

BY MICHELE MILES GARDINER

SOON we'll be wearing plexiglass bubbles, I thought, while watching a technology program on TV.

A male voice-over stated, "This is the way we'll all be shopping soon," as a woman pushed her cart down a grocery aisle, scanning items with a portable mini-scanner. She then dropped the groceries into bags in her cart, swiped a debit card, and headed for the store's door. All I could think was, "Wait a minute! What's so great about that?" I work at home. Some days, grocery checkers are the only people I interact with.

Sure, my husband asks "How are you?" And on rare occasions, my teenage daughter might ask the same — which makes me suspicious. At least the checker has no ulterior motive. Every now and then, a checker has even suggested a recipe, tossed me a compliment or commiserated about raising teens.

The few times I've tried the self-checkout computer at my

store, it's been a hassle. And I can't stand the tone the computerized woman uses to tell me to "Put the items in the bag."

So I'd hate to see the grocery checkers disappear the way employees at "service" stations have. Less than 10 years ago, I'd chat with my friendly gas-station attendant. He told me when his wife was going to have a baby, and I told him my mother was moving to France. On other visits, he'd proudly pull out wallet photos of his little girl. One time, I paid for my gas and my attendant friend had me laughing so hard that I drove away, forgetting to fuel my car.

But now we have self-pay pumps. They're convenient — and really boring. I scan my debit card and pick the lint from my sweater as my cents tick away into my tank. Not once has the pump made me laugh.

Yeah, I realize technology has made life easier, but often at the expense of human interaction. I hear that before air conditioners

came along, folks would grab icy glasses of lemonade and mosey out onto their porches to catch a cool breeze. They might spy Gladys over her fence, pruning her roses, and wave. "How you doing?" But now we have air conditioners, so we stay inside and have few reasons to talk to the Gladyses of our neighborhoods.

A lot of our technologies buffer us from other humans. Think about the car. We drive inside our glass and metal bubbles, feeling free to yell — sometimes with certain fingers upright — at whoever gets in our way.

Why is that? Would we do that to someone in the mall for blocking the line to Hot Dog on a Stick? Probably not. Though, now that I think about it, I know a few who would. But a lot of people might not even be bold enough to squeak an "Excuse me" if they had to look into someone's pupils. Then we get into our cars, our bubbles of safety, and we feel bolder — in the same way we might behind our anonymity on the Internet.

Don't get me wrong, I love technology. If only I had a cell phone back in the '80s, I could have avoided one horrible evening I spent stuck on the 101 Freeway. And I remember having to search library shelves for information that I can now find within seconds on the Internet.

So I'm hardly a Luddite. I just worry that the less we know about the people around us, the less we care. But, then again, plexiglass bubbles could serve as our domes of freedom; inside them, we could smoke or eat trans fats whenever we wanted. And we wouldn't need to bother with perfume.

Oh, well, I might have to accept this self-scanning grocery gadget. I guess it wouldn't be too bad if it could say things like "Are you having a bad day? Tell me about it" and "Wow! Your hair looks great." But to truly impress me, it would have to tell me how it got its teenager to wash her own dishes without rolling her eyes.

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