

# Chapter 1

## Last Day of Work

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—By Douglas Rushkoff

I'm finally doing it. Clocking out for the last time. It's been twenty years since they began offering the package, close to a decade since the company's been down to just the skeletal observation crew, and over a year since it's been just me. Well, Curtis and me, but he wasn't ever fully here anyway, so when he left the office it was more like watching someone log off one network to join another.

And I'm looking forward to it, I really am. I just thought being the last one here would be a more notable achievement. At least more noted. An accomplishment as fame-worthy as something my father could have done. So while it is a significant human milestone, I'm sure of it, I just so happen to be doing it when nobody is around to care. I am the headline of every newspaper, the front page of every web site, and the message in everybody's inbox: Dr. Spiegel Turns Off the Lights. I've been delaying the inevitable (and, from what I'm told, my own joy, my own release of ego, my membership in the next phase of human evolution) mostly because there's no one who knows or cares that I do. I'm collecting salary every day—I'm paying myself time-and-a-half, in fact, in consideration of my having to both work and monitor my own progress. It's not easy being the last guy.

Of course there's nowhere left to spend the money I'm earning. The last few businesses stopped accepting credits early last year, and even before that most financial transactions were done purely for show. Once the Date of Dissolution had been agreed to by the banks, there wasn't much point in

hoarding currency of any kind. It's as if we just needed the credit for credit's sake—to prove to ourselves and our friends we had really done something of value. Kind of made everyone think about the stuff they used to buy with money, and if most of it was for the same, empty purpose.

Just because you know something to be true doesn't make you any better at accepting it, or acting any differently because of it. That was the main message of my dad's work, I suppose. Not that he was any messiah himself; just the messenger. But in a land of no egos or authority, that's pretty much the best anyone's going to get. As for me, well, I'm a messenger, too—but in a world with no recipients. Except maybe you, if you happen to find this missive. And if you do, I guess it means we were wrong about the whole thing.

But that possibility has been enough to keep me going at this chronicle, written in the same work hours that I used to spend monitoring the systems, making sure the nano, robo, digital, and genetic algorithms were all working within predicted parameters. Ready to pull the plug right up until the moment there was no longer any plug to pull.

I mean, everyone—at least everyone who was anyone—went over. Someone had to watch from the other side. Someone had to be the last one to leave. Work the last day of the last job. Close the door, turn out the lights.

It's fitting that I'm the one—and not just because I'm a Spiegel. As a kid I had always been obsessed with Michael Collins—the Apollo 11 command module pilot—not Neil Armstrong or Buzz Aldrin, the guys who actually landed on the moon's surface. Collins circled around, alone, over to the dark side while the other two made the historic lunar landing for the TV audience. He just sat there in the capsule, beyond the range of our communications, when everybody else celebrated our first truly unifying planetary achievement. He was completely responsible and utterly by himself.

So yeah, I've been relishing my “last-remaining-human” experience, and dragging it out far longer than I have any excuse to. I wander through the abandoned shopping malls, try on clothes I would never have been able to afford, watch movies the old-fashioned way, stack paper cash in big piles, and shoot machine guns at cars. It's fun. As long as there's only one of me, I can afford to live in exactly the way my father's work showed us not to.

On the off-chance you have no idea what I'm talking about (Wouldn't that be a hoot? Me having to tell people about his existence?), here's how it came to pass:

I've got my own theories on the moment it all shifted—but so does everyone else. There's no way to know exactly which technology or policy or pop star or combination of these led to the great unwinding. There's not much consensus on this, but I still think it was the TP, or telepathic podster. It wasn't a truly telepathic uni device, of course. That took another decade. The TP was just a biofeedback circuit. It observed the neural output of enough people thinking "right" or "left" and then use that data to predict when someone else is trying to move the cursor in that direction. It was the first smart phone/gamepad that seemed to know what we meant without our telling it anything.

While that might not seem like so very much, it changed the whole way technology developed from then on. Instead of it being our job to figure out how to make some new thing and then figure out what the heck to use it for, now it was technology's job to figure out what we wanted and then just go do it for us.

This turned out to be a big problem, because what we all wanted was more of everything we already had. Consumer technologies learned to think of people the way we already thought of ourselves: as absolute consumers. Technologies from net agents to nano-bots competed through the networks to bring their owners as much stuff as cheaply as possible. Meanwhile, technologies in the service of corporations and governments mirrored the profit-minded or bureaucratic ideals of their own users. They created trading algorithms, intelligent currencies, and self-referential legal axioms that brought capital into their coffers at alarmingly rapid rates.

This was all good for the economy—at least in the short run, as measured by the GNP. The faster the economy grew, the faster it could accelerate. As long as there were new thresholds for acceleration, the sky was the limit.

The only drag on the system proved to be human intervention. The amount of time it took human beings to make decisions for themselves paled in comparison to the rate at which these same choices could be accurately predicted and carried out by assumption routines. Our impulses at that stage of evolution, after all, were really quite simple. They all pointed towards more of one thing or another, the sooner the better.

Once outside direct human command and control, technologies from the TP to the nano probe were capable of reflecting and meeting the aggregate human demand well in advance of our conscious requests. At least until the economic systems on which all this was occurring began to break down.

It seems that leaving technology to meet human demand, unchecked, wasn't the best idea after all. Resources ran scarce, especially when distributed to individuals. And capital tended to pool at the center, leaving companies with no one left to sell goods to. We painted ourselves into a corner, and lacked the ingenuity to change in time to get out of the mess. Our programs gave us exactly what we asked them for, and we didn't know how to ask any differently. Environmental forecasts indicated that even if we reversed course somehow, it was already too late. Resource depletion and wealth disparity had passed the point of no return.

A few great ideas—master plans—were attempted. A Chinese firm developed a technology through which biological forms could be reduced to one-tenth their normal size. The thinking behind this scenario was that human beings would only take up a tenth the space this way, and thus utilize only one-tenth the resources. But even tiny humans would have a hard time surviving the radiation that was to come, so the idea was scrapped.

Trapped in the scenario from which there seemed to be no escape, my father came up with the last resort idea for saving the species: interstellar migration. No, we didn't have the technology to fly humans from earth to some safe haven, but we had the means to seed another planet with our DNA. And so scientists began on the great project to send robots, nanotech, and genetic material across the galaxies in search of a planet suitable for life to begin again.

To avoid merely repeating the evolutionary process that brought us into our sorry state, however, our government came up with the idea of nesting a message into the DNA strand: our little fortune cookie for the next round of humanity. In this message, we could explain where we went wrong, as best as it could be articulated. Then, once the next civilization was approaching our level of development, they would presumably find the message in their DNA strand, read it, and avert our fate. While the United Nations argued about exactly what the message should say, my father was tasked with finding an unused, or generally unnecessary code on which to embed it. He spent a long time considering which animal and human qualities were necessary or not for our development, and scanned over the sections of the genome like an engineer looking for unused tunnels in the New York subway system.

Then, he figured, why not go to the source of the trouble? The human drive for self and tribal interest so necessary at early stages of development, yet so dangerous when allowed to run human affairs in the later stages of evolution

when drives can be so easily amplified by technology. He used his virtual quark microscope to zoom in on his target zone of the genome, exploring the fractal-like model on the subatomic level, when he noticed something strange: there was a small, extra bundle of mesons and single baryon hanging onto the edge of one of the neutrinos in an atom of the cytosine nucleotide. Now what was that doing there?

He guessed it as quickly as you just did. It was a message. Similar in spirit to what humanity was now attempting to tell its own evolutionary progeny. Incapable of being translated into words, but conveying the essential and seemingly frightening truth: technology is not a mirror, it is a partner.

The location of the message provided the clue for its implementation, which proved a whole lot easier than trying to embed it in some future seed-spawning project. We would simply release our technology from just amplifying the existing social order, and set it free to deliver us a new one.

It took some time for people to accept that the biases of our technology were not foreign to humanity at all, but its greatest and most deliberate expressions. Through our networked intelligences, we had developed a fully decentralized modality for matter to achieve greater complexity in the face of entropy. We could hunt and gather no more, conquer and collect no further. The Industrial Age reversed itself, as bigger was no longer better, and centralized authority worked against the power of networks. Our drive to monopolize was no longer a valid means of increasing our knowledge and capability. We would have to learn, instead, to let go.

And so the process began through which we saved humanity and, more importantly, continued the evolution of matter toward greater levels of self awareness. It just meant including our technologies in the great game, instead of requiring they submit to reality as we previously understood it. They were only as responsible for reading our minds as we were responsible for reading theirs.

We moved from the scarcity model—the zero-sum game through which species compete for resources—to an abundance model where anything that is necessary can be found or synthesized and then shared by all.

The manufacturing of energy (long limited by the faux economics of resource depletion) was as simple as a yawn. The only thing that had been standing in the way was an energy industry whose profits depended on fixed supplies and non-renewability. Medicine, agriculture, air and education all

proved as plentiful as our willingness to adopt technologies that created value from the periphery, and replicated effortlessly as they spread. From shape shifting to mems to transformation of matter. Everything became free.

While our prior social system would have been challenged by the extreme unemployment that came with the collapse of corporate capitalism, we no longer saw the need to distribute wealth according to one's contribution. There was enough for all, and barely enough "work" for anyone. Once the synthesis of appropriate matter forms was left to technologies unencumbered by the necessities of an artificially scarce marketplace, people started lining up to do the one day of work per month per person required to keep everything going.

Then, the work itself became ritual. Over the past ten years or so, those of us who visited a workplace regularly did so purely out of habit, or as a form of historical reenactment. A few of the robots, like my friend Curtis, remained to perform the last few clerical functions—keeping the lights on, maintaining the few ancient servers left that provided no functionality other than maintaining the illusion of working companies. And then even the robots left, fully convinced of their superfluousness, and ready to join the party. They're out there, too.

I've spent time there, don't get me wrong. Matter, energy, consciousness, all in the same dance. The technology—the balls, the light, the information—isn't taking commands from any server. There's no middle, anymore. No top. Everything is just taking commands from everything else. The network is the server, the genes are the organism, the nanos are the medium. What we tried to teach technology in the industrial age turned out to be the opposite of what technology finally taught us in the Great Unwinding.

I don't know if anyone but me gets this on anything but an intuitive level, or why they'd feel the need to. Once you see the dancing, you can't help but join in. And it's everything they say it is: the ecstasy of connection—of everybody knowing everything about everyone else, and being perfectly okay with it. Overjoyed, even. Still unique and individual, yet also part of a greater mind—a collective awareness that has finally grown ready to reach out and finally find the other ones out there. I have held back for a long time, now. But no longer. I just wanted to—I don't know—to do something as significant as my father did. Make a mark. Get recognized, lauded, and even rewarded for something I did, me alone.

That's something I could only do back here. And like everyone else's personal success, the only thing it can do for me in the long run is keep me more alone.

So I'm going to stop now. Years later than I had to, I suppose. But all in my own good time. And this time I'm really doing it. This is my last day of work. I'm going to turn off the terminal, switch off the lights, and walk out that door. This time, I know I will.

### **More information on robotics and telematics**

- <http://personalrobotics.intel-research.net/videos.php>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbifmRBBN6Q>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s27Yd5mwZKM>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vq08egobDCI>