

Stupor Stop & Shop

by Michael Ball

South Bay, Dorchester, Boston, Massachusetts is not a Fort Point Channel or even a Beacon Hill in terms of trendiness. Yet, locals have enough to confuse them now and suddenly.

In case you stay in whites only areas of Boston, you may never have been to this blue-collar pass-through parking lot. It has the middle and lower-middle class pleasers – Target, Marshalls, Home Depot, Toys R Us, Old Navy and like that, as Kojak used to say. It has a slightly elevated profile very recently too because it is home of the largest of the Super 88 oriental supermarkets, the ones that dare to defy the Blue Laws and open on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Now it is also in that most vicious of merchandising games. No, it's not bait-and-switch specials, nor even promoting a holiday three months in advance.

The shocking truth is that the anchor grocery, Stop & Shop, is offering too many choices and befuddling the cart rollers.

S&S had a perfectly fine, quite large enough, Super S&S. It just replaced that with an even more super Super S&S 100 yards across the parking lot.

To visit is to see how little evolving humans have accomplished and to know that multitasking is a self-delusion for nearly all of us. It is not just the grandfatherly and anile who are stunned and overloaded by options. They are the most obvious because of their slowness, but teens and older share their dysfunction.

Over a decade ago, the elderly began asking me or anyone who looked their way how to find the predictable among the cornucopia. "Can you just show me where the corn flakes are?" is a typical plea.

These are the same folk who clutch their carts with cliff-hanging grips. God forbid they leave their gathered goods even five feet away. Their cart, their very own cart must stay within reach. Otherwise, who knows what might happen. The evil polo-shirted employees might return their boxes to shelves. Another customer might make off with their treasures.

In France a supermarket, supermarché, is usually twice the size of an American 7-Eleven. That's all the super Europeans generally want or need.

There with the address of Mass Avenue instead of Allstate Road, the super duper S&S brings more confusion to its shoppers. The first weekend of the new store, I had a bit of trouble getting in, but not because there were more shoppers than usual. There was less God just as much my-gosh as stepping into Notre Dame in Paris. Shoppers entered by the

expanded produce area and blocked others in their amazement at the relatively minor differences.

Inside, once you career past the gawkers, the footprint is not so much bigger or varied. Yet, to us humans, small distinctions are big conversation.

In the pattern of the new S&S stores, this one has an aisle of office supplies stocked by Staples. It has a full aisle of non-foods, or crap you don't need as one might put it. Then a third of the last frozen-food aisle is the Go Lean Crunch and other mass-market health-food labeled food.

You'd think navigating such differences would be like stepping over the puddle that appears at the corner after the rain. You'd be wrong.

Two elderly women who didn't seem to know each other passed in opposite directions in the canned fruit and veggy aisle. One turned to her peer to say, "I can't find anything in this store." The other replied, "Yeah. I used to be able to do my shopping in less than an hour. I'll never get out of here today."

And the Gen-X, Gen Y and Boomer types were similarly befuddled. Some ran their carts into frozen food standalone cases. Others just stopped at an aisle and blocked and gawked.

Amusingly to someone who writes his shopping list in the order those items appear in the store aisles, this upgrade required no change. The fish, seltzer, dairy and everything is in the same order. In fairness to the humanoid with carts, it is a mirror image of the store a football field away, but for crying out loud in a bucket, the food from start to finish is in the exact same order!

So now, tell me again how much more advanced we are than other simian creatures. Forgetting the smart and pacific cetaceans, we are allegedly the leading edge of mammalian evolution, right? If you are properly fundamentalist, we are like God, created in his image and the highpoint of his work, right?

Tell me again how the human brain is such a marvel that the least of us are multitaskers. We can drive and use our cellphones...without daily fatal accidents. We can load Word, Outlook and a browser at the very same time. Aren't we wonderful?

Truth to tell, most of us are pathetic single-taskers. We can load three programs at the same time, use one or two in a half-assed fashion and goof up repeatedly. Most of us can handle input sequentially.

Likewise, we are susceptible to simple-minded political slogans and sound-bite reasoning. Not too much complexity, please. We're human.