

It doesn't add up

I stood at the checkout at K-Mart the other day. A young high school student was about to wait on me. I wasn't about to break the bank with my meager purchases so no one needed a mathematical mind to total my purchases. My three items included two items – each costing \$2 and another item costing \$5. With tax, the total should indicate \$9.56. The young woman rang the items up and said, “That will be \$14.98.”

Immediately, I said, “Wait a minute. That's not right! How much does this, cost?” pointing to the \$2 item. She said, “\$2.” “And this one,” I said, pointing to the other \$2 item. “\$2,” she affirmed. And finally, I said, “How much does this item say it costs?” pointing to the \$5 item. She agreed that it said \$5. Then, I asked, “Where do you get \$14.95 for these three items?” She thought for a moment in bewilderment and then decided to recheck the items for the correct amount. I handed her ten dollars and six cents which really confused her. She wondered why I was handing her six cents. Wouldn't it be much easier if I had given her the ten dollars bill and received forty-four cents back?

As I thought about the experience, I realized it was not the first time that this had happened to me. I had often found items on sale but when I approached the cash register, I found out that the cash register didn't know they were on sale.

Some people hate to have loose change in their pockets. They either have a container by their bedside to dump it in every night or a glorified piggy bank to save it for a future date. I never use such a method. I always keep loose change in a small purse in my pocket.

When I go shopping, I always try to get rid of it and in the process end up confusing the checkout clerk as he or she wonders why I am complicating things by adding coinage to the mix. I have an ulterior purpose involved. I want to get rid of excess coinage in a most effective way. For example, if my total purchase costs \$6.24, I would give the cashier a \$5 note and five quarters. In many cases, the cashiers would be confused and wonder why I was making things so complicated for them. Why didn't I just give them \$7 or a \$10 dollar note which would be much easier for them. Obviously, complicating the issue for cashiers would make it a lot simpler and less coinage for me to tote around.

This all makes me wonder what would life be like if we had to do without calculators and barcodes. We would have to do some mental gymnastics with our mathematical acumen instead of lazily depending on something mechanical.

All this reminds me of how we complicate things. Scott Peck, begins his book, “The Road less traveled,” with the sentence, “Life is difficult.” His sequel book, “Further along the road less traveled,” begins with the sentence, “Life is complicated.”

I think back to the Old Testament times. Moses received Ten Commandments from God. The leaders, down through the centuries, wishes to explain God's intentions and their implications so they drew up their own interpretations. They ended up with 613 precepts; 365 prohibitions (obviously, based on the number of days in the year. We're not sure what they would do on a leap year, if they gave people a reprieve) and 248 laws of direction. Jesus came along and uncomplicated them by breaking it down to just two commandments – love God and love neighbor. I often wonder if we complicate things sometimes so that we can be distracted from doing their basic commands. Do we labor under the assumption that if we complicate something, then we are somehow pardoned for not doing it?

What would life be really like if, when I had typed this column, and didn't know how many words were involved. I wouldn't know if I had too few words or too many. I'm glad that someone had the foresight to include a word count with my word processor because now I know that I have the right amount of words and they all add up.