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# Moon, stars, profit, our loss

[M]ama used to roll her hair back before the central air we'd sit outside and watch the stars at night she'd tell me to make a wish I'd wish we both could fly I don't think she's seen the sky since we got the satellite dish"

— James McMurtry, "Levelland"

I saw the starry sky and a majestically bright moon among the clouds last weekend while camping out at Lost Pines Scout Reservation in Bastrop. My Wolfscout son saw



them, too, as did five of his buddies and their parents. None of us missed cable television. One cell phone went off during

stories around the campfire. The call was kept reverently brief. Back home in Austin my wife decided not to call because she felt it would break the spell of tents, sleeping bags, popcorn and our just being together out in the woods.

At Lost Pines, we felt the magic of separation. We were experiencing things that would form the stuff of special stories. We sensed that our stories would lose something in satellite transmission, so we waited to tell them in person to those we love back home.

Three key notions here are feeling, wonder and personal contact. Why is it that as the entire world comes to us on the Internet and 300 channels, and as we can communicate with one another instantaneously at any time, we feel isolated and less in touch with the simple wonder of existence? Part of the answer is that life has become too "Kubwellian."

For example, members of the University Federal Credit Union at 46th and Guadalupe streets no longer wait in line with other members until a human being can assist us. We now approach a virtual teller. A virtual teller has real parts: a television screen, a pneumatic tube and a round, recessed camera lens that spies on us.

The tube sucks and blows our paperwork to and from a nether world just like the tube in Winston Smith's cubicle in the Ministry of Truth in Orwell's "Nineteen-Eighty-Four." The size, shape and orientation of the camera lens eerily resembles Hal, the evil spaceship computer in Kubrick's

"2001." The television screen constantly scrolls Big-Brother-like factoids and commercial messages.

Gone are the days of talking with one another in line or even being pleasantly alone with our own thoughts. When my son was a toddler, people in line or real human tellers often earned my paternal gratitude by charming him with a friendly smile, a funny face or a piece of candy. Now I approach one of the UFCU Hal's with dread and a piece of paper. The dread stays with me. I stick the paper over the screen until a detached voice informs me that my transaction is finally being handled. An image belonging to this voice then appears on the screen behind my sheet of paper.

A UFCU officer told me that 'Kubwellian' virtual tellers improve security and maximize efficiency. The real human beings behind the virtual tellers handle up to eight terminals at once. But this makes our freedom from waiting in line a mere illusion. We still wait, but now we wait alone in front of electronic screens that assault us with advertisements and factbytes. The UFCU undoubtedly receives fees to subject us to such infortune, but they never asked me to sign a release form.

This is but one example of the increasingly thoughtless transformation of human beings into components of productivity systems. In our jobs and in our mundane pursuits, profit is extracted from what we do, and we are conditioned in what is left of our private lives to be productive. But who questions whether the "profit" achieved is socially desirable or good for us as individuals? And who is identifying and measuring the intangibles that conduce to human happiness? As Professor James Dawes has pointed out, this whole process is "insidiously vampiric," our very lives are converted by "future-oriented, accumulative instrumentality" into "stock for use, into calculable potential rather than actuality or being."

No one makes money from a boy and his mother wishing on the stars or from Cub Scouts and their parents gazing at the moon. But I bet the UFCU efficiency experts never thought to calculate how much customer loyalty is "produced" by a human employee's kind personal gesture toward a customer and his child.

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