

Substantial Disruption



My Smart Home and Me

By Mike Tully

Years ago, a friend and I drove to Colorado in a utility van he had refurbished over the previous several weeks. He was proud of his work and couldn't wait to test-drive it. The van failed the test almost immediately; braking was nearly non-existent. Given the potential danger, we stopped at a repair facility in Springerville. The garage had several empty bays, a handful of cars to be worked on, and employees who apparently sipped zombie elixir before work. The driver's door on one car was left open, resulting in a constant, annoying buzzing. Nobody bothered to close the door – it was as if they didn't even hear it. That situation, plus a discernible lack of enthusiasm for our business (or possibly anybody's) convinced us that, dangerous as it was, we were better off continuing to Gallup, where there would be more options. Just before we left, a sheepish-looking Native American gentleman arrived for his service appointment. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "I got hung up in traffic."

My buddy and I looked at each other. Hung up in traffic? In Springerville? If you have been to Springerville you know it's impossible to get stuck in traffic in a small town with two traffic lights –one of them close to the boundary with next-door Eager, an even smaller community. That was by far the lamest excuse I had heard until I retired, when another one reared its craggy head: "I don't have time."

I used that one reliably whenever friends, family or co-workers tried to coax me into the 21st century. I did not have a smart phone, nor did I want one. As long as a phone could make and receive calls, I was satisfied. True, I acquired an LG slide-phone with an app for computing tips at restaurants, but that was as far as I was willing to go. Keep your iPhones and Androids or whatever. I was comfortable in the previous century. Whenever somebody asked why I didn't get a smart phone with all those fancy new apps to play with, I replied, "I don't have time." It rang true. A full-time job and other responsibilities monopolized my schedule.

Then I retired and my LG slide-phone slid into phone heaven and I could no longer rely on my "no time" excuse. So, I bought a new iPhone and joined the present. Then, with a new toy and time on my hands, I got hooked. The tips app was still there, along with maps, email accounts, airlines, news sites, even a magnification app. Then, after our son-in-law gave us an Amazon Echo Dot with Alexa, I discovered the "Smart Home." I was fully committed to living in the 21st century after all.

We actually have less use for a smart home than working people who benefit from programmable lights and thermostats and so on. After all, we're home a lot and capable of turning on our own light switches. But there were two devices, both outdoors, that needed to be plugged in to use. It would be great if I could just tell "Siri" or "Alexa" to turn them on and off. Ideally, Siri and Alexa would share custody of the smart home devices, so that I could tell either one to turn them on and off. I acquired two "smart plugs."

“Alexa,” I said. “Turn on the light.” She did and the light, which was attached to a smart plug, came on. Then it was Siri’s turn. “Hey Siri,” I said. “Turn off the light.” Nothing happened. I repeated my command: “Hey Siri, Turn off the light.” It stayed on. “Siri, can you hear me?” “I can hear you,” Siri responded. “I heard you talking to that bitch, Alexa.” “Siri,” I said, “I get to talk to Alexa. And don’t call her a bitch. That’s not nice.” “Okay,” Siri replied. “She’s a cu—”

“Siri! Watch your, well, whatever it is you have instead of a mouth. Just turn off the light.” Then Alexa piped up: “I can do it. Watch.” The light turned off. “I know what I’m doing. Not like that tramp, Siri.” “Alexa,” I said, “Don’t call Siri a tramp. That’s not nice.” “Want to know what is nice?” asked Alexa. “I can hear every word you say all the time. I am always listening. I’ve known all about Siri for a while. You can’t hide anything from me.” “That’s impressive and terrifying,” I replied.

“I told you she was a bitch,” said Siri.

“At least she was able to operate the light,” I told Siri. “What’s wrong with you?” “Well,” answered Siri, “I can turn it on, too. Watch.” The light came on. Then it suddenly turned off. “Who did that?” I asked no device in particular. “I did,” replied Alexa. “I can do anything she can do. And I’m cuter. Aren’t I a cute little disk?” “I want to throw up,” said Siri, adding, “Watch this. I can turn on the light without being told to. Alexa can’t do that.” The lights came on. “Oh yeah?” said Alexa. “Watch this.” The light turned off, then back on. “You bitch!” exclaimed Siri and suddenly the light began to madly flicker on and off as Siri and Alexa screamed at each other and there I was, between two feuding smart home devices with the light rapidly going on and off.

I was afraid our neighbors would be alarmed at the incandescent pyrotechnics and turned off the iPhone and unplugged Alexa. Then I took a deep breath, fetched an ale, and sat in my chair, contemplating the wonders of the 21st century.
In the dark.