

The SYSTEM Versus PEOPLE

“Systems are popular because they give the illusion that no one is responsible.”

People are fine. But s-y-s-t-e-m-s—pronounced in robotic monotone—verge on the monstrous. Pick up a telephone and the pleasant voice of some really nice person asks you to push buttons and, presto, you are turned over to the s-y-s-t-e-m.

The battle between individuals and the s-y-s-t-e-m has engulfed the telephone, banks, hospitals, corporations, and even the government. A lot of prominent people, without naming names, have become casualties.

A few years ago, I responded to Southwestern Bell ads about DSL service, I phoned the number, and asked a nice person if the service was available at my address. She turned me over to the s-y-s-t-e-m and it sent a bright young technician out to test our line. He determined that the signal was too weak for DSL. But the next day the s-y-s-t-e-m sent me a kit which I could “self install.” The battle was on. I called to ask what to do since the s-y-s-t-e-m seemed to have forgotten that our signal was too weak. After punching in innumerable numbers and several half hours on hold while the s-y-s-t-e-m attended to other persons, I was told to return the kit by UPS using the prepaid label the s-y-s-t-e-m had provided. I ran all over town trying to find a UPS s-y-s-t-e-m location. The s-y-s-t-e-m was wrong—Kinkos did not have one. I ended up spying a truck driven by a khakied fellow, one of that s-y-s-t-e-m’s employees, and he kindly accepted the package.

On my next phone bill, I was charged \$200 for the kit. Attempts to object were devoured by the s-y-s-t-e-m for the next two months and I devoted hours listening to messages about “all our representatives are busy helping other customers.” I resorted to writing a hard copy letter.

Southwestern Bell does not publish its battle plan; it provides no address in its phone book. However, I cleverly looked up its listing in the business section of our phone book and mailed my letter to the address given in small print. The letter came back a month later. It had been opened, I’m sure it must have been by a

sweet person because they had written on the envelope, “Must have Suite Number.”

I decided to confront the system in person and attempted to go behind the enemy lines. The “suites” were all locked with combination security. But, I found a hole —one receptionist had her door propped open and I could talk to a real person. She explained to me that this building was SWB’s cellphone operation and no one here would be able to help me because the central office of Southwestern Bell is in Dallas Texas. She became my double agent and made the necessary call so that I could find another nice person to stop the threatening letters about ‘pay up or else.’ If I could only have dealt with such intelligent people from the start, I could have saved all of us a lot of time and frustration.

How can nice people beat the system? *Louisville Courier Journal* columnist John Ed Pearce said, “in small, little ways remove yourself from the system.” When enough people desert the system, it will collapse. Systems are popular because they give the illusion that no one is responsible. If we believe that or give in to it, we will have lost the battle. Ultimately, however, we are all responsible as the courts have recently shown.

I once spent ten eternally long hours of wheeling my wife from office to office and room to room before getting the health care s-y-s-t-e-m-’s permission for a compassionate doctor to administer the shot for her unbearable pain. We found that hospitals are riddled with layer upon layer of inhuman s-y-s-t-e-m-s and although the people are really nice the system has no compassion.

Now, the s-y-s-t-e-m has quietly invaded my bank, secretly subverted it, and changed the rules. A receipt is no longer that. The system spits out pseudo-receipts when I make a deposit. It took two months and hours and hours to locate a missing \$78 last year. Kind souls eventually found the missing money and I could finally close out the accounts for 2003 before the income tax deadline. I thought I had won another round. Then the s-y-s-t-e-m notified me that it was deducting \$162 from my account—without my signature—for copies of 17 checks made at \$6 each to straighten out its own mess; it acknowledged no responsibility. It took another trip to the bank on foot to see Orlando, a nice guy, and arrange to have the

deduction replaced. I now always take my deposits to a real live teller, ask him/her to add my checks and to give me a real receipt. But the system is a powerful adversary—Monday, I had 13 checks to deposit. Chris, the teller, could not add them for me. The s-y-s-t-e-m gives him permission and space for adding only ten checks on the teller's computer. I could remove myself from that bank and secretly hope it collapses.

Today, I went on a hunt for the deed to my house. We were able to pay off the mortgage last week. The bank sent me to the Register of Deeds but they have not yet received notice from the bank. "Come back in three or four weeks," I was told. Who owns my house in the meantime? Moving onto the street is no small matter!

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