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Hard days are easy for clerks

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By **Bill Hall**
Commentary

I watch store clerks working themselves to a frazzle during the Christmas season and I realize how easy their job is this time of year.

I have worked in such jobs and I tell you the easiest work is the hardest work because it makes the day move so rapidly.

If you want to see a hard job, go watch the store clerks on a weekday in July. There you will see them standing around, waiting for customers, folding and refolding the merchandise, repeatedly glancing at their watches and sighing a lot.

Einstein understood store clerks during the dead days of summer because Einstein understood relativity. He knew that a busy day races by whereas a day without anything to do lasts almost forever. Everything is relative.

Or as Einstein put it, $E = mc^2$. That means, of course, that E represents the energy you expend during a work day and m represents how much of a madhouse a store is during a day of frantic Christmas shoppers. And c^2 stands for the amount of cash shoppers spend, multiplied by itself. Thus Einstein's famous Shopping Center Theory of Relativity is a way of forecasting how much cash a shopper can expend before his bank account implodes.

Or something like that. All I know is that it is true that time passes more quickly when you are busy in life and more slowly when you are not. I know that because I have worked during my life in restaurant jobs and other trades where the pace of work can vary greatly from day to day and season to season.

Any experienced waitress will tell you that she likes busy days much better than slow days, and not just because of the tips. A day when you are swamped with famished customers is over before you know it. A day with hardly any customers at all lasts nine years.

When you don't have time to do anything but keep up with a restaurant crowd, you don't have a moment to notice time itself. You're too busy trying to get the potatoes and gravy to the customers before a cold skin forms on the gravy and a primitive look forms in the angry eyes of ravenous people.

Working in busy restaurants was among the best and fastest-moving jobs I've ever had. The worst job I ever had was "working" as a flagman on a logging site high in the Idaho mountains on a gravel road where, on one day (I kid you not), a total of four cars went by. That was the longest day of my life. I was unflagging in my duty, but I spent many empty hours with nobody to flag.

However, that's not the worst of our struggles with time. The effect is the same with our perceived length of life itself. When you are a 10-year-old, time is as slow as an old man walking to a dental appointment for a

root canal. But when you are an old man, time races toward the finish line like a 10-year-old chasing a puppy.

For a child, it seems that school is forever and summer will never come. But as people enter the far reaches of age, they hate to see summer coming because they know it means winter is just around the corner.

Much of our lives are lived backwards. As the poets have noticed, youth is wasted on the young. Our elders are old enough to really know how to party but they could hurt themselves if they tried.

Why would Fate waste slow time on kids too green to appreciate it, kids who are always wishing a birthday or a Christmas will arrive soon?

And how cruel of the powers-that-be to keep speeding up the march of elders toward the hereafter. Children are compelled to dawdle and elders are forced to race. What a lousy system that is.

But the One Great Time Keeper did get something right: As people grow old, they generally retire. Often that means they stand around a lot with not much to do. And so to them, as with store clerks, the days seem to drag, putting the brakes on our swift advancement toward our rendezvous with the Big Manana.

Thus you should tell your spouse that household chores will speed you toward your end, but loafing is the perfect antidote to avoid reaching the finish line much too fast.

Hall may be contacted at wilberth@cablone.net or at 1012 Prospect Ave., Lewiston, ID 83501