

Automatic Schmuck

The other day I was reminded about something my wife said to me a wee while back. No, it wasn't 'have you mended that kitchen shelf yet?' Nor was it 'so when are you going to paint the spare room?' (although there's little doubt if she reads this I will be reminded yet again about these tasks...)

Rather it was when she who must be obeyed remarked that 'we'll all be replaced by robots before very long' that re-entered my thoughts. Not for the first time I thought 'she's right'.

I'm in the process of training to be a counsellor, having recently qualified as a hypnotherapist (appointments now being taken...) I've had to postpone my class due for this weekend as I had to go to hospital this week and will need a few days to recuperate. When I telephoned the company running the course and told the person on the other end why I wouldn't be able to attend class this weekend I was told I would need to advise them by email.

'So, you can't deal with this query over the phone then?' I asked incredulously. To which she replied 'I'm sorry, Mr Smith – you will need to email what you've just told me'

The fact I was able to speak to someone at all only resulted after enduring one of those highly irritating automated messages – press one for finance queries, press two for course details, press three for all other queries – alternatively, press four if you feel like throwing your phone out of the window...

I have experienced the same issues at my place of work. I had been paying invoices to one particular company by phoning up and paying by company credit card. Now I have been advised that I need to 'pay the invoices on-line as we will no longer be taking payment details by phone'. So that was me told – at least it was by a human voice...

So many things are automated these days. Even the somewhat mundane task of doing the weekly shop at the supermarket is fast becoming a

grapple with a machine at the 'self-service' checkouts. I usually opt for the old-style method of being served by a human being at the checkout till. I shared a wee bit of banter the other day with a woman in a well-known supermarket in Leith who light-heartedly chided me on the way I had packed my bag and how the £100 bunch of red roses (is this right? Ed) I had bought for the aforementioned Mrs Smith may fall out. Trying getting that from a machine which does little other than beep at you as you scan your goods.

It has even reached the pastime of going to watch football. Just before Christmas, I headed to the Granite City to watch Hearts play Aberdeen. As I entered the turnstyle I was about to offer a greeting to a home official about it being a cold day (as it always is at Pittodrie) only to discover there was no one there. I had to insert my match ticket into a slot in a machine which then moved the turnstyle so I could gain entry to the stadium. I found this rather dismaying – no longer will I be greeted by 'fit like, min' as I enter Pittodrie Stadium.

It seems the art of conversation is being threatened by automation whether it be self-service checkouts, websites or damned pre-recorded messages. It's bad enough when you go out for a meal or a few drinks and your companions have their mobile phone seemingly glued to their hand. The irony is that people don't tend to use their phones for conversing any more. It's for texting, using 'apps' and posting on social media. 'I'm in the pub with Jim, Jean, Bob and Carol' and within minutes people will be 'liking' or 're-tweeting' this comment – people who probably haven't spoken to each other for some time or, worse still, haven't even met the person who posted the comment.

As I recover from my wee op (that's operation and not app for application – although if there had been an 'app' for what I'm getting done I would be a happy man) I have been asked by my manager at work to let her know when I should be fit to return to work. 'Text me' was her parting shot as I left the office.

I could go all retro and actually phone her – but there's a fair chance I'll be greeted with an automated message along the lines of

'Can't come to the phone right now – leave a message after the tone'

Is it just me? Hello? Speak to me...someone...