

## A Visit to the Grocery Store



Yesterday I went to the grocery store and I saw eight people in a line. Each one was juggling an armful or small basket of groceries while they waited for the self-checkout machines. All four units were busy with one overseer store clerk

who walked about like a cross between a kindergarten teacher and a security guard. Several check stands away was the express line with two people waiting for a real live checker.

When the machines were first installed I tried it with two items that I knew would be less than \$5. I introduce myself slowly to machines and I wanted this meeting of the logical unbending, unconversational digital brain to be kind to my fuzzy thinking, nervous, self-conscious blood and electrical synapses brain. Especially in a public place. It was easier than I expected and except for not liking the tone of voice of my machine checker who sounded like a gym teacher I had in junior high it went well.

Once I had passed the test and proved I could be a checker, I began to wonder-why am I doing the grocery store's work? I go to their store, take things off the shelf, pay, load it in my car, carry everything up our steps to the kitchen or down to the basement and put it all away. What's wrong with someone else checking it out and putting it in bags? And if I'm going to put it in a bag what am I getting for it? Reduced cost? Better service? Less time in store? Nothing. What is the store getting? Fewer employees, fewer benefits for those employees, theoretically higher profit because a machine is less money in the long run and I'm doing the work of a former employee.

In his book, *The End of Work*, Jeremy Rifkin writes, "It is estimated each robot replaces four jobs in the economy and if in constant use twenty-four hours a day, will pay for itself in just over a year." He was writing about the auto industry, but though number of jobs replaced may be different in this case, the end result is that jobs are lost and the consumer has not gained.

Jobs aren't the only thing jeopardized. Old fashion human contact and community awareness is also weakened. I remember the checker at Harmons who had a smile like a Madonna who I watched through the years getting sicker and weaker, but still working because she needed the job. I remember the courtesy and bright voice of a young girl with rings in her nose and lip and black nailpolish, and I told myself once again not to ever jump to conclusions about people. I remember the woman who years ago heartily congratulated my ten year old son when he mentally added the grocery bill of about \$100 to within \$2 of the final amount. She made him feel good about his ability.

Yesterday when I walked by the live checker in the express line she was not all smiley face, in fact she looked a little tired from working all day, but at least she didn't bark in automatic register tones, "Put it in the bag, now!" Copyright © 2004