

Isolated in a Digital Crowd

by Dennis Payton Knight

The digital age has brought wondrous things. With a simple device the length and width of an index card, and not much thicker, we instantaneously record and communicate words, sounds and pictures around the planet. We are in touch with practically every byte of human knowledge, proven fact and fantastic fallacy, somber and hilarious, past, present, and predictive. We seem to be but a step away from telepathic communication and for that tiniest separation I suppose we should be thankful.

I have been caught up in the digital age for much of my adult life and have even had a wee part in causing the boom. It is a tool, not the essence of life, and I am not technology's slave, it is mine. At least that's what I hope as I gaze at the words forming on the electronic array of pixels that occupies a good share of my life. Sometimes I'm not so sure, but that's another essay.

All of our commercial institutions, social, government and health care services have adopted to the digital age and have so reordered their way of doing business. Personal contact has fallen to digital communication. We answer our phones to prerecorded digital incursions into our peace and privacy. Being present in human form and ready to serve the next customer has fallen to being online. Receptionists have given way to perplexing phone prompts, bad on-hold music and looped digital voice interruptions alleging how important your call is while making you realize it isn't.

In spite of its aggravations, most, even those of us in my (barely) pre-baby-boom generation, have embraced the digital age for what is best about it. We like to be entertained and have a dialog with our world in simple keystrokes, even voice commands. We tweet our opinions in blocks of characters. We manage our calendars and financial affairs from a control panel. We glean and verify information in the moment from literally millions of sources. We order goods for delivery in a day or two from every corner of the globe.

But there are many who have not been served so well by this revolution in how we associate with each other. I am reminded of a James Thurber character in the early 20th Century, coping with the new age of Edison, going around nightly making sure all light sockets were occupied and bulbs tightened because of her worries about electricity leaking all over the house.

You and I likely have people close to us to like Thurber's aunt in a previous technology revolution who, for lack of opportunity, natural reluctance, or by handicap, haven't been swept into the digital age of iPads, iPhones and iMacs. They open not an inbox but a nearly empty mailbox for cards and letters. The landline they expect to connect them with people instead connects them with robots, and it is a robot who calls them.

They are isolated in a digital crowd.