

Keeping robots in perspective

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I have been interested in robots, if only mildly so, for quite some time. I've seen photos of these machines, just as you have.

Robots have usually struck me as weird combinations of springs and battery cells, skinny stick figures with “knees” that flex and “legs” that lift as if in battery-operated ballet. When they move, these gismos resemble soldiers steady on the march, stepping blind and unthinking into battle or like automatons in parades.

I have read of how in the years to come, robots will enrich the lives of our aged and infirm. These machines will reduce loneliness for our elderly. That's what people say, you know. Robots will help people with special needs to put on and remove clothing, prepare their meals, and climb in and out of bathtubs. They'll walk across floors to flick a light switch or turn on a lamp. They'll help folks to adjust bed sheets, fold blankets, and pat down pillows. They'll be programmed to set a table, sweep a floor, operate a vacuum cleaner, and put dishes into a cupboard. Robots promise us so much.

As my favorite Tom Nash and the Morphemes song puts it, “What a wonderful world it would be!”

The China Post published a cool photo of President Ma Ying-jeou in the arms of a robot at the Nangang Exhibition Hall in Taipei last Thursday for an international show on robots and related products (8-29-13 p. 14). The machine in the picture is giving Mr. Ma a hug, or at least trying to do so. Mr. President has a stiff grin on his chops, it must be said. He looks like a good boy scout. He is doing his good deed for the day, doing his best to go along with the joke. But let's not get distracted from the robot.

Gone are the metal rods, wire boxes, and naked sticks to jerk, lift, push, and move like an engineer's brainstorm, a scary specter on an automotive assembly line. Here to stay is the modern robot: a machine dressed like a cuddly teddy bear in a great thick, fluffy, cotton-like costume, head and arms an immaculate ivory, the torso a pastel blue, with a pink (yes, PINK) scarf around its throat. Or is that a bib? You mean this thing eats like a human, too?

The article features useful vocabulary. We read for example of “multi-axis” and “delta” robots. The multi-axis creatures move in “three or more dimensions.”

The delta models function with three “arms” which connect to a “universal joint” at their base. The deltas are particularly useful for picking up objects.

I should have seen this coming, and regret I did not get myself to Nangang for the exhibition. We had been forewarned, after all. Another local English newspaper reported on the show as early as Saturday, August 24. That publication spoke of BeRobot, an intriguing, but unsettling machine indeed.

Clearly, BeRobot appeals to the busy parent in need of an assistant or perhaps a baby-sitter. An enthusiastic reporter says it can play electronic games with your child, “give hugs, tell bed-time stories, and 'educate' ... The savvy kid can make it fight autonomously, like a Pokemon, or make it do the chores” (TT 8 - 24 - 13 p. 12).

There are pluses and negatives to just about everything under the sun, including robots, of course. As I approach what I assume will be the golden years of my life, I imagine the day will come when robots or equipment with robot-like qualities will be a blessing for me.

All the same, I have to say I am happy I was born when I was, and with the Mom and the Dad I was given. They were there to give my siblings and me our hugs. Mom was there in a special way to help us with our stories and reading. Dad was there for baseball and for “lessons” on how to fish, paint a room, plant a garden, cook, and drive a car. We had no robots for any of that and, holy Toledo, we still managed to survive pretty well.

How can I describe how the term “savvy” for children affects me? Do I find it perplexing, worrisome or vaguely problematic? I suppose if I had had a robot to do my chores back in my salad days, I'd have used the cursed thing, yes.

I'm not so sure, however, that a robot would have made me a fuller or deeper person.

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