "Password." With the TV program you were supplied a word, which was the password, and were asked for another word. Today "password" has an entirely different meaning. I think it's another word for "hell." On the show you were given a clue, but today, with the new game, you aren't given a chance. You need to provide both an ID as well as a password. Unfortunately, you can't decline to play this game unless you are a hermit.

The good news is that you set up your ID and password once and for all, but you do have the option to change it when you desire or when you happen to forget either of these. The bad news is that you can't write it down or shouldn't record what you created. You don't want others to see it. There's more bad news. You have to set up more pairs of IDs and passwords for your bank account, Internet access, Amazon account, retirement accounts and just about anything else that involves the business world. Moreover, some companies may require you to change your password every month. It gets even worse as some businesses ask for the name of your pet or your father's maiden name to get on the system. "Password" used to be fun.

Not long ago I tried to log on to the Internet. Usually I click on the connect button and I'm on, but that day I got an "invalid password" message. My password is always there, but not that day, so I had to enter it. I was ninety-nine percent sure of my password but what I keyed didn't work. I called the help desk and was told that I could call a 900 number for technical support, which would cost me about \$2 a minute. I was also told that I could get a resolution to my difficulty through an email at no expense. Unfortunately I couldn't email anyone since I was without Internet access, but I could use a friend's PC. I wrote down the email address to get me out of this predicament, and headed off to use the resources at my local library.

At the library, I decided to go to the provider's site and try my luck there. Soon I went to the login screen, which had an option for people who forget their password. The result of this endeavor is that you will be emailed your correct

password. That might take time, like days. I'll get into more helpful ideas later but let me add that to make my life easier, I use a four-digit number for a password on one account and the same four digits followed by 'XX' for another. Had I tried the latter combination for the password initially, I would have been home free and I would have saved a few hours and avoided buying a new lamp to replace the one that I threw against the wall. I thought it would bounce back and not break. For me, password purgatory had evolved into password hell.

If you use the Internet, you have at least two passwords to worry about. If you live in the twenty-first century, you most likely have a dozen of those gems to remember, and that's being conservative. I have many more than that, but that may have to do with the fact that though I care about the environment and conservation, I'm a progressive. When you count them all up, you will probably see that you have more passwords than I have, and that's only the tip of the iceberg, where all passwords should go.

I spent over twenty years as a computer consultant. At one of my recent contracts, I had close to a dozen passwords, and they couldn't all be the same due to the various rules of each system. There was one to log on to the PC, a LAN password, one for my phone, another for my email and a few more for mainframe testing. I needed another four or five passwords because I had to test different systems. If you haven't lost count, it's now up to about ten. To use the ATM, another password is required. If my funds are depleted, I can get dough with a cash advance, but I have to remember still another keyword. For other accounts that I

haven't mentioned, there are more passwords. I use E-Z Pass, so they provided two passwords, one for Internet access and the other if I care to use phone access. Here is one case where I didn't double my pleasure. If I want to go see my boss, I need a password to enter his office, which I've forgotten so I don't talk to him. Still, with so many passwords, there's a high likelihood that I will forget one or confuse passwords, unless I record them somewhere.

I eliminated many of the password problems when I retired from consulting at the end of 2001. I continued my third career as a writer in earnest, and developed my own web site, but guess what? I now have more passwords than when I was a consultant. These evil things seem to be following me around. I did have some ideas that I used and can still be helpful in this putrid password pit.

Let us assume that we need to worry about six passwords. How do you remember them all? You can't write them down, as that would defeat the purpose. Someone could find the list and all security would be lost. With our half dozen, there are probably that many different systems with all their different rules. One system may require numbers only, a second, letters of the alphabet only, while a third may let you use either. One account requires you to begin a word with a number while a second demands that you start with a letter. At the same time a third system may not have a restriction in this regard. Don't forget about the difference between upper case and lower case, another potential headache. One password has to be only six characters, another from four to eight and a third might be from five to nine positions.

If things aren't confusing enough, some systems may not allow you to use the same letter twice in succession. One system may not let you use similar words when you have to change passwords. I ran into that restriction, and how the software concluded that two different words were similar, I couldn't figure out. Another system may require you to change that magic word once a month while another password may only need to be changed every ninety days, while some systems may allow you to keep the same one without ever changing it. At one company where I worked, different people would change certain passwords for our group once a month. If you're faced with that scenario, just pray that they let you know of the alteration.

There are further rules, such as the password cannot spell out the name of a New York City taxi driver or you can't use an "O" with a slash through it. You can't use wingdings in your password and no obscene words are allowed. Some businesses spoil all the fun. On one contract, I was handed a sheet of password rules and guidelines. One suggestion was to take the first letter of each word of a phrase, such as "Be aware Reggie feels television is more enjoyable," and use that as your magic word. This would result in BARFTIME, but is that any easier to remember than YQSKPHW, which I got by randomly hitting keys in front of me? Some of you may think that that combination is the name of a Russian diplomat. If you follow this recommendation, you now have to remember a different phrase for each password. That will certainly make the situation a great deal better.

Just when you think you have it all figured out, the people in password security (PS) change the rules. Banks are one of my favorite places – more on them later – and they change the rules more than I change my socks – well, they don't do it everyday, but they do get carried away. When they increase the size of a password, they could allow existing passwords to still work – I think that's called grandfathering, though neither of mine had to put up with passwords – but that wouldn't get enough people upset. All these changes are done because the designers want to have so many combinations of symbols to protect the users of the system. So then why don't they add a requirement that you have to use at least one Chinese character in the password and some of the letters should be upside down or backward? Maybe "PS" stands for "particularly stupid." What about having two passwords per account, with one for days of the week ending in an odd number and the other for even? It worked during the fuel crisis of the 1970s.

I wish I could say that what I described above encompasses all the rules you will run into, but these will surely change. What I suggest to make our lives easier is to standardize the rules and simplify them for all passwords on all systems. Having fewer rules will be beneficial. Allow numbers and letters of the alphabet with no distinction between upper case and lower, but don't require either. Words that people can remember should not be ruled out. If these combinations have to be changed at all, make the change necessary on January 1 and July 1 each year and at no other time.

I may also suggest that once the rules are made, no changes should be allowed to them at any

time. Perhaps PCs could be made more secure so that hackers can't get anywhere close to them. Also, why do you need a password if you have a logon ID? When you consider it, this combination of ID and password is really two passwords, isn't it?

Since my suggestions about standardization won't be implemented soon enough for most of us, we need another solution right now. While consulting, I did my best by using the same password or at least the basis – and for the most part this worked. But one month while doing the synchronized change, I ran into a snag. It seems one system changed the rules for everyone. Before, you could use a password of six characters, but now you had to have at least seven. This threw a monkey wrench into my system but I solved it by adding an 'X' at the end. A '9' would work if you needed to have at least one number present. Note that you can use these additional characters at the beginning of the word just as well, depending on the rules. To take care of the different time requirements, what I did was change all the words after a month even if they didn't have to be changed. Because of the need for an extra '9' or 'X' for some passwords, you will need to be aware of what goes where. Trying all combinations will just take too long. I really think that you need to write down something to keep your sanity.

My system still wasn't foolproof but it made the entire process somewhat manageable. Of course, I had another concern as I had to remember all the variations. To keep the phone synchronized with the other stuff I made a list of words that corresponded to the numbers on the keypad and tried to use easy to remember combinations such as

667667 and 333363 which translated into MORONS (appropriate, isn't it?) and DEFEND respectively, both valid in their system.

To accomplish this task of synchronization, you can write a computer program – not an option for everyone – to translate a six or seven character word into the equivalent telephone number conversion. Just decide on the length of the word you want, go to the dictionary and then get all the words that fit. That is probably the hardest part, as the computer program to do the conversion is relatively simple. You can even rule out certain words in your program based on restrictions set forth. Finally print out the list of words and their equivalent and take your choice of what you think is a good word for the month. Just make sure your boss doesn't catch you doing this. He may not be too happy, but if he does come around, tell him you're doing password maintenance.

You can take this process one step further and either sell others your password computer program or the list of words. Your fellow employees can still use the program without any software experience. Once again, be wary of management snoops. But if you do get canned because of your efforts, you can use the program at your next job and even make some cash doing this. The possibilities are almost endless. You can turn a troublesome situation into a moneymaking endeavor. Don't report these monetary gains to the IRS.

As grim and confusing as all these suggestions and actions are, you have one last option: call the security help desk. Actually, annoying them as often as possible might be a really

good idea. Besides, you won't ever again have to worry about forgetting any of your passwords or writing them down – the less paperwork, the better. This will certainly slow down your productivity, as you may have to wait for the security people to get back to you. However, you get paid by the hour, so why should you give a hoot? Just remember to always look busy and you should be fine. It may even cost you, but the company where you work will wind up footing the bill. This suggestion to frequently call the help desk isn't worth squat if you are self-employed or retired. Nevertheless, make every effort to never forget your ATM password.

I think I have come up with a password that I hope to use for all my accounts, everywhere: “With\_liburty\_and\_justice\_4\_awl.” It meets the requirements that you need numbers, letters of the alphabet and even the caps thing. You'll note that I changed the spelling of two words to thwart the hackers. My only concern is for the underscores and the length. Nonetheless, I think giving up “liberty” is worth the security.

It really is amazing what we are put through just to be productive. How can you not forget a password every so often? When you really think about it, the people whom these magic combinations of letters and numbers are supposed to keep out of the system, namely the hackers, don't have any problem with passwords. They're in without them while the normal users are locked out.

## 8. Meet serious Christian singles

The title of this chapter has to do with the title of an email I received, but didn't bother to open. I don't answer every email I get and this is one of many that I quickly sent to the trash basket. If the people advertised happen to be neo-Conservatives, I want nothing to do with them. I won't bore you with any more as I mentioned this in the section on labels. Unfortunately, not long after this email, I got another email with the title, "Meet real, honest singles in your area." I'll pass on this fine offer, as well.

With the advent of email, the phone and post office are no longer necessary to communicate with friends or family. If I log onto the Internet and decide to communicate electronically, it costs me nothing for each email – since I pay monthly for DSL. That will allow me to send as many messages as I want, provided there's no disruption in the line, which does happen from time to time. But even that isn't a concern as I need not worry about getting a no-answer machine, busy signal or a message saying, "I'm sorry, but I don't understand you," something my parents said to me on occasion.

It may seem too good to be true, but there are just a few problems that may arise with email, as well as the fact that the conversation is merely one way. You can be on the Internet through a modem or a direct connection. With the former, unless you have more than one phone line, no one will be able to call you if you're online. That may not be a bad thing, but the problem doesn't exist with a direct hookup, so you can converse with tech support in Pakistan – I'm not suggesting you'll

understand them – while surfing the Web. Just because you send an email does not mean that you will be able to get in contact with your friends. After all, people have to see the message and then they have to answer it. If they never get what you sent – not unheard of – don't expect to ever get a reply. What if you email someone who only checks his email every three years? If they checked yesterday and you send a correspondence today, you'll have a long wait. You may also not hear from some people simply because they don't answer email, or at least not yours.

To verify the contention that email is one-way communication, consider what you receive each day. It's not much different from what I get, although I'm sure that I get more unwanted stuff than you do. Ninety percent – probably much more – of my daily email is spam. Some goes to the folder labeled that way or the bulk folder, and there I do find legitimate stuff from time to time. Simultaneously, my inbox is blessed with garbage. Apparently, the discriminator function for my email needs improvement. On February 1, 2008, I saw that Microsoft offered over forty-four billion dollars for Yahoo! – a match made in heaven. They deserve each other.

In general, it's not smart to open or reply to any spam. Of course, there may be a web site for you to go to in order to make a purchase or do something else that the spammer wants. The junk mail could also harbor viruses – which could be a problem if you haven't had a flu shot. On one occasion, I did reply but got a message back that said that it didn't reach the intended recipient. Somehow, I believe it got there after all. For the

messages in my inbox that should be there because they are not spam, most are one-way correspondences. Either they are a sales pitch, a bad, racist, sexist attempt at humor – some actually are hilarious and I do save them – or they are informing me of an event and don't need a reply. A few more may be the response to one of my emails but on too many occasions the question I asked goes unanswered.

Because of my writing, I use email to contact bookstores, marketers, my agent – since made redundant, but not in a criminal sense – publishers and people who may be of assistance to me in what I do. From my experience with these communications, I can only confirm that this method of inquiry and dialogue in the majority of cases isn't any better than using the U. S. mail, the Pony Express or Alexander Graham Bell's invention. In each case people can make excuses or the messages never reach the recipient and there will be no contact.

There's another type of the communication frustration. I have seen people with businesses on the Internet do some crazy things. You can go to their web site but after spending a few minutes realize that you have no way of contacting them, as there is no address, phone number or email address. If you want to buy their product, it's difficult to do so. Maybe they want you to get it elsewhere. You may think you can contact them since they give their email address. However, when you send them something, you could get a message: "Does not like recipient." This is really dumb since the person to whom you sent the email is the *recipient*. This sounds like an image problem to me. I'm sorry, but

if someone wants to sell something, they should give consumers a way to get the product from their web site and not reject your email, or at least a link to complete the sale.

Spam has to be the most annoying feature of the Internet and I could have mentioned that in the chapter on the Internet. You could say that unwanted email belongs in either chapter – I think it should be relegated to the garbage can. I have a Yahoo! email account and from time to time that company makes improvements – at least they think so – to the package. I have already described getting slimed after searching for my *Yahoo! images* fiasco. Maybe a better name for it is *Yahoo! damages*. Another truly annoying creation of email and the Internet is the spam guard, employed by this email provider. You have to enter a string of characters from a displayed image that is close to impossible to read. This is supposedly done to eliminate spam, but only creates screaming users.

Some time ago, another incident arose of such a nature that I may also include it in a book I write about missing intelligence. I can't mention any names for security reasons. In fact, what I have to relate will be somewhat vague, but you should see the point. I would not be surprised if this happened to many of you. I got a first-time email from a person – not someone trying to sell me something, in fact this was a very meaningful communication – and not long after that, I emailed in reply. Here is the response I received for what I sent:

*I apologize for this automatic reply to your email. To control spam, I now allow incoming messages only from senders I have approved*

*beforehand. If you would like to be added to my list of approved senders, please fill out the short request form (see link below). Once I approve you, I will receive your original message in my inbox. You do not need to resend your message. I apologize for this one-time inconvenience. Click the link below to fill out the request.*

I was somewhat surprised by this turn of events. Since the person sent me the email, I assumed that this individual had added my address into a file of acceptable senders. Obviously, that didn't happen. I didn't fill out this request but it may be necessary in the future. One thing I didn't receive was an apology for the sender's temporary brain deficiency.

I have already mentioned all the old jokes sent by email, but there are other annoying creations, such as the numerous Ponzi schemes. Some of these are commercial and of course illegal, and they are a huge waste of my time, even if they wind up in my bulk folder. Some of the others you receive from ordinary individuals – some even friends and family – who threaten you if you don't pass it on to at least ten others. If you break up the chain, you will be cursed by having to listen to Donald Rumsfeld speak for an hour, or if you do the will of the sender, something special will happen to you. I have nothing against religion, but I don't believe it belongs in politics or emails.

One thing I don't care for is all the secrecy of email. People can send you something but you can't reply to them, or when you try, you get an annoying response. That's bad enough, but it's worse when someone emails me in reply to an email that I never sent. For some reason, an individual

emailed a friend and it appeared as though it came from me. There's no reason why this should ever happen. I am not the only one that has experienced this pathetic deception. It's a good way of getting a virus on your PC.

In conclusion, if you really believe that email is a great thing, consider my discussion earlier about it. Email is a one-way communication in most cases. The barrage of spam should convince you of that as well as the constant bombardment of your inbox with faint attempts at humor or enticements to buy something you neither want nor need. Also, the email in which people threaten you with ill health if you don't pass it along is really another communication going one way. Finally, these few words should sway your opinion about the burden of email: *spam, viruses, spyware, files that can't be opened* and *empty promises of the "free gift."*

## 9. Better living through chemistry

Before I received (and *earned?*) my undergraduate degree in mathematics, I took two chemistry courses: one in high school and the other in college. My grades both times indicated that I did *all right* – for an understanding of those words in italics, you’ll need to read the chapter on education in my 2007 book, *This Page Intentionally Left Blank*. Because I liked the courses, I thought briefly about a career in that field but chose math instead. It’s much more difficult to blow yourself up in the area I eventually pursued.

I’m not sure precisely when this happened, but it was around the time I was at Canisius College, or maybe just after graduation, that I applied for a job at Dupont Chemical. I was disappointed when I didn’t land it, but looking back now, I am convinced it was for the better.

Years later I became convinced that the home you own should be maintenance free, meaning the deck should be made of pressure treated lumber, and the exterior of the house should be vinyl or aluminum siding that wouldn’t need painting. As I write this, my three homes eventually wound up with both suggestions, including blue vinyl, one of the world’s most dangerous substances. The lumber I described has been proven to be toxic as well. If you don’t change your mind at times, it probably means you’re not learning.

You heard of the expression, “Better living through chemistry,” but maybe it would have been more appropriate to say, “More toxicity and addiction through chemistry.” I hope I don’t have to explain that one. I did cover a great deal in this line

of thought in my 2008 book on the environment, *Take Back the Earth*, so I will try not to repeat what I wrote. We use chemicals to kill pests, but the Bhopal disaster pointed out that when not controlled, innocent people suffer and die. *Five Past Midnight in Bhopal* by Dominique Lapierre and Javier Moro describes that horrific event in details that will depress you and make you furious.

Rachel Carson warned us about the problems of chemicals many years ago in her book, *Silent Spring*, but many didn't listen to what she had to say. They were too busy watching *Password*. What was even more disgusting was the fact that junk scientists – they were probably watching the test pattern for the ratings people – questioned her work. Real science has proven that her research was well documented, but even today her efforts have been attacked.

I'm a scientist – I majored in math – and I have enough intelligence to realize that spraying toxic chemicals is hazardous to the health of humans and isn't very good for the environment. Moreover, if you use these poisons, the intended pests will build up immunity and soon what is being spread on fruits and vegetables has no beneficial effect whatsoever.

Reading *Making a Real Killing* by Len Ackland will inform you of the environmental hazards of building bombs, since numerous chemicals were involved. The project involved a great deal of secrecy – doesn't that sound familiar? – as the only people who really knew what was going on were the government, the Atomic Energy Commission and Dow Chemical. There was also a

great deal of missing intelligence as even the scientists weren't sure of the long term effects of the entire process. This resulted in radiation leaking into the environment, affecting the workers as well as the planet. Disposing of the byproducts of building these weapons became an unsolvable dilemma, which is still not resolved today. Finally, the finished product itself created the worse possible scenario: if it wasn't used, all that money went up in smoke, but if the bomb was deployed, there was still plenty of smoke and the earth wound up in flames, with death, destruction to the earth and radiation poisoning.

On Saturday, May 13, 2006, Erie County and the Town of Amherst in Western New York held a drop-off day for household hazardous waste. The scene was Erie Community College North Campus, so I collected some items: used oil, old paint and a few batteries. When I turned down Tech Drive, I saw the trucks collecting materials and so many cars that I thought I was tailgating at a Bills' game. I noticed all the entrances were blocked, so I kept driving and eventually I found an open entrance. I got in one of the four long lines of vehicles. Eventually, after over an hour, I got rid of my junk.

Besides what I mentioned, pesticides, fertilizers, solvents, kerosene, mercury thermometers, propane tanks, household chemicals and cleaners were also collected. The multitude of participants was a good sign: it meant people really cared about the earth and were doing something positive to properly dispose of toxic chemicals. It also indicated that humans bought products that they shouldn't be using. I only concluded that this

gathering should occur more frequently in the area, maybe once a month. Another possibility is to have the various town recycling programs allow for similar drop-offs, here and throughout the nation.

Much of what follows is pointed out in another book of mine, *Take Back the Earth*, but I think it's worth repeating. There are alternatives to toxic chemicals as cleaners. Some time ago I lived in a house with three toilets – useful for the day before a colonoscopy, but more to clean. On moving into the house, I found the toilet in the master bedroom to be caked with crud. Talk about a bad frosting! I tried a few agents but cleansers didn't work, nor did bleach or any other cleaner. I was going to buy a new toilet or at least the bowl, but somehow I didn't.

One day my mom suggested using vinegar. Since I had other bathrooms, I could pour some into the toilet and let it sit for a while – time wasn't a problem. I put some of the liquid into the bowl and let it do its thing. I am not sure how long I left it there, but after a time the toilet was good as new. The vinegar did the job, something all those other products couldn't do. Moreover, the environment wasn't polluted.

On more than one occasion I have used a combination of vinegar and baking soda to clear up a slow drain. It really does work. Not long ago I had guests over for dinner. About two hours before anyone arrived, I noticed that my kitchen sink was plugged and the water just sat there. Running my garbage disposal didn't help in the least. I really didn't have time to call a plumber so I got as much water out of the sink as possible and decided that I

would use an alternative to good China and silverware to serve the meal.

I poured some of the vinegar and baking soda combination into the sink and let it sit. I didn't have much choice. The dinner was a success and later in the evening, I noticed that my sink was remediated – there was no need to call a plumber. So, the vinegar and baking soda combination not only cleared up a plugged drain, it did it in an environmentally friendly way.

There are alternatives for just about every toxic product surrendered on the Saturday I discussed, with new innovations on the way. I applaud Erie County and the Town of Amherst for their efforts. With a more frequent collection process could come work sessions to enlighten the public about alternatives to the toxic products that they are using in and around their homes. Spreading the word will lead to the elimination of these poisonous substances, which could someday result in no need to have these collections, as we will have graduated to a cleaner, less toxic planet.



## 10. BCCI means **Bilk** the Citizens of Cash and Interest

If you are down and need a good laugh, head over to a bank or post office. A few of my books have discussed those venues because of temporary brain tumors and you may recall the Seinfeld episode where our favorite postal polluter went to court to avoid a speeding ticket. In that episode, he claimed he was coming to the aid of his friend, Kramer, who was about to commit suicide because he never got to be a banker. I'm not going to dwell on the United States Postal Service but on mortgage corporations, credit card companies and those places where we have checking and savings accounts.

Despite having written about banks for laughs, I am not thrilled with them for a few reasons. To begin with, if you have money and want to get a loan, the bank will grant you one. On the other hand, if you are short of cash and need some, the banks won't come to your rescue. Having owned a few homes as well as writing numerous checks, I have not been able to avoid these institutions. In fact I have even had software contracts at these corporations that we get to hate.

Banks have failed miserably when it comes to the application of technology. They document every transaction to death and create too many unnecessary reports, resulting in the loss of the forests. On one contract that I had at Chase Bank in Syracuse, I recall a computer report that used over one full box of paper. I ask you, who would read that report or even want to? I certainly wouldn't.

What probably happened was some individual went to the last few pages for some numbers, checked them and then tossed the listing. Wouldn't it make more sense to just print that page or better yet, have it available online? That would result in the saving of quite a few trees.

Another complaint has to do with the endless number of scandals at banks. BCCI was a doozy but not the only one. I'm sure you have heard of the involvements with the Enron debacle as well as others that are just being uncovered. There may have been a fine or two, but the perpetrators escaped relatively unscathed and returned to work on the following Monday. Some may have been canned, but they didn't suffer too much with their huge severance packages. Meanwhile, the citizens lost their retirement and now must continue working, even though they had other plans.

Another change that we have seen over the years that doesn't please customers is the merger of one bank with another. This naturally implies downsizing and compensation packages to those close to retirement, maybe even some outsourcing. There have been so many deals between banks that currently there are few banks left in which you can place your trust. The smaller banks in your town are a good option and I believe that local businesses should be supported as much as possible. It's good for the region. At one time or another, I have used many of the biggest banks in the country, much to my chagrin, but I decided to change that. In the spring of 2006, I obtained a new checking account – I kept the old one for a few weeks – with a local bank. Less than two months after I made my initial deposit, this Buffalo bank was bought out by a

California institution. There are other local banks here, but I really didn't feel like closing out two checking accounts within a few weeks of each other.

Less than two months after I opened this new account, I called for a wire transfer from one of my investments. Two days later, I decided to log on to the bank web site to see if the cash was there. I just had one problem: I forgot the logon ID and password. I did the dumb thing and tried a few possibilities, with no luck. I emailed the bank and got it and went to the site again. Before I got the information I desired – it turns out the transfer hadn't taken place – I had to go through a process that I had done before. This included verifying my email address. Of course, a few minutes before this, they had emailed me my ID and password. This was from the bank that I thought would be better than the rest.

The main problem with changing banks may be access to cash, due to the limited ATMs. You will give up convenience in many cases, and that means adapting. It probably will be worth it in the long run. My old bank, which I kept for a while since I still had checks, paid no interest nor did any of the previous ones. My new bank pays a whopping .3 interest. That is a period before the “3,” which may not be quite visible – you can say the same about the interest. Even though it's not much, over time it might add up – about a million years. Still, it's better than the other places that had my money.

It's extremely difficult to survive in the world today without a checking account. You have to pay your phone, gas, heating bill and the

subscription to “Gluttony Monthly” as well as the rent and it may not be possible to make a payment without writing a check. Using a small, local bank is fine – if you have that option – and will mean you need not deal with Chase Bank or Citibank. You might have the option of using a credit union. If so, you may be able to get an interest rate higher than what I get now. But as I mentioned, getting cash could be a problem for you since you won’t have as many withdrawal or deposit points compared to the big banks.

Another really annoying part of the banking process happens when you deposit a check into your account. It could take two days to clear or perhaps a bit longer, like five days for a non-local check. Why should the origin of the check matter and why can’t it clear within one day? If I write a check to pay my gas bill, the gas company doesn’t have to wait five days to get the cash. The bank isn’t going to say to the utility, “The funds for the check will be available in two days.” It sounds like there is a bit of an unbalance here.

It gets even worse when I deposit a check from Joe, who doesn’t have enough cash in his checking account, but I am not aware of that. As a result, Joe will have to pay some outrageous fee for writing a check with insufficient funds – \$25 is not out of the question. I will get charged as well, even though it’s not my check. I guess banks are equal-opportunity gougers. It could get a lot worse if I write a check or two and now they start to bounce. This problem can be remedied by having a feature – overdraft protection – having nothing to do with getting recruited for Iraq – that waives the fee in these situations, but it will cost you. You also may

have to pay your bank if you write more than a certain number of checks per month or if you don't do a required number of transactions.

There are loads of other fees. You may get charged for using your debit card. There could be a charge by your bank if you don't use their ATM machine. The use of that device for a withdrawal may not cost you a cent if you use your bank, but it might if you use the network to do a withdrawal or deposit or some kind of transfer. For one checking account, I had a fee because I didn't use my debit card at least three times in one month. Then I had to use it in a certain way otherwise I would have to pay a fee for the transaction. I think that's really underhanded, but then again I never did like banks.

Most banks today list "balance" and "available balance." From a reasonable, logical point of view, the former should be the number that includes deposits that will soon be acceptable, while the latter should represent what you can draw from. From this thinking, the former will be greater than or equal to the latter at all times. Personally, I see no need for two fields – it only results in confusion. If you make a deposit or withdrawal, your balance will be changed appropriately. If money has been deposited but hasn't cleared, it should not be included in the balance. It's a simple matter. Banks only confuse the issue because for some of them "available balance" includes pending transactions, and "balance" is what you can draw against right now, which is completely confusing, illogical and the opposite of what it should be.

In the past, you could always get a checking account with no fees – if you looked hard enough. Because of competition today, all accounts are free,

to a point. You may get some free checks but will have to pay for the next batch, but fortunately you can get them through different mail-order houses, saving you a few dollars. In the past it was easy to get free checking if you kept a minimum balance of a million dollars in combined accounts. Actually it's not that high but for some banks the requirement is more than you would imagine.

I had one free checking account that required \$20,000 in joint accounts. They waived the fee for the first year. However, I did have a home equity line for \$20,000 as well as a credit card with that same bank. Even though my credit card use was high, it didn't count towards the required balance while the home equity line did. Unfortunately if I made just one payment towards the equity line, the balance could dip below \$20,000 and now there would be a fee. Would you keep a checking account with that bank? I didn't for too long.

At one time I opened up a checking account with a similar scenario except that the minimum balance was \$5,000. This balance could be in a mutual fund provided by the bank so I decided that I could handle that. About a year or two later the bank boosted the required balance to \$6,500. I did have some dividends from the fund so I had to invest a few more dollars to reach the new minimum. I didn't complain.

About two years after that, I received my monthly statement and there was a monthly fee. I called the bank and they explained that the mutual fund could no longer be used in computing the minimum, as outlined in the letter that was sent out a month ago, except I never got any letter

explaining this. After wheeling and dealing, which seemed to go on for months, I got the fees waived for one year.

I still had this checking account and at one time had a \$200 balance. I made a large deposit and when I checked my balance, the latest deposit was accounted for in amount. I was expecting two electronic transfers of tax refunds into my account so I called a day later to see if they had arrived. I found out that my balance was around \$200 again. There were no outstanding checks that I had written to cause the balance to dip back to the original amount. I called a teller but got no reasonable explanation for the conflict. Why would the bank post one amount and then actually negate the deposit. I know the check was good. In fact when I checked on the balance a few days later, the recent addition was finally reflected. Maybe I was dealing with voodoo banking.

While discussing this establishment, I should mention their procedure for deposit slips. They didn't use the normal appendage at the back of your book of checks. They have their own tickets, which resulted when they updated their system. I remember waiting in long lines for a teller while the conversion was taking place. It was no fun being there. The new system created more paper, rendering normal deposit slips useless. The ones they used had carbon copies, so instead of saving the earth's resources, they were using even more of them.

When banks get to implement some type of computer system – whether for the first time or as an upgrade – you may want to go to the Bahamas until it's all straightened out. It will be a great deal

less frustrating to avoid the bank, because the conversion may take a while. I suffered through a few of these “improvements” and I doubt that you will be spared the same situation if your bank gets a new computer or does an upgrade, even today.

I mentioned my paltry interest rate earlier. My mom generally has more cash in her account but it pays even less – or did – than mine: .1 percent (one tenth of one percent.) Savings accounts give you more, but you have to buy a CD to get a four or five percent return and may have to commit to a few months for your money. Before, the terms were actually better for five years than one, but that is changed and the policy is actually just the reverse. I mentioned the numerous fees that can smack you in the face. In the long run you are probably better off with a free checking account that pays no interest. Of course they may give you a toaster to open the account – more on that, later. This is what is referred to as a “free gift.” When I passed my former bank not too long ago, it still had that sign outside the door and I got an offer from another bank in the mail with those two annoying words.

A few months ago I walked into the bank when it was open – I avoid holding up banks since it could mean time with people you may not want to invite for dinner. As I stepped in line I noticed that there weren’t any tellers to help me make a deposit. It was Destiny’s birthday and they were having cake in the back. I wish I could have used the ATM but since I didn’t have that option, I had no choice but to wait patiently. Finally a teller appeared, but I had never been in one of these institutions before when there was no one behind the “counter.”

When the teller did appear, there was one person ahead of me in line. It turns out that the bank person knew this individual so their meeting turned into a social encounter. This was just what I needed and all the people behind me felt the same. Now there's nothing wrong with a friendly cashier, but there is a time and place for everything. The customers were bothered enough by the scarcity of tellers and this unnecessary chatter at the counter was not welcome. The banks want our business but somehow their actions seem to indicate that they could care less about us. You may have heard about "on-line" banking, but I really don't believe you can get on the Internet and get cash. Isn't that what it's all about? No matter what we do we still have to go inside the bank for some issues or use the mechanical dispenser of cash for our deposits or withdrawals. At the end of this chapter I will suggest how you can avoid either of these scenarios most of the time.

Another bank that I dealt with for a time did something much worse to people I know. A check was written to a missionary overseas and it took some time before the check was cashed. Actually it was stolen and cashed by some thief who then proceeded to phone the bank or got in touch with it somehow, asking for a withdrawal of some percentage of the funds in the account. This sounds like someone who wants to be able to fly a plane without having to land it.

Wouldn't you know it, the bank approved of flying without a touch down – I mean to say they sent him the money. When the writer of the check noticed a deficit in the checking account, it was only then that the picture started to get clear as to

what had happened. The perpetrator was never found but the bank wound up having to cover the loss, which they certainly deserved for their lack of common sense. Maybe someone should have hit them on the head to wake them when the questionable request for the money was made. I am sorry to report that this bank is still in business under a new name.

In the early 1980s, I was about to buy a house outside Syracuse. I went to one lending institution and was told they could process my application for a non-refundable fee of \$150. I accepted their offer and gave them a check. Looking at my investments, credit cards and earnings statements, I figured I would easily qualify. My monthly rent was more than my monthly mortgage would be.

It wasn't long after that I was turned down and my check returned. All I can figure was they didn't want to handle my mortgage. If I indeed was qualified, why didn't I get the loan? If I wasn't, why did they send back the non-refundable fee? I doubt that they did any kind of processing of my finances. If I worked at that institution, I would certainly not do all the processing and then return the fee, since that wouldn't make sense. And if no processing was done, how can you make a decision as to whether a mortgage was approved? To this day I haven't figured what happened in this case.

I did get a mortgage for the house and a few years later I applied for a home equity loan. The bank that I applied to had a commercial where they made fun of other banks that took weeks and weeks to process this type of loan. From what I could gather, it appeared that I should have been able to

obtain the loan in about a month. Was I ever mistaken.

About two months later I had a closing date so I went to the bank, but the clerk said that it wasn't that day. I argued to the contrary but was then informed that the closing was four days later. Eventually I got the loan but it took three months to get it. I really believe the reason for the delay was that too many people were involved in the loan – it seemed like every time I was dealing with this bank, I talked to a different person – and this created all kinds of confusion. Believe me, even one individual working on an application can wind up dazed. Needless to say I will never do business with that bank again.

The home I live in has no mortgage – it's a condo for which I paid in full. I almost used a bank to get a mortgage, but after considering that the closing costs would be about \$4000, I decided to cash in some mutual funds instead. Before I made this decision, I sent the bank \$350 to process the application but then that effort wasn't necessary. However, I didn't recover the \$350, though I tried. My emails and phone calls went unanswered and I eventually gave up. I thought people should rob banks and not the other way around.

I think that some rejections for a mortgage are ridiculous. Consider a couple that has to pay \$600 a month in rent along with all their utilities and so forth. They apply for a mortgage for a house that they want to buy and determine that their monthly mortgage payment will be \$500, including taxes and insurance. They are rejected because of some determination based on their incomes. For one thing they are already making a payment for their

rent that is larger, indicating they can make the necessary payment each month. The lending institution should approve the loan request but instead they lend one hundred times that requested amount to a third world country that will eventually default on the loan. A similar occurrence takes place when an individual gets rejected for trying to consolidate his debts with a lower rate credit deal.

Let's talk about the convenient ATM at our bank. Assuming your branch is close by, there can still be a problem with this machine. Suppose you are planning dinner on Saturday night at your favorite restaurant with friends but you need some dough. On your way to the restaurant, you stop at your favorite ATM, but wouldn't you know it, it's temporarily out of service. There's no money left, at least not for you just now. Well, there really is, but there is also a failure of you know what. You have another option as there is a branch not far from the restaurant and you pray that it's not incapacitated for the moment. If so, you've got the ATM blues.

When I lived in East Aurora, I used one of two ATMs to get cash and they both left much to be desired. The first one was about two miles from my house but was a pain when you went there late in the afternoon as the sun made your withdrawal a real challenge. The other one was a few miles from my home but close to where I shopped. Unfortunately I have tried to get cash and found that machine out of service too many times.

Another bother with ATMs has to do with the fact that from the car – or walkups, too – the software isn't the greatest, resulting in frustration to the customer. Over the years I have used the machines of various banks so it happens on too

many occasions. I recall trying to withdraw a certain amount of cash but discovering that I couldn't get it for some reason. It may have been because I asked for \$30 but the ATM was out of tens. The result was I had to start all over with my PIN and hope that this time I could get some money from the machine. Above everything, you need to remember that it's a machine.

Today you can barely exist without some kind of credit card. By the same token, too many people have met their downfall because of this kind of plastic. Try to rent a car with cash as your only alternative or go to a restaurant without it. Let's admit it: the Discover Card, VISA and Master Card are quite convenient. You just need to have some discipline in your spending habits and realize that you will have to pay someday. Also, come to the realization that little charges of ten and twenty dollars here and there add up to a hundred dollar payment quite quickly.

If you don't have a credit card, you will probably have to contact the Chase or Citibank criminals to get one – I like alliteration. You may be able to find a credit card with a smaller, more ethical institution, though. As pointed out, be cognizant that you'll probably have to pay for that coat or dinner for which you whipped out your VISA. I use the word "probably" because there might be situations where you charge something and never have to pay for it. That has happened to people I know on a couple occasions but don't count on it. On the other hand, you could be double-billed, which is not as enjoyable as double-dipping. Above all, be aware of what you have spent so that when the bill arrives you won't have a heart attack

– you’re the one with the card.

The credit card companies don’t exactly play fair when it comes to the customers. They will entice you at first and then nail you in really obscene ways. Suppose you have a Discover Card as well as a Master Card. The latter has an interest rate of close to six percent, but one day you don’t pay your Discover bill because it never arrives in the mail. Eventually you settle it but because of the late payment, your Master Card account now results in an increase in the interest rate to 12.9 percent. This increase is done not because you were late with the MC payment – you paid them all on time – but with the Discover bill. Not liking these institutions is growing into hate.

Another thing that might happen is you get a credit card from Chase with a six-month interest rate of zero percent, provided you do a balance transfer – paying off another credit card with the new one. The best part is that ad states that the normal transfer fee will be waved. Once you perform the move, you find in your first statement a fee of \$50 for the transaction. You call Chase and mention the problem but they ask to see the document to verify your claim. Unfortunately, you tossed it and wind up accepting the cost, which you really were bamboozled into paying. Blowing up your bank will wind you in the hoosegow.

Not long ago I closed out two credit cards and you should have no trouble guessing their names. If you can’t, I’ll give you a hint: I mentioned them earlier. Today they have their offer in the Sunday paper but years ago it was different. Then you would get an offer in the mail for a credit card that was “pre-approved?” How is that different

from one that was approved? People who mess up the language should have to pay higher credit card fees. For this offer, sign your name and it would be yours. The best thing to do was just ignore this wonderful deal. Every so often an “offer you couldn’t refuse” with a very low interest rate arrives, even if only for a limited time. You might have been in a position where in six months you’d have enough cash to pay off the entire amount and that would have made the deal more appealing. The 6.9 percent interest will save you some money as compared to the 12.9 percent rate on your present credit card.

I have received my share of these offers, one having a rather low rate, so I sent it back. A few weeks later I received a letter from the company stating that my “application” was refused. What application? All I did was sign my name for pre-approved credit. Needless to say I had happier days. Apparently this lending institution’s approval process was haphazard. What they should have done originally was to perform the checking that took place after I sent in my reply. Then I would never have gotten the initial mailing. Of course, that would have been the proper way of doing things.

Some time ago a similar scenario happened and once more my “application” was rejected. I decided to take action. I called or wrote – I don’t remember which – and asked why? After some time I was given bogus reasons that I couldn’t accept, so I argued my case. It took probably a month or two but I was finally granted the credit card. I then decided to reject the offer after all that had transpired. That was some time ago but today you can get a credit card with zero percent interest for

six months with no balance transfer fee when paying down another credit line.

In fact the competition today is so great that the credit card companies are offering rebates on purchases, as high as five percent. The banks don't really play fair in this regard because unless you read the fine print, you won't realize that in order to get that percent back, you need to buy a home in Los Angeles or New York City and two Mercedes. At that point, you will get your rebate, but only on groceries and gas. Actually, the threshold is a bit lower, but you get the idea. I only bring this up because my credit cards work exactly that way.

When I resided in East Aurora, I received a correspondence from a major credit card company for the previous owner of my house. I opened the letter before I realized it wasn't for me and inside there were access checks. Thus it appeared that this wasn't an application but a mailing for a current customer. However, she had moved away almost seven years before. If she hadn't used the credit card in a few years why was it still active? If she was a current user of the card, then why was it sent to her old address? I still can't figure out why this came to my address. I might add that this wasn't the first one from this same credit card company. There may be more, but I won't know about it since I too moved from that home.

There will be a time when you want to close out a credit line, whether it is paid up or not. When you talk to someone about this, they will probably ask why you want to do this. They may even offer a lower interest rate just to keep you from abandoning the account. From a business point, this is the thing to do: not lose a customer. On one occasion recently

I called about closing an account and they said fine and closed the account. And that was it and I consider myself a good customer. I guess this institution could care less about keeping me on board.

On another occasion I called to close out a credit line and they asked why. I mentioned that the interest rate was too high. They offered a rate that was lower but not good enough for me, saying that was the lowest they could go. I just thanked them and was then switched over to another person who said that since I was about to close the account they could extend me a rate of 6.9 percent for the next 6 months – lower than their *final* offer. Now why didn't the first person offer this low rate to begin with?

Not long ago I needed to use my credit for a mail order purchase. I didn't have the card with me at home so I got the number from my credit card statement but the person on the phone then asked for the card's expiration date. I didn't have it, told him so and he said the sale couldn't go through without it. I said I would call the credit card company and call him back. However, the credit card company said they couldn't reveal the expiration date to me even after I gave them my bowling average and transcript from undergraduate school. I then called back the mail order company and gave him an expiration date of 06/99, which I made up. The actual expiration date is 10/99, so I was close. The sale was then completed, meaning that the expiration date is irrelevant – but probably has to be a future date. Perhaps, I should have tried that. I question why the credit card company couldn't give me the expiration date and why the

mail order group accepted the bogus date.

Some time ago, I ordered a one-year subscription to a health magazine. I charged it to a credit card and after receiving the magazine for twelve months, canceled it. The magazine kept coming and I received a bill for the same credit card even though I had paid off the account and even closed it. Now I have two complaints: one with the financial company and the other with the magazine. I had a one-year subscription and the credit card was closed and shouldn't have been reopened without first notifying the account holder. Also magazines don't usually do automatic renewals without first contacting the customer. There were some big screw-ups in this case.

Many people don't have and never intend to get credit cards. Despite their limitations, I think the good outweighs the bad, provided you have some discipline and you are vigilant. They eliminate the worry about having huge amounts of cash in your wallet. There is protection when buying a product or service when you use plastic. If the card is stolen, you are not liable, provided you notify the appropriate people when theft occurs. Also, because of the competition, you can easily have fees waived and interest rates lowered by threatening to close out the account. If the credit card company won't oblige, get another card. That is where we as consumers have a great deal of power.

I mentioned earlier that you can get cash and avoid going to the bank most of the time. First of all, use direct deposit from your place of employment whenever possible and do most of your banking on-line. Use the U. S. Postal Service for making deposits because despite Newman and

Claven, that service is quite reliable, overall. That should only mean a delay of one day and you won't have to drive to the bank. As far as being tied to the ATM for withdrawals, you may be able to use your credit card for grocery shopping and get cash at the same time, thus avoid using those dreaded machines. Depositing cash into your checking account means you will have to go to the bank, but with a bit of ingenuity, I think you even can avoid that.

You could also go out to dinner, use your credit card to pay the entire bill and get cash from the others at the table. If they have the same goal, you could make larger cash withdrawals, thus reducing the number of bank visits but that would only mean more cash in your wallet. The more you have, the quicker it goes. I guess there are few easy solutions to this banking business.



## 11. You just need an appendix transplant

Over the years, the advances in medicine have been phenomenal, with the elimination of many diseases. At one time not long ago, the diagnosis of cancer was a death sentence, but those dreaded words, “You have cancer,” are no longer as ominous. This is because of the possibility of a cure, with surgery and treatment, and those three words are about as upsetting as, “You’ve got mail.” Many people might not be here were it not for a reputable surgeon, radiation and chemotherapy. Miracle drugs and antibiotics have played a huge part in giving us healing and longer lives, in spite of sickness and pain.

As discussed in my 2008 book, *Take Back the Earth*, Bill Moyers benefited greatly from scientific advances – but I did as well – without which, either of us may not be around today. However, it is very possible that the reason for my cancer was caused by the failure of technology and the problems of the industrial revolution. Some time after my first colon cancer battle, I did some research into its causes. A report by the Harvard Center for Cancer Prevention stated that this type of cancer is caused by tobacco use, diet, obesity and lack of exercise. It attributed two percent of U.S. colon cancer deaths to “environmental pollution.” Scientists have disputed this number as being too low and I tend to agree.

Colon cancer is rumored to be hereditary, that is, it occurs within families. Of course, this cause does not rule out the fact that it could be environmental. After all, if a family lives in an area that is toxically polluted, being related may not be

the primary reason why these people all had colon cancer. I can't prove that mine was caused by my surroundings when growing up, but I exercise daily, eat healthy food, could add twenty pounds to my frame and still be nowhere near obese and have never smoked, except for an occasional cigar, which I gave up years ago. I am convinced that the cause of many types of cancer is indeed corporate pollution. This would certainly apply if you eat food that is tainted by the soil used to grow it or the water that sustains it, and the result happens to be cancer.

While recovering, I had the pleasure of trying a few types of drugs and antibiotics to reduce some of the pain as well as to prevent other obvious problems. Demerol and Darvoset may offer relief after surgery, but they are not without other difficulties. That seems to be true about most drugs. Even if it appears that some pill works without side effects, it's very possible that somewhere down the road the user will have to pay. Sufficient analysis just hasn't been done.

I read a few words about how drugs are named. One note was that the first letter or part of the name has a good deal to do with comforting the patient so as to buy the drug, no matter how effective it is. There are so many legal drugs that it's hard to keep track of them all. Besides the painkillers, there's a prescription drug or over-the-counter medicine for just about any ailment. Together, these aids provide a great contribution to the economy, but are they all worth it and do they truly benefit the users? Somehow the use of a painkiller or pill to stop stomach discomfort even before it happens seems to point to a flaw in our "I

can't wait – I want it now!" society. Another assumption on the part of many people is that if they see a "wonder" drug advertised on TV or in the newspaper, this product will solve their problem, no matter what it is. It might, but probably won't. Perhaps there's a reason for this term "wonder" drug: you wonder if it will work. Sometimes labels are significant.

A short time ago a good friend of mine's mother succumbed to cancer. She was a great, wonderful woman and we all miss her. She possessed one quality that we should all have: she was brave. She fought as best she could, even undergoing some chemotherapy. After some time she decided that she was done with the treatments; they didn't seem to be doing that much good. The side effects weren't worth it. She died at home with her family and with dignity.

A few years ago I felt a sore throat coming on so I decided to try some zinc lozenges to avoid getting the flu. The recommendation was to take no more than one at each meal so I managed two or three for a few days and they seemed to work. My throat was relieved and I dodged the cold. Around the same time I noticed my right eye was twitching, something that I never experienced before. At first I blamed the fluorescent lights, as I sat just underneath one at work. I also noticed on the weekend that my eye was doing the same thing again as I sat in the waiting room while the oil in my car was being changed. But then I figured that these lights probably weren't the cause as I had been in contact with them before the twitching began. I then realized that I had taken the zinc tablets recently so perhaps there was a side effect. I

can't say conclusively, and to this day I am still not sure what caused the twitching.

No matter whether you are talking about chemotherapy, painkillers or drugs to alleviate hay fever, you have to consider the side effects. When you are suffering and in distress, your first thought is to stop the agony. Nevertheless, as I already mentioned, the side effects that occur later might be as bad or worse than the initial pain. My discouraging drug descriptions and those you read before opening the bottle should caution each of us and make us think twice before popping any pill.

Naturally, some situations don't give us much choice. If there are options, they should be considered. I find it somewhat ironic that some pain, problems and suffering are caused by the side effect of some other remedy to a different problem, and this goes beyond drugs. Consider a company that creates some product to solve the shortage of some material. They come up with a new synthetic that works well as a replacement, but in the process of production they release carcinogens into the environment and this affects people living close to the factory. Eventually, it is discovered that the product was toxic. This has happened more times than some people will acknowledge.

Going without this synthetic replacement would have eliminated some lasting effects of contamination. The same could be said for smoking cigars or eating too many chocolate éclairs. Speaking of chocolate, when I was but a lad I developed a case of hives. The blame was from eating chocolate pudding. I avoided chocolate for some time, as I really didn't care for the itching and scratching that came with it. I can have taffy for my

sugar fix. I am not a chocoholic, but today I can eat chocolate – it is believed to have some great benefits – and it has no similar effect. If there is any food that might give me a problem, I won't eat it. There are so many choices that we can easily do without those that bother us. For me, key lime pie will do.

They say an apple a day keeps the doctor away, and an onion a day keeps everyone away. Not that long ago I didn't eat apples regularly, despite the fact that I should have and actually liked them. I ate apple pie and applesauce on occasion but didn't eat the fruit fresh because some time ago I ate an apple or two and it bothered my stomach. Like Adam, I blamed the apple. I'm happy to report that since my colon surgery, I eat an apple just about every day. It wasn't an allergy after all.

Another drug that we are all too familiar with is Novocain. The name is derived from the words for new and cocaine. Over the last few years on my visits to the dentist I can hardly recall a time when I didn't get 'cained. I of course didn't receive any shot of that pain freezer during routine cleanings, when I could have used it. When I was younger, the occasions when I did get Novocain were as frequent as the times today that I don't get it. Yet, I made it through the drilling, filling and billing as a child.

The question might be why so much Novocain is shot into our bodies. Obviously we won't feel a thing while the doctor is in our mouths. But later on when it wears off, it could be another story. Of course that's why we have the option of another painkiller. Why couldn't the original work be done without administering that needle that

renders half our face numb? Well, this helps to increase the bill that will face us on the way out of the dentist's office. Without it we could have pain but also a smaller fee.

There are all kinds of pills and drugs to slim down. Some probably work but you might wonder if the weight will stay off. Then there are those dreaded side effects that could come into play. By itself, dieting can be very dangerous if someone cares to quickly shed a great deal of weight. Perhaps the best way is to eat less, avoid junk foods most of the time and get into the habit of exercise, such as walking and getting away from the television set. It seems that what is needed to fight obesity is a great deal of discipline rather than any drug. Just because a pie is on the table doesn't mean you have to finish the whole thing – at one sitting. Limiting what we eat is a beginning, but then setting aside that half hour each day to bicycle or walk is just as important. If we make this effort, we will feel better and not have to worry about any side effect except perhaps a sore muscle or two. That too will pass.

You see all kinds of ads on the tube for some kind of tablet that will allow you to overcome insomnia. If you can't sleep at night, you can take that sleeping pill and not think about the side effect. You just might fall asleep on the drive to or from work. You really should consider alternatives and question why you have this difficulty anyway. There are quite a few suggestions without popping a pill. Daily exercise, but not in the evening, avoidance of alcohol and certain types of food, following a regular sleep schedule and getting to relax can all be solutions to insomnia. Maybe we

just have to slow down and stop watching MTV. Reading a book helps too.

Getting back to advertising, we see admonitions to try this food and that beer and sure enough we sample it, maybe even overindulge. But don't despair. In a few minutes there will be an ad on television for a product that can make us feel better. Our problem won't stay around too long as there is a quick fix. We can proceed to have some more pizza or chocolate and not worry about any stomach discomfort. If we eat so much that we tend to put on a few extra pounds, don't worry about that either. Just wait a few seconds and there will be a product advertised to lose those extra pounds. Maybe the food companies and the drug companies are in cahoots. You sell your product, we can sell ours and we can all make money. Side effects aren't a consideration.

But these reactions have to be a concern. It's like the story of the corporation that destroys the environment but sells their product anyway. With no environment, no one will be around – not even the company! – to buy anything. The same applies to the users of these pills and drugs. Some of these “remedies” have been fatal and who knows what some of these drugs will bring with time. It's just something that research can't predict because their study is limited to a year or two. The answer is alternatives rather than drugs – prescription or over-the-counter. More concern on the part of the medical profession for patients could result in the use of fewer pills.

The reason why these tablets and injections are prescribed is because it is easier to write a prescription and send the person away and clear the

rooms for others, rather than spend some extra time with the patient. Physicians are pressed for time because of their workload and the possibility of litigation also plays a role. Of course the blame does not solely rest on doctors and nurses. The healthcare industry is also a contributor to the state of affairs. Limits imposed relative to what is covered by insurance have a great deal to do with final results.

Another blame lies with the people getting treatment. Some individuals who have health coverage think nothing of journeying to the doctor at the first sign of a snuffle or sore throat. I believe you should see a doctor under certain circumstances but their philosophy seems to be that they have insurance so why not use it? This might help to explain why other people who really need treatment are rushed out of the door. Unfortunately this situation probably won't change anytime soon.

Just recently have people in the medical profession shown more respect for the patient. In the past you saw a specialist and if he or she talked to you at all it was in a language that only another MD could comprehend – it was English, though. Today, many physicians and nurses are treating people like human beings and the latter are becoming more aware and more inquisitive. At the same time people have to be concerned about taking better care of themselves and asking about alternatives to pills. There still are too many prescription drugs taken by individuals. The usage can be diminished by introspection and looking for alternatives, especially prevention. Don't completely rule out alternative healing either – I'm not sure about witch doctors. In order for things to

improve it will take a huge effort by all of us – patients, nurses, doctors and the insurance companies alike. The good news is that we can succeed by working together.



## 12. Get a free gift

One of the gadgets for the kitchen that you might get by opening a new checking account is a toaster – another *free gift*. On May 25, 2006, I put some bread into my toaster oven – I paid for mine – and pressed down the button. The bell rang shortly thereafter, but the bread was still cold. The problem was easily remedied as all I needed do was plug in the toaster. Even writers have lapses. You may disagree with me, but I think this appliance should not have worked this way. A necessary requisite for any process with this device – including bell dinging – should have been electricity. I don't think that's too much to ask. On a lighter note, I'm thinking of calling my third book on missing intelligence (which is well on its way), *here's your free gift – send \$10 for shipping*.

I am willing to bet that this toaster oven will have a short life in my condo. I don't plan to toss it out or throw it against the wall but rather it will break down sooner than any appliance should. It is a useful kitchen tool as you can toast bread, almonds, re-heat pizza or food from the refrigerator. It's difficult to warm up a rice dish in a conventional toaster. Even if you succeed, you'll have a hard time doing cleanup before you toast some bread. Nonetheless, maybe I should have used the oven in my stove for warming food and opened up that checking account and taken the toaster – assuming it was the two- or three-slice job.

My counter top has an empty space where the blender used to be. If you read my first book, *The Read My Lips Cookbook: A Culinary Journey of Memorable Meals*, you may recall I mentioned

that, “I can’t see a kitchen without one.” We’re all allowed to change our minds. My first blender was made primarily of glass, unlike the current ones with the plastic jar. It lasted quite a few years but eventually I had to replace it. I’m not sure how many blenders I have owned – maybe four or five. The last one was not in my possession very long. A few months after I bought it, I was creating a salad dressing when I noticed liquid on the counter. The blender had leaked because the gasket wasn’t on tight. This alerted me to the fact that I had to make sure that in the future, the connection was secure. A few weeks later, I set out to use the blender so I checked the base but to my surprise, found that the plastic had cracked.

I decided that I wouldn’t replace this kitchen tool for a few reasons. First, I had a small device that probably could take its place. Second, the blender I had was supposedly one of the better ones. Third, I did not care for the short lifespan of all the replacements for my first blender. I could probably have gotten a refund or replacement because of the warranty, except I tossed it away, not expecting to have to worry about such a breakdown so quickly. Even if I dig through my warranties and find it, it’s too late since I trashed the mixer. As I write this, I changed my mind again and bought another blender. Wish me luck with this one.

I will get into planned obsolescence later, but for now I should talk about another blender I had. A few years ago friends of mine bought me a “Herbie Junior,” a small grinder for processing coffee beans as well as herbs, hence the name. It was a great appliance; I used it mostly for grinding before brewing – coffee, not beer – and it lasted a

long time. Its life came to an end and I never replaced it. I don't drink that much coffee and you can always get that product ground at the supermarket. In addition, I do have a mortar and pestle for smashing spices, so there was no need to get another. The demise also meant that I had one less thing to pack when I moved from a three-bedroom house into a condo in 2003.

Another kitchen tool that I owned and even used a few times was an ice cream maker. It's gone now and just as well because it requires storage space. If you have something that you use once every five years, you really don't need it. If you use it once in two years, you still may want to donate it to Goodwill. I had an electric wok that is nowhere to be seen in my kitchen today. I did use it a great deal but it's gone because the surface was covered with Teflon, and I heard a few stories about that chemical that moved me to remove all kitchen products covered in it. These included a large T-fal frying pan that I used quite often and a waffle iron, which made great cinnamon waffles. Maybe these Teflon products are safe for cooking, but I don't want to gamble with my health or with that of anyone else's for whom I cook.

You may have heard of electric flour sifters – another great innovation. I never owned one but at one time had a mechanical sifter. It's gone now. I had no use for it – it just took up room in my cabinet. I bake bread very often, but you really don't need to sift the flour. That may not be the case if you grow your own wheat or rye, but I don't think you will have success if you live in an apartment. The landscaping companies will chop it down as soon as it comes up. Each of these

supposed time-saving devices is just a means for someone to make a few bucks, resulting in more junk in the landfill.

There are some things we buy and use, even if we really don't need them. In 2000, I purchased a CD recorder for my stereo system. Since that time, I have learned a good deal about the relatively new technology of recording your own music on disc. I had been very familiar with creating music on cassettes but this new opportunity brought excitement and some apprehension. For one thing, you can't record over a song that you originally put onto a CD-R (the R stands for recordable) disc. Even if the disc happened to be a CD-RW (RW means rewriteable), it's not that simple to overlay one song with another, like you could easily do with cassettes. Perhaps the next version of the software will allow you to do that.

When I first began my CD recording – the word is burning, which I think is inappropriate as I never smelled smoke or saw flames – I had a CD with 15 songs already recorded and so I set out to add the next song. I did that but when I had finished, the counter on the recorder indicated that the next selection would be number 18. I was in manually recording mode in which the recording is completely in your hands, but somehow this still happened. The reason was that the machine will advance the selection counter if there are a certain number of seconds of silence while recording, that is, low volume level. The song that I was putting on disc did have a very quiet beginning.

I also ran into a few other disc problems while recording. Two of the CDs turned out to have disc errors and there was not a thing I could do

about them except toss them into the trash. Sometimes you can recover the disc and I tried, but it was no use. I also had a few other apparently similar situations where it seemed like I would have to start recording the same music onto a new CD. Somehow I was lucky and recovered the disc so I didn't have to toss it out – excuse me, recycle it.

As you all agree, audio has made great strides since the wax cylinder was used to preserve music for future generations. The vinyl disc and the reels of tapes that had great fidelity nevertheless were improved somewhat with the cassette and no good whatsoever came out of the eight track, except for those who marketed it. Fortunately the eight-track tape is history and was not around that long. I didn't ever own one and wasn't thrilled with a song that had to be interrupted with a click before completion because of a need to change tracks. Now we have the CD, and music has reached another level of brilliance. There are those who swear that vinyl recordings are superior to CDs but I only remind them of the hiss and pops that were present even on playing a record for the very first time.

Technology for music is still not done, as improvements will be introduced with time. The television and video are also undergoing changes with high definition TV and I won't go into details as I already spent an entire chapter on it. But let me remind you that any technology can be fine as long as we don't become dependent on it. A few examples should illustrate my point. Somehow it doesn't matter in which kind of technology you are involved, you can still become a slave. Consider the person who views very little television but one day

decides that to keep up with his neighbor or some relative, he is going to buy a 48-inch screen. He makes the purchase but now feels so guilty that he has to spend more time as a couch potato to justify the money he dished out – pun intended.

Think about the person who decides on buying a lawn tractor to make his work in the yard easier. Let us say that the new device is delivered but now he needs a place to store it since his garage won't hold both his car and the mower. So now he has to have a shed built; alternatively, he could do it himself. Suppose that the tractor breaks down and he himself can't fix it. How will he haul it off for service? Maybe it can be picked up, but if not, and he has no truck to haul it, how will it get to the repair shop? He can't hop on it and drive to the store since it's broken down. Maybe a better question is, "Why did he buy this machine in the first place?" It could be because his lawn was so big, but then why did he buy property with so much acreage? This may have been done to "keep up with the Smiths" – his name is Jones.

This tractor could have another inconvenience. Suppose it also doubles as a snow blower. That could be a great feature except this involves converting that four wheeler from snow remover to grass cutter or vice versa two times each year. That may be an easy task but on the other hand, it could turn out to be something that the user dreads. Once again forethought has to be used or technology will get you. I bring this up because my father had this combination and twice a year required the dreaded switching of modes.

Besides our everyday lives, the world of sports has tried to take advantage of technology.

Instead of hiring better officials, the NFL made the decision to use instant replay, with its multitude of cameras all over the field. Well, they have the means but not the method as indecision and mismanagement of the tools has been rampant over the last few years, with no sign of improvement. The results are huge delays and rarely do you see a call overturned. The NHL uses it also but it too has had the opportunity and not exercised it to ensure proper calls on the ice. Major league baseball still relies on the umpires to make competent calls and they seem to have carried on this tradition over the years. Perhaps it is time for an electronic strike zone to standardize balls and strikes in both leagues as well as from one official to the next.

One outcome of the advance of technology has been an apparent decline in basic skills. Indeed, today's youth are quite computer intelligent but the ability to do simple math calculations such as addition and multiplication without some mechanical tool is not what it has been. Giving a clerk at the grocery store \$10.03 for a \$8.28 food bill at a time when the computer terminal is not functioning will mean that you will either not get back the right amount of change or it will be some time before you leave the premises. In many cases, the clerk will be completely baffled. Of course, you could get back more change than you should.

I talked about the obsolescence of the slide rule before, but it is not the only item that is on its way out. With digital watches and clocks, children will soon ask their parents what those time indicating devices with hands are. Today even the calculator seems to be going away as every PC has one built in, with many functions which many will

never use, but over which math majors salivate. Nevertheless the rudimentary skills should not be neglected just because any of these calculations can be carried out with the personal computer. In the event of a breakdown there has to be a backup procedure and this seems to be lacking since simple multiplications can't readily be done anymore.

Just as numerous calculations that were once done by humans have now been taken over by machines, it seems like the library might soon be moved aside in favor of the Internet. You already have books on-line but I really don't want to sit in front of a PC reading anything, even email. I think many people feel the same way so we don't have to worry about books and libraries becoming extinct. Not long ago a well-known writer came out with a book on the Web that you could download for a small fee. It was just the beginning of many installments to sell his latest book and there were conditions posted to keep up this process. I am not sure of the success of this endeavor, but it couldn't have succeeded since I never heard of this being repeated.

I have already pointed out the frustration with downloads and it may not take that long to copy a novel, unless it's one of the *Lord of the Bada-bings* trilogy. Once it is on your PC, you could read it but probably would not want to print it out and read it in the den. This effort to move it from disk to paper will create even more frustration so that by the time this effort is done, you may have no desire to read the book. You may have saved money by getting the book through the Internet, but was it really worth it? You still have to pay for electricity, ink and the paper. There's more money

in your wallet but having the book and not the desire to read it saves you absolutely nothing.

Of course, you could have ordered the book through E-Bay or some other Internet service and saved a few dollars and now you have the book and not the frustration as before. Technology has given people the opportunity to shop without leaving their homes and that's not a bad thing. We have more freedom and it's cheaper too. Nonetheless, many individuals have placed orders and let their cash go and never received a thing in return. There are scam artists out there who will take your money and then you'll never hear from them. Obviously there are many legitimate businesses but you can still get taken just by shopping on the cable networks too, so you can't be too careful.

There is also the serious problem of identity theft. Freedom comes with a heavy price. It's not that personal information isn't available even without this technology. It's just that now you have to be ever more diligent. Once you get on the Internet, you give out more than you think. It shouldn't be that way but unfortunately that's life. I'm not advocating giving out false information, just that you have to be careful once you get on-line. Sure there's excitement, but there is also danger. The two seem to go hand in hand.

Technology has created another problem that should be obvious. We have filled the landfills through materialism and waste; flea markets and yard sales are ubiquitous. I think you will agree that these sales and trash both feed on technology and vice versa. When this combination is maximized, so is waste. The more disposable your system is, the greater the garbage you proliferate, not to mention

consumption of natural resources. Creating cell phones and pagers means you need goods to produce them, and if the life of these gadgets is one year, not only will the landfills get larger, the materials for producing these gizmos will become scarcer as well.

Of even more concern is what this production as well as the dumping of these used goods does to the environment. Creating any new technology has byproducts that no one really cares for but which result nonetheless. This in itself is a great danger to our earth and I'm not sure that tossing used monitors, printers and disk drives onto a junk pile is any safer. What is the long-term effect of having a PC junkyard and would you want one in your backyard? I rather doubt it. We are learning about many things we thought we could just toss away, but have found out that in doing so there is great harm to the planet and the future will probably bring the same realization for technological waste. I hope we haven't already reached the point of no return.

It was almost too late as the twentieth century approached its end and an unnecessary challenge arose. I'm sure you heard of the Y2K problem. In my mind this was the ultimate technological slave. Companies were shackled into bondage because of a lack of foresight and incompetence on the part of managers as well as many employees. Some saw it coming and posed solutions but executives closed their minds to it. Some programmers did their thing and made sure their systems wouldn't have a concern but others didn't. The result was near panic and vast amounts of money being thrown at the problem.

December 31, 1999 came and January 1, 2000 was here but things went smoothly. There were a few bumps but all in all not that many real problems. Before this end to the nineties, I had the opportunity to cash in on the Y2K craze as I worked as a consultant on a few of these projects. At the last one I heard of really crazy situations such as where a company had a year to fix the problem but it was determined that one year would not be enough time and there would be difficulties. A few other people I worked with questioned why this corporation couldn't just return temporarily to a manual system for a short time until after the danger had passed. It was a good suggestion but I wonder why that company didn't pursue it. Talk about being a slave.

The naysayers went out and bought generators and guns to protect their possessions as well as huge supplies of food just in case. I hope they didn't waste all those goods, but this Y2K thing should never have happened. Moreover we should not have become so much of a slave to technology that we failed to see solutions having nothing to do with all these "advances." I think after Y2K was over, many people did some serious thinking and decided that perhaps they were relying way too much on many of the things that they thought were really necessary in their lives. Perhaps some good did come out of this problem.

In 1982 my parents bought me a 35 mm camera. It was a simple model but it had everything I wanted in a camera. It even gave me the option to have the date printed on the bottom of the picture if I so desired. I found this to be very convenient even though I didn't use it for every shot. In early 1996 I

was taking some photos and was about to use the date option, but much to my dismay there was no “96” available. The range of years turned out to be from 1981 to 1995. It appears as though “planned obsolescence” had reared its ugly head. I was somewhat disappointed at the time as I got used to having that option for the date. The last time I used it, the camera worked fine but I donated it to charity and recently I went digital. Had I kept it, I could have used the date feature again in 2081.

My work with computers has been on the software side rather than hardware and thus I can't say too much about that aspect of the computer. But whether you talk about a computer or an automobile, you have to take into account what is called the future breakdown of the machine. Any product will stop functioning for good after a certain period of time – especially after the warranty expires – and you will have to buy another of the same product. Ideally, it should last a reasonable amount of time, not break down after a few days. It appears that “planned obsolescence” fits in with the development of too many consumer products, leading to more sales and higher profits.

The hard drive on your PC can be insured against problems, such as a crash. The majority of these data devices last for years, but it is possible to buy a new computer and shortly thereafter have to replace the drive. It hasn't happened to me but I did have problems a few years ago and as a result bought the PC that I am using now. Is it worth the price to insure your PC or any other piece of technology that you buy? With the low cost of most goods, it seems to be a waste of money. However, I have to do plenty of backups so that any computer

problems won't deal me a major setback. Sometimes, even that doesn't help, as I will relate in the next chapter.

When it comes to breakdowns of appliances or PCs, most people would rather pay more to get a product that lasts longer rather than have to repeatedly buy the same time-saver. Many products are built with this in mind. The ones that don't last wind up in the trash and as a result our landfills continue to be inundated with more and more garbage. Even if we have the option to repair a product, it so often is more worthwhile to buy new since the cost is less than the repair bill will be. If the old broken down equipment can somehow be recycled, that at least is commendable. From an environmental point of view, products should last a whole lot longer and if they have to be repaired, it should cost less than replacement.

As far as computers go, short life spans are even more pronounced. If you buy a computer today, it will probably be obsolete by the time you get it home. This is an exaggeration since you can use the computer for many years, but the manufacturers want you to think otherwise. A computer comes out one day and then within a few months, a new *improved* version is on the market. As a computer user, you have to get rid of your old machine and buy the new one if you want to "keep up" with everyone else. The truth of the matter is that you really don't have to ditch the old computer and buy the new one.

You may wonder why so many versions of computers keep coming out. The obvious reason we already talked about: more sales and thus more income for a company. The other reason is that

there are “improvements” to the old version. The old version didn’t have something that many people want and / or need and the old version has bugs in it. This is caused by rushing out a product without really getting rid of the problems and without knowing what the product should do. A computer may be promised for a certain date and it will be out somewhere around that date whether it’s bug-free or not. It is certainly true that a newer version might have more disk space or the ability to be faster than the old. Unfortunately that is not true all the time.

What is needed is more insight on what a product should be, how long it will take to develop this product and what should be included in the product for the customers. If you have novices developing the product, you might run into deficiencies as we discussed earlier. If management doesn’t have a good handle on what is necessary for the product, once again there will be problems.

I thought about the technology thing and decided that it was very similar to food and drink. We need both to live but if we drink too much alcohol, we can become addicted. If we eat too much, we probably won’t feel that great. In either case, our health will undoubtedly suffer, as could our family situation. The same thing could be said if we got on our PCs or on the Web and spent too much time there. Moderation in eating and drinking is necessary as is moderation in our relationship with technology. We can become couch potatoes by watching too much TV but it isn’t much better if we spend hour after hour on the Internet. One is no better than the other. Technology is never going to go away but it is up to us to make sure that the environment doesn’t get destroyed in the process

and we ourselves not become slaves to it.



### 13. Just do a restart

You are already familiar with how I progressed in my writing from the computer terminal to a word processor, which vanished when I was away from home. Of course, circumstances always enter into decisions, such as storage and compatibility. There is also the grip that technology has on people. Some people are reluctant to try new things, while others are lured in and never can be free of the spell that has been cast on them. I'm no different and I really can't go back and write with a pen or pencil, something I never did anyway, for the most part. Maybe I could buy one of those word processors that isn't connected to a PC, but because of my web site, it's difficult to abandon technology entirely. For now, I'm stuck, but I do my best each day to not get overwhelmed or discouraged and try to maintain a good sense of humor.

You may have seen the 1985 Martin Scorsese movie, *After Hours* starring Griffin Dunne and Rosanna Arquette, and a host of other big name stars. It answered the question, "What is the very worst night you ever had?" I really like the movie for a few reasons – it was real, funny and showed something that we all go through at least once in our lives. As you can guess, this chapter reflects that flick, except that it won't cover merely one night. It will be my journey into hell ever since I bought my first PC. I thought about relating these fiascos in some order but since there is no order with personal computers or the net, why should I bother? I wouldn't be a bit surprised if much of what I relate has been a burden to you as well. By the same token, I hope you get a few laughs and I

will attempt to offer things in order without covering every bloody detail.

When my fine word processor – a huge improvement over the typewriter and I really loved it – was ripped off, I made the choice of getting a PC. A friend of mine sold me an old, used PC for a song. He didn't really like the music but he put up with it because of the cash and gave me this dinosaur 286, which I used for word processing. It worked fine for a clunker, for some time. One day I ran into a bug while doing some word processing. The screen went blank while I was modifying a document. I recovered by rebooting the system but lost all my work for the day. That was frustrating but I decided I could live with an occasional problem like that. When the screen went blank again, I realized it might be a hard disk problem, or else my PC had cancer – I figured it might be terminal. It didn't take long for me to decide that it was time to buy a new computer. By this time I had written a few books, and they were all on that dinosaur.

I spent the money, and you might think that my work was easier, but not so. I had to move my documents to the new machine and learn the new word processor. The conversion took about a week. I took my data files to a computer service and they moved it from a truly floppy disk to a floppy disk, which wasn't – another bad example of labeling. My work was just beginning, as I still had to take the resulting data and spend time in making it acceptable to the new computer. Compared to that, learning the new software was a breeze.

When I bought the new PC, I thought about using my black and white monitor with it – now

you know why I used the word *dinosaur* earlier. I hooked everything up including my inkjet printer but I couldn't manage with the monitor. I went to a computer store to see what my options were without buying a new monitor. I could have bought some conversion software but it seemed like that would cost as much as buying a new screen, which is what I settled on. It wasn't worth using the old device even though they say that most systems are compatible. What they really mean is that they are if you have enough money.

Eventually all the important files were transferred to the new computer. I lost some information but I figured it wasn't worth spending time recovering. Think of it as housecleaning, something that needs to be done occasionally. I still had some minor compatibility issues, but I worked them out. Once my files were truly in the format on the new system that was satisfactory to me, I still ran into bugs when trying to print out some files. I guess it never ends. The problem was easy to describe but the explanation for it was another story. While printing out seven pages of a document, there was no problem until the second last page. When that page was being printed, the printer stopped in the middle of the page and then advanced to another page where the printing continued. If I logged off the system and then the next day tried to print this one page, it would print with no difficulties whatever. The problem is a bug either in the printer, printer software or in the word processing software, at least as far as I can tell. I am leaning towards the latter since I used this same printer with my old PC and didn't experience those problems. This is exactly the problem I promised to

describe to you in an earlier chapter about whom to blame for glitches.

Unfortunately this printer malfunction is not the only bug. There will be those times when the PC locks up and the only way out is to reboot the system. This occurred to me when I was printing out a document. I lost control of the mouse. This is a universal problem that is seen by many users. I got a call from another writer not long ago with that same challenge, which I related in a book I had published in 2008. It appears the disease is spreading to my machine because now my mouse is behaving very badly, but I am sure that the problem is in my PC.

A few years ago, for some reason I decided to buy a scanner. I had a Hewlett Packard desktop, so I bought a scanner with the same name. I figured that there shouldn't be any compatibility problems. Was I ever mistaken? I spent time trying to get it to work but finally gave up and took it back. I was then informed that I needed a different model, which I proceeded to buy and take home. As you might guess, I couldn't get that one to function either. I headed back to the store to return this non-working piece of trash and on the way decided that I should put an end to this adventure. I had wasted too much time in this whole endeavor and I had survived for years without a scanner. Why all of a sudden did I need one? This is just another wonderful example of *compatibility*. Today, I have a scanner / copier / printer that works most of the time.

I got rid of the Hewlett Packard for another reason a few years ago. One day, my hard disk crashed and I didn't have insurance. Fortunately, I

took it to a computer service and recovered most of my work. It cost me a few dollars but was well worth it. This was my first experience with this type of problem, so I got familiar with symptoms and was somewhat prepared when they arose again about a year later. I could have unplugged the monster and hauled it off for more service, but I decided it might be better to just get a new PC – it was about time.

Before making the purchase, I did some research. I thought about getting a Dell system since I had heard some good things about them. I had certain requirements specifically related to my writing, so I called and asked questions, indicating exactly what I needed. I was assured that I could be accommodated with their software. I was convinced so I made the purchase. Setting up the computer was relatively painless. However, when I did the necessary file conversions, I realized that either the person I talked to over the phone was smoking weed or he didn't know what he was talking about. Maybe it was a bit of both. Getting high may be a good feeling but it tends to reduce certain skills – at least, that is what I have been told. My difficulty had to do with Microsoft Works Suite, which I didn't find that sweet. I mentioned the “work around” earlier and once again I used it to get where I needed to be – something I never should have been forced to do.

The Hell Computer – excuse me, Dell Computer – was better than the Hewlett Packard but I found new problems with each passing day. I needed some kind of database or spread sheet, but the Dell didn't have one, or it was hidden somewhere, so I loaded Excel from a friend. I also

wound up loading his version of Word, since what came with the PC was slower than getting a book published through a royalty press. Even with this load, I still had an annoying glitch whenever I opened a Word document. If I didn't page down with the cursor to start, I was forced to take three unnecessary steps that were really time consuming. To try to remedy this, I reloaded the software, but that was merely a waste of my time and effort. It made no difference. Hallelujah, as of early 2008, that problem is gone.

One day I tried to open an Excel spread sheet, but couldn't do it. The same thing happened when I tried to edit a Word document. Most of the files I had – Excel or Word – I could open and edit, but a few I couldn't. Fortunately, I have backup files but they may not have the latest updates. To take care of this problem, I decided to take more backups than anyone should have to do. Whenever I saved a file, I saved it as is and then saved it with the same name ending in the month and year. If the date was May 28 and the file was *finances*, I would wind up saving the file as *finances* as well as *finances0528*.

In an attempt to solve this problem of not being able to open the file, I reloaded Word and Excel. Since that time, I have not seen a recurrence of the problem but I still take backups. I wound up with a slight modification to my redundant backup process by using the Monday of the week as the suffix, resulting in a few less files. If I remember, on Saturday I take all these files with the *0528* suffix and copy them to a CD backup as well as a folder called backup. I'm not taking any chances. This is another fine example of the *workaround*.

You might think that you can prevent problems with enough backups, but an experience in the mid-1980s disproved that. At the time I worked for a small computer company in Syracuse. I was a full-time employee in a consulting role, receiving a lot less pay than I thought I should have. I designed a small purchase order system for the Carrier Corporation and the people there were thrilled with it. Unfortunately, that wouldn't last long.

There was a normal procedure that involved backing up the entire system every day to a tape. One day there were problems so the users got out the last backup, but it was damaged, as was the one before it. The tape device seemed to be working properly but wasn't for some time. This meant that Carrier had lost transactions – who knows how many – since their system was inoperable.

Luckily, I had a backup tape at the office and their system was also at the computer at our office. Of course, the restore would not have all the data entered for an undetermined number of days. By this time I had left the company and you will soon see why. To begin with, someone in his great intelligence deleted the purchase order software from the computer at the office. It got even worse as he did this before doing a backup – something that any reasonable person would have done. I was notified and mentioned the backup tape that was sitting on what had been my desk. You are smart readers who have already figured out the ending. Yes, indeed, someone wrote over that tape. I have no idea how the entire matter was settled with the Carrier Corporation. I did the right thing by resigning this job.

At the end of 2004, I decided to switch to an Apple Computer. I paid for it, brought it home and after a few weeks of frustration, returned it. I could have spent longer on the conversion but even had I done so, there were functions I needed to do which were impossible on that machine. In fact, I went back to the store and mentioned the challenge but technicians couldn't come up with answers for me. An apple a day may keep the doctor away but my intention was to not have to dial the help desk very often.

I still had my Dell PC, and it was in the summer of 2005 that a corrupt start-up file almost forced me to toss it out the window. I didn't take that option, as I didn't want to pollute the environment. I tried to log on to my PC and was informed that the start-up file was either missing or corrupt. I could mention the hardware and software that I use, but I'm sure you can easily guess what I'm stuck with. At the end of this story, I will give a suggestion that people who develop computers or software should have followed to remedy my problem. It would have made my life infinitely easier but unfortunately it's hard to soar with eagles when you work with turkeys – my apologies to those fowl, as they don't deserve this abuse.

With this problem, I had a few options. I decided on a course of action and it probably was the wrong one – I'll never know. I attempted to get everything back to where it was by myself. I did make a few calls though, and got some advice. I had no difficulty with my data files as I back them up more than anyone on the planet, as related earlier. My quest was for all the software that had been on

my PC. From the tone of that statement, you can see that I was a loser that day.

The stuff involved was Norton Anti-virus and Clean Sweep, spy detection software, web design software and my Internet hookup, for starters. There may have been more but recovering what I mentioned was bad enough. As time would tell, I really did not get completely back to where I had been before the missing start-up file until December 2005. It didn't take long to recover some of the software and I had a semblance of my old system in a few days. I wish it hadn't taken so long and been so painful to achieve full recovery.

The anti-virus restore was a real picnic, thanks to Ralph Kramden's buddy, Norton. Had I designed the software, the recovery would have worked in the following way. To recover, read in the disc with the software and the system will take care of the rest. That is, all old software will be deleted by the system and a re-install will occur. Within a few minutes, the software will be back to where it was. As I found out, it's nowhere near as easy as that. You first have to remove all the old virus software. To do that, you can go to a specific web site for instructions, since bits and pieces are everywhere. I would seriously recommend a beer first. You are going to need it.

I would have gone to the site but I had no Internet access – I wanted to do the virus recovery first. So I gave in and did the required recovery of web access before the Norton restore. When I got to the anti-virus site, there were pages and pages of instructions. I didn't want to create a missile, just get rid of the unwanted and unneeded software. I figured the best way to do this was to print out those

pages – actually it was a bad idea because much didn't apply in my case. Also, on some of the pages, you were supposed to click on a link to get more instructions. Printing this out was as worthless as putting Tom Delay in charge of an ethics committee.

Eventually, I did restore the software, but it took hours and it really should have been a simple task. Then it was on to the next restore and more thrills. Fortunately, the other recoveries were somewhat easier. From my mention of December earlier, you probably guessed that there was one that took months rather than days or weeks, in this case later rather than sooner.

The real bugaboo on my system was my web design software. I thought it was lost but on the Saturday following my crash, I discovered that the software was still on my machine. I was about to do some file transfers but I noticed that the way I usually did them didn't quite work. However, I found another way, i.e. *workaround*, to move data to the web from my PC. I spent some time doing this and everything looked fine, for a while. I soon learned that the transfer not only didn't work, it messed up some of my web pages. The web design software wasn't completely on my computer, just bits and pieces – it only appeared to be integral.

You might suggest that all I had to do was reload the software. That was my thought but a few weeks before the missing start-up file, I gave another writer that disc, rather than a copy – which I should have created. I needed to retrieve it and I should have driven over to pick it up. This was at the time when gas hit three dollars a gallon for the first time. I figured that since she lived about twenty

miles away, it would be beneficial to have her mail me the software. Sometimes we make the wrong choices.

I hoped to get the disc within a day or two after I sent an email, but in reality it wound up taking six days. However, the CD did arrive in the mail – that’s the good news. The bad news is that the CD was cracked. I would like to know: how do you manage to crack a CD? It’s not easy. For those of you who didn’t guess the answer to that question, the answer is simple: use the good old United States Post Office. They’ll figure out a way to destroy anything, even Corelle Ware – and they don’t need explosives. What really baffles me is that I had received movies in the mail in a lot thinner packaging than what my friend sent, and I have yet to receive a cracked DVD. Maybe the next one I order will be destroyed – I shouldn’t have said anything.

My next idea was to have my friend copy the software to another CD but as you might guess, that won’t work because you need the start-up file, which is only on the web software CD. What I should have done initially was to copy the original – which I wouldn’t need back – and given her that. We learn something new every day. At this point in my adventures, I could still change my web site and do loads to the net by using a less user-friendly alternative. I could also get some different web design software, which is what I tried. No matter what I got into, nothing quite matched up to what I had. I tried other possibilities, but they were too cumbersome and I really wanted my old web design software – limited as it was.

The problem was that TopPage was an obsolete IBM product. The old adage was true as can be – create a great product and before long it will be gone and never to be seen again. That didn't deter me, though. I figured I could contact the people who sent me the CD and even try IBM. Those efforts failed but then I tried the Internet. I found the software but one site was in an Oriental tongue, so I passed on that one. Don't get me wrong, I like Chinese cuisine, but I didn't want to order the software and get mooshu pork, as tantalizing as it might be. However, I found a company that had TopPage and ordered it. I figured spending even \$75 would be worth it. Unfortunately, about a week later I was notified that they didn't have the software after all. I kept trying and was just about set to accept the fact that I would never get TopPage, when one day I located what I wanted. I didn't get my hopes up too high but then the CD arrived in the mail. I still needed to install the software. When I did, some six months after the corrupt start-up file, I was back in business. It had been one hell of a trip. I don't wish this on anyone, even lawyers.

Somehow, I survived that fiasco and in 2006, I thought about the Apple alternative again. To accomplish that, I copied a few important files from my computer and went over to the Apple Store and tried to see if they would work on that machine. I returned a few times doing more research, as I wasn't going to make another purchase only to return it. In the process, I considered buying a used Mac, so I called for information, asking if they sold used PCs. I was told that they didn't – they did sell used Macs. The nerd who answered the phone

wasn't intelligent enough to realize that an Apple or Mac is a computer for personal use, something we call a PC.

By the time my attempt at conversion adjustment was finished, I concluded that because of what I had gotten used to and done on my PC at home, buying a Mac or Apple would have been throwing money out the window (no pun intended.) Speaking of which, the only windows I really appreciate are the ones in my home. Windows and the mouse on PCs are good illustrations why we all hate computers. Somehow people thought that both were such great ideas that they proliferated to all PCs. Why not come up with an alternative to stop the suffering? The moral of the story that I just related is that you can't combine apples with lemons.

I promised a recommendation for the recovery of the start-up file. I have two suggestions and I can live with either. First, when this problem occurs, a process begins that takes a backup file – you heard of those – and uses it as the start-up file. Before this happens, this backup is copied to another file – just in case. You know PCs. This procedure can be so transparent that no one even realizes there was a problem in the first place. The second choice is that this backup file is easily retrievable from a disc so the problem is easily solved. This option requires some effort on the part of the user, but certainly not all the hassles I went through.



#### 14. We'll create a job for you

Having a job is a good thing but not every job should be created. Earlier I mentioned my two books on work. In the summer of 1975, I started work at Nestle Foods in White Plains as a programmer analyst. This was my rude introduction to the business world. At that time, over thirty years ago, our workweek at that corporation was 37 ½ hours. The time requirement was typical of many places in the area. I will get back to that assignment shortly.

Even before that, in 1933 the Senate approved a bill and the House of Representatives was ready to do the same in order to establish a thirty-hour workweek, nationwide. Unfortunately, it never passed and we all suffered because of it. A few years later the New Party held a confab in Albuquerque, New Mexico at which time there was a call to institute a 30-hour workweek at 40-hours pay.

Even at the turn of the century as the 1890s evolved into the 1900s, people worked under horrible conditions, putting in as many hours as management could get from them, even to the point of exhaustion. To understand how bad things were, read the biography of a great woman, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America* by Elliot J. Gorn. Unions were needed then and everyone – except for management, since they don't really work – would have welcomed a shorter workweek.

My first job as a software designer wasn't bad. The shortened workweek was great as we were blessed with summer hours even before June 21st

and after September 21st. If I am not mistaken, we had a great opportunity from roughly May to October. We could leave work on Friday at one in the afternoon provided we had by that time put in the required hours for the week. This was great because it extended our weekend. If you wanted to take a short trip to New England for some chowda, you could pack the cah and head out on Friday in the early afternoon and be in Boston for dinnah. You could even extend your time away from the factory by taking Monday off and now you had a mini-vacation. You can see why I liked that job. With that attitude, you could see that the company benefited as well, since happy workers were more productive. It's just common sense.

Working at Nestle Foods wasn't a bad gig. The pay was decent and the hours were conducive to accomplishing things. I was young so I didn't see all the bad things until a few years had passed. Let us now fast forward to the early twenty-first century. I resigned from my last consulting job on December 31, 2001. The question is: What was the length of the workweek at that time? The answer I would have liked is thirty hours – what should have been passed in the 1930s. The reasonable answer should have been thirty hours or less because of all the gains made over the decades in technology. Unfortunately, that idea was about as far-fetched as a checking account interest of one percent.

As you might guess, the reason for a fifty-hour workweek today has to do with both management and technology. I have already elaborated on the former in the chapter of *Tick Tock, Don't Stop* titled, *Boss Spelled Backwards is Double S O B*. I should add that I did meet people in charge who

were on the ball, but unfortunately they were the exception. I wish more people emulated them.

The technological aspect of the problem marries the leaders with the corporations that produce the swill that they call “software.” The hardware in many cases isn’t much better, and that doesn’t help. I’m sure you’ve heard the expression, “If you really want to foul things up, get a computer.” Those words have never been more accurate, but there really doesn’t have to be such a mess.

When I started out as a programmer/analyst, difficulties arose from time to time. There may have been a problem with the hard drive or the tape drive, brought about because Memorex made the drive while the computer trying to read it was an IBM mainframe. Once the trouble started, the finger pointing began. Just imagine the chaos when more than two companies entered into the picture. But you already know what that is if you own a PC. Dell makes the hardware, Microsoft provides the soon-to-be debugged software and a host of other corporations let you use their spy detection software, clean-up aids, anti-virus stuff and the list goes on. It’s even worse when you try to download or install most of the crap that you really don’t need. All that was necessary was a better design and some rules to the systems on the PC.

I hope that the previous chapters convince you that technology is a huge failure, in all its aspects. Specifically, what I was forced to go through for six months beginning in the summer of 2005 only shows why the number of hours we have to work has not decreased over the years, but increased. I may be retired, but I don’t have time to waste on figuring out why systems crash or pressing the

“back” button on the Internet doesn’t quite return me back one page. There are more bugs in the software on the Web and on PCs than in a home about to be fumigated by the *Terminator* on Seinfeld.

You can thank the computer and those who created it as well as those who manage employees in corporate America for the problems in the workplace, but we also see them at home. Anyone with any common sense realizes that no one can work a sixty-hour workweek. Don’t let any boss tell you they can – it’s physically not possible. Actually, even a forty-hour week will result in stress and work time that simply isn’t very productive. The thirty-hour proposal of so many years ago is right on the money for a number of reasons. First, productivity will actually increase. Second, there will be less stress in the office. Third, employees will be more content and this will result in cost benefits to the corporation, which won’t need to spend money on interviewing and hiring since people won’t be quitting in droves or dying on the job. There’s more to be said – which you can read in *This Page Intentionally Left Blank* – but you get the idea.

In that 2007 book as well as in *Tick Tock, Don’t Stop*, I mention an alternative to working hard – something our elders drove home while we were growing up. They were way off the mark. My suggestion is “working smart.” Suppose your project leader gave you an assignment that he thinks will take two weeks. Under the “working hard” routine, you would head over to your cube next to Dilbert, start working and after two weeks, the assignment is done. On the other hand, you decide

to “work smart,” so you mosey over to your desk, spend the next few hours analyzing the problem and in doing so, come up with a way of getting the job done in only one week.

It should be obvious which method is preferred. I would hope that because of your approach, your supervisor appreciates the effort and doesn't let you go when you have finished a year assignment in half the time. Rather, he keeps you on board and actually extends your stay with the company, perhaps even offering you a raise, rather than a bonus of a set of cuff links. From my consulting experience, this probably won't happen – go to that chapter I wrote on management if you haven't read it.

Since I thoroughly believe in “working smart,” it really upsets me when I have to waste time on something like a corrupt start-up file. I could have been working on another book or marketing what I had published. I also mention created jobs in my books on work. To me it seems like there is so much work to be done and at the same time we have people that are unemployed. Simultaneously, you have people sitting around doing nothing and eventually getting promoted – catch the movie *Office Space* if you haven't seen it – while others slave and can't seem to catch up with their workload. Then, which of these people will be downsized? Most likely it will be the individuals who are the most competent.

On the other hand, by “working smart,” we should be able to accomplish most tasks by having everyone work a mere thirty hours each week – probably even less. You might say this is impossible because of the failure of technology, but

that too can be overcome. Those who create hardware and software need to do it in a way that uses the “working smart” ideal rather than “working hard.” Create a product that doesn’t crash more often than I change my underwear, which I do daily. Simplification would help, too. Use common sense and realize that you don’t need thirty versions of some software. Spend the time to get it right the first time.

No one needs to replace her computer every six months. It should last as long as an automobile. Make a better product and people will pay more for it. Above all, forget about greed and power. All it might get you is a prison cell someday, without a cell phone. How much money do you really need? People will say more good things about you if you show concern for the customers instead of for your ego and wallet.

## 15. Work smart to make things better

We know what the problems facing us relative to technology are, so it's time to get to work to solve them. This is of utmost importance because of numerous reasons. The mess that enveloped us came about because some person or company cared only about huge profits and not at all about the planet or its inhabitants. They could easily have been included – some were – in *for seeing eye dogs only*, my humorous book on missing intelligence, or any of the similar books that will be published in the future. *wake up – it's time for your sleeping pill* was published in the summer of 2008 and it has more gems about being asleep with eyes wide open. We must laugh but also work to make everyone's life better, since technology has such great potential.

You can make money the way greedy businessmen and corporations did by polluting the earth, or you can follow the regulations and care for your fellow man and increase the bottom line. That really is a better alternative because you won't need to subtract the cost of the cleanup of the mess you proliferated as well as lawyers' fees and the cost of bail from all your earnings. It never hurts to use common sense and think about the future rather than be only concerned about today.

The movie, *Who Killed the Electric Car?* was released to select theatres in New York and Los Angeles on June 28, 2006. Electric cars began to be seen on various roads in California in 1996. These nonpolluting vehicles were fast and quiet, and they had the public's support. Unfortunately, they didn't last long and all the cars were destroyed, each cut

into tiny pieces. One major car executive even mentioned that this last destructive effort was one of the worst decisions ever made.

In June 2006, I took a short vacation to Thunder Bay, Ontario and northeastern Minnesota. Unfortunately, I had to drive through Chicago on a Sunday afternoon and I am truly glad that I'm not a commuter in that city during the week. The town is not unique as you can say the same about New York, Washington, DC, Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles and Minneapolis. The list of cities doesn't end there and points out the fact that much can be done to end gridlock on the highways.

Now is the time to bring back mass transit and experience train travel the way it used to be. The billions of dollars earmarked to be spent on highways have to be used instead for alternatives to the automobile. Cars and trucks will still be around but efforts have to be made to have vehicles that use less gasoline or none whatsoever. Besides mass transit, we can save the earth and its resources by the use of hybrid, electric, bio-diesel, solar cars and other choices that can be developed without the use of fossil fuels – forget ethanol as it only creates more problems. American ingenuity has the power to develop even more options to solve global warming and still allow us to travel.

The car manufacturers must increase gas mileage on whatever vehicles they produce. Conservation needs to be practiced and instead of getting behind the wheel, men and women should opt for a bit of exercise by biking or walking. This alternative will save resources as well as create healthier individuals. Obesity in this country is rampant while Americans drive to the gym to work

out when they could just as easily walk and leave the automobile at home. Rather than using the car on three days in a row for shopping and other errands, the choice should be made to do all those tasks on one day. Planning and thinking have to be considerations.

The SUV and oversized trucks should follow in the footsteps of the eight-track tape. This will require less gasoline, reduce road rage, and visibility for other drivers will be increased since these behemoths are difficult to see around. A few years ago I saw Gallagher perform and one of his skits was a thought on people and their trucks. He mentioned that people give the excuse that they buy these monsters because there's more room for food shopping. What are they doing, hunting for their dinner? Some people say that trucks are good for moving, but how often does anyone do that? Buy a truck and you might get petitions from your friends to help them move. That might be a good idea if some of them move far enough away.

The corporations need to fully embrace a thirty-hour workweek, telecommuting, flex time and more vacation time. These choices will mean less traffic tie-ups, frustration and stress as well as happier, more productive employees. It will also save on the earth's resources because less energy will be used and construction on the roads may be done less frequently. Using the railroads again in place of eighteen-wheelers can also reduce highway work and disastrous accidents, saving energy and materials of the earth. Hopping on a bus or subway and carpooling can make a huge difference as well. Another suggestion to save lives as well as gasoline is to lower the speed limits on the highways to 55

miles per hour. If you need to get somewhere faster, take a plane. Driving at that speed will result in just a slightly longer trip, but you definitely will arrive at your destination. You will also get there without any bandages.

I mentioned this idea in *Take Back the Earth*, but it's worth repeating. A very intriguing proposal comes from a group of labor unions led by the Steelworkers – of which I am a member – Machinists and Electrical Workers. The Apollo Project calls for investing \$300 billion over a ten-year period to create new energy based on efficiency and innovation. This would involve energy-efficient buildings and appliances, environmentally friendly factories, hybrid vehicles and mass transit. The program would create three million high-paying manufacturing jobs and the cost for the entire project would be only a fraction of what the country spends each year on imported oil. Your job is to write people in Congress to get this program implemented.

We need to eliminate oil, gas, coal and nuclear power and replace them with alternatives, which I have already mentioned, but that is merely the tip of the iceberg, most of which are melting because of global warming. In the past, numerous great innovations have been introduced and there's no reason why this can't occur again when it comes to energy. Many people feel that solar and wind are not developed enough today, but between the mentioned replacement possibilities, our current stagnant sources that pollute the earth and harm the people could be replaced right now.

Another factor is cost. Many feel that what we have is so much cheaper than the new

technologies. They are way off on that account, since they have not added in the costs of health care, pollution and litigation. They are looking at the present moment rather than having any thought about the future, which should be considered. Indeed, solar and wind power are much more financially beneficial and the planet will be much better off, as well. Renewable energy is the future and conservation should not be ruled out. Reduce, renew, re-use and recycle.

For television, program producers need to get away from the short-attention-span reality concept, and follow the lead of PBS for great programming. News should return to what it once was in the days of Edward R. Murrow and become a great deal more objective. Corrupt corporations – if that’s not a pleonasm, I’m not sure what is – or administrations should never control what goes on the air. Just as we should have separation of church and state, we also need the splitting of news and entertainment, with news entertainment becoming a thing of the past.

Consumers need to realize that couch potato living only results in obesity and passivity, rather than action and good health. Limit TV viewing and take advantage of the VCR to record and then watch only the programs you tape. Turn on the set only when you have a specific program to watch, rather than keeping the tube on for the entire day. Get away from your addiction to watching the weather channel or news for hours on end. You’ll be seeing the same stories over and over and if you want the weather, go outside and see what’s happening.

We can’t eliminate email – if only it were so – so here are a few suggestions to make all our lives

better when it comes to that terrible technological tool of torture. In order to get an email address, you need to get it from some provider. It might be from your college or from Yahoo. In order to eliminate garbage mail, there needs to be a requirement that any mail you find in your inbox has the email address of the sender as well as a subject. Email providers shouldn't allow you to send email if either is absent.

When you get junk mail and you can see the address of the person who sent it, you have a few options. You could reply and ask him to refrain from sending you similar stuff in the future. You could also send him a huge file a few times to fill up his mailbox, but that's a waste of your time. The best option is to notify the company that gave him the email address. The result could be a warning at first for the provider with a fine later. A repeat performance could result in a much higher fine. Since the receiver has to go through trouble because of the inconsideration of the sender, he should recoup part of that fine. If the provider refuses to help you, you can notify the attorney general for action and it will cost the provider a few dollars.

You may wonder where the office of the attorney general will get the funds to carry out this work. It will come from fines collected. If a provider has a few too many situations of this nature, he can be fined more heavily and shut down. If you run a business, you have to follow the rules. If as a proprietor, you insist that you don't have the time or money to do this, you won't have to worry because you will be out of business. Rights come with responsibilities.

Providers give free email addresses but each succeeding one should come with a price. The second one should cost a few dollars and each one after that even more. This will go a long way to discourage spamming. Those who receive emails and then find that they cannot reply to them or don't want to but don't want the spam either – who does? – can contact the attorney general. There is no reason why this cannot be done. All who use the Internet and email will have an easier time once they log on. Spam can be eliminated.

The Internet and email both have been set up with a minimum of rules – it seems anything goes, and that is why there are so many problems. The elimination of junk email will go a long way to another goal: improving communication by this means. No one has talked about this, although I did post the following in *This Page Intentionally Left Blank* and people liked the idea. They're also on my web site and worth repeating, namely, rules of email etiquette:

1. Each individual is limited to sending one email per day to each person. If you send an email and get one back and then decide to follow up with another to this person on the same day, it's time to pick up the phone.

2. No Ponzi schemes of any kind are allowed. Avoid sending stuff with a threat that they will turn into a zucchini if they don't pass on to ten others what you sent them.

3. If you plan to send jokes or humor of any kind, make sure it's funny, not racist, sexist or condescending. If there won't be laughs without these considerations, don't send it. You can always pick on politicians, lawyers, agents and

businessmen – they’re still fair game until they clean up their acts.

4. An email with no subject should never be sent. If the title is “no subject,” it appears that you have nothing to send, so don’t send it.

5. A greeting and signature is always an example of civility, so use them both and avoid emails that are one word or less. You really don’t need to send just the two words, “Thank you.” If you really feel you should, add a bit more to the message. I get many emails without the names of the sender. Should I reply, “Hi, no name?”

6. Don’t send epics. People don’t care to read long, boring emails, so keep it short and to the point. If you go on and on, you are not being concise and people won’t read what you sent. I certainly won’t.

7. If you get an email, you should be considerate and respond to it. This assumes that it is not spam, some story or joke. If it doesn’t fall into those categories but what you get isn’t all that nice, you may want to make it a point not to respond and save face. If you feel you must respond, at least wait a day before responding. The consideration of replying is connected to the fact that you have email. Why have an email address if you are not going to check to see what is in your inbox? Perhaps it would be better not to give out your address in this situation. Checking your email every third month isn’t a good idea.

8. If someone emails you with a question or two, do your best to give replies to what is asked. No doubt, if the roles were switched and you were doing the asking, you would not be pleased if you didn’t get an answer.

9. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I think no more need be said as far as email goes.

The Internet will never go away so we need to make it less of a burden to people using it. A great start would be the elimination of spyware, viruses and cookies. Much has been done to keep each PC free from this trash but administration of the net can do even more. Pornography will always be a part on the World Wide Web, as many will claim free speech without wanting any responsibility along with it. Surfing will never stop but we need to realize that the knowledge found on the information highway is similar to that found in books. You can't believe all you read, whether it is in a paperback or from a web site.

Each of us has to remember that there is life beyond the dot com world and we should not be a slave to technology. Don't forget your family and friends and get out and enjoy nature rather than sit cooped up in front of the monitor, even if it is in high definition. Don't become an addict and if you do, make provisions to free yourself from this dependency. It's not as bad as being a drug addict, but it certainly isn't good for you either.

Simplification of web sites and the effort to make them more user-friendly will make everyone's day better. It's time to eliminate all those IDs and passwords and the frustration that goes with them. Businesses need to get designers with more knowledge of what will work rather than "rocket science" approaches to software. Since a company won't hire a business analyst to write a computer program, they shouldn't hire a software engineer to

design an application without knowledge of the system he is creating.

What the world needs is a PC that people don't curse at and doesn't crash – yeah, that means doing a restart! – more often than drivers at the demolition derby. Both the machine and the software on it should be free of bugs, thoroughly tested and functional without having the capability of doing everything. After all, people want word processors that give them the opportunity to write. They don't really need fonts like wingdings. Simplification and computers that work are really all the public wants.

If you are going to have “help” on a PC, it should not result in the user tossing the machine out the window. It should enable the person at the console to proceed rather than have her decide she had enough torture for the day. Manuals fall into the same category. They shouldn't be created if they are too long, too confusing or lacking in instructional value – something which we have seen too much of since the advent of the computer.

There is nothing wrong with being innovative and developing technology that is so different from what exists today but simultaneously easy to learn and bug free. A mouse should only be used by felines for tormenting and windows should be means of allowing light into a home. A few years ago I had windows 94, that is, my house got new windows that year. Those were the only windows I ever liked. If you come up with a great product, people will rush to buy it and tell others as well.

It doesn't take many smarts to realize that this last suggestion applies to appliances, electronic equipment and just about anything the consumer

purchases. Planned obsolescence should become a thing of the past. The litigation consideration – where a corporation determines the cost of settling lawsuits versus the cost of recalls – needs to be eliminated. One good way is a huge settlement that would convince companies that their first priority is the consumer. After all, without buyers they would have no business.

Health care and the medical profession need much improvement. I truly question the campaigns for raising funds for conquering disease. I get solicitations for Jerry's Labor Day marathon more often than I like. It's been going on for so many years; when are they going to find a cure? Where is all the money going? The same applies to the American Cancer Society. A cure for cancer would be fantastic but wouldn't it make more sense to determine the cause of the disease and eliminate that? Serious efforts to make technology work will eliminate many of the causes of cancer.

This thought should convince you that drugs are not the answer. There need to be treatment approaches such that drugs are only used as a very last resort. Also, if a drug does make it to the market, it should only be after serious, thorough testing. I realize that raises many problems and arguments, but readjusting our philosophy toward drug usage can alleviate some of these concerns. When it comes to prevention and cure, the former should be the main priority.

There is no doubt that nurses and doctors are overworked. That might be a good reason why the wrong leg is amputated or Chris has an appendix removed when Pat was the patient for this surgery. Workloads for those in the health care profession

need to be shortened. These people can't continue to keep up the hectic pace forced on them. Eliminating many diseases by finding the causes will alleviate some of the long hours. This is tied to the environment.

Shortening each individual's workweek is another great suggestion – this extends beyond just those in the medical profession. I mentioned the thirty-hour workweek earlier and it needs to be implemented. What should be discarded is the 24/7 mentality. There is no need for the majority of businesses to never close, unless they simply lost the key to the front door. In that case, change the locks. Supermarkets can have hours on Monday through Saturday from 9 am – 10 pm. If you can't find time to shop during those hours, your life is much too hassled and you are probably a workaholic. It's time for some adjustments.

Working too many hours is caused by materialism. The marriage of the two creates loaded landfills, stress, heart attacks, indigestion, irritability and destruction of the planet. The good news is that with this addiction, one need not worry about retirement, for a variety of obvious reasons. You also won't have to pay off your credit cards – unfortunately, your family will be stuck with the burden. Eventually, every object you obtain will be tossed into the trash, donated, handed down or sold. The more you acquire, the more resources are used and the larger will the garbage dumps be. The preponderance of yard sales and permanent weekend flea markets is a good indication that there is too much junk on the planet. Landfills have grown into huge hills – perhaps this is done to replace the mountains that have been irresponsibly

leveled by coal companies in their quest for that resource.

My discussion in *Take Back the Earth* of Cancer Alley – specifically Mossville – and the hazardous waste drop-off day in my town, not to mention the disaster at Bhopal in 1984 and Love Canal, should convince you that “Better living through chemistry” is a myth. The health of the people and the environment can benefit without toxic products – all of which can be replaced with safe alternatives. If an innovation results but there is some question as to its short or long term effects, more time is necessary for evaluation before it is made available. After seeing the results of many chemical products on our planet and its inhabitants, we can only ask if the pain and suffering caused by their use was worth it.

Genius can and has created numerous alternatives so that the dangerous stuff need not be used any more. There’s no doubt that any extra cost is well worth it since in the long run, health costs will be less and the earth will be spared. One compound that should be abolished is the one that too many people have put on their lawn. The obsession with green is fine if we are concerned about what environmentalists preach. However, if the consideration is green as found in grass or people’s wallets, it’s time for behavior modification. Weed and pest control of lawns and gardens can be accomplished with non-toxic products and varieties of grass can be raised which require less water and maintenance. Another possibility is to replace never-ending areas that get mowed with ground cover. These alternatives mean less work for the homeowner and less use of energy

and less damage to the air, land and streams, since lawnmowers, blowers and trimmers have no pollution controls.

Recently I stopped buying gallon jugs of bottled water. Instead, I bought a Brita water pitcher. I save on the costs for water, have no jugs to be recycled and need not worry about a hernia hauling water from the supermarket. That's what I call a triple benefit. Check with the town to see what's in your water and take steps to do the switch to tap water, which is no less safe than the stuff you get in bottles. You may also want to buy a container for your water other than plastic.

The innovations of the twentieth century by and large all had great potential, with the exception of vinyl and gunpowder. Somehow, the producers and the consumer fell asleep and failed to assure that things didn't get out of hand. A company won't produce something if there isn't a demand, so the public is to blame as much as corporate America. You should realize that a company is made up of human beings, so blaming a business is really blaming the citizens of the land. Many people failed, at various levels.

Fortunately, it's not too late, but we are running out of time. I don't have an answer for all those bombs created over the years. What do you do with them? I wouldn't advise disposing of them in the oceans or even shuttling them out into space. That doesn't leave many options. If only the scientists had considered this before they set out on their mission over half a century ago, the world would be infinitely better off. If the United States is so concerned about other nations having nuclear weapons, why don't those in power in this country

lead the world by eliminating all those nasty weapons of mass destruction that they themselves possess? Bringing the men and women home from Iraq and Afghanistan today would be the best thing we can do for our country and the planet. The money spent on those wars could be invested in solving many of our problems.

You should be convinced that technology has drastically failed us. At the same time, this chapter should lead you to the realization that something can be done about the mess. It's not too late. There is so much brainpower on the planet that the citizens can make changes themselves and effect change in government and in corporate America. Innovations of the past can be improved upon and new ideas can restore the land to what it once was. Technology should make our life easier and we should make it work, not have it work us to death.



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