

A Cell of Our Own Making

Moira Farr

- 1 I am not the first person to rail against cellphones, and I am sure I won't be the last. But recent television commercials have jolted me to a new level of alarm at what we are doing to ourselves with this rapidly metastasizing technology.
- 2 A certain purveyor of these devices is luring potential customers with this happy scenario: Imagine *never being alone*. Yes, everywhere you are, they are — whoever, in your case, they are. They scuttle behind you as you shop, this cling-on clan of yours. They wedge themselves into bed with you (perhaps installing that meter Leonard Cohen sang about in his darkly prophetic *Everybody Knows*). They hover over your shoulder at your computer and breathe down your neck as you root around in the fridge.
- 3 Ah, togetherness. With your cellphone connecting you at every waking moment to everyone you know, you've got it. And why stop at voice and text? Why not send pictures of yourself every chance you get to that special loved one from whose hip yours has been temporarily severed? After all, it's been hours, possibly even days (let's not cause mass hyperventilation by mentioning the prospect of weeks or months spent apart), since you witnessed each other in the flesh.
- 4 I'm only now getting up to speed on how widely this epidemic of attachment disorders has spread. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. The inability of large portions of the population to get by without constant telephonic communication has been getting chronic for some time now. I used to enjoy the four-hour Ottawa-Toronto train journey, as uninterrupted reading and thinking time. That is difficult now, because for much of the trip, you will involuntarily listen in on teens and twentysomethings giggling with their cell-pals, and business guys (I'm sorry, but it is usually men) sharing their Earth-shatteringly urgent dealings with all of us.
- 5 The world now seems divided between those who understand that the human voice carries more loudly when on a phone than in live conversation, and those who blithely imagine that public space is just a convenient extension of private space — theirs.
- 6 I teach a course at Carleton University. It is now standard to ask students to turn off their cellphones before class. They ring, anyway. One student actually argued for permission to leave the phone on. "But I'm waiting for a really *important* call!" she wailed. I never thought I would have to explain: For centuries, scholars have sat in classrooms for hours at

a time, unavailable to the outside world, without undue damage to their private lives. Unless you are awaiting an organ transplant, or someone else will die if you personally do not administer CPR immediately, it is not important enough to interrupt my class.

I admit, cellphones are great in an emergency and, theoretically, they can be used without disturbing others. But something's happening here to the way we perceive ourselves, the space we occupy, and the time we spend together and apart. I am not sure we fully appreciate what a revolutionary change it is.)

Throughout centuries past, people had to get by with long spells away from each other, even permanent physical separations. They left beloved homelands, forever to be apart from the people dear to them. On either side of that human experience, memories sustained love and hope. Absence made the heart grow fonder.

Months or years might go by before news, good or bad, got through. Letters went astray, purloined, burned to ashes before their intended readers saw them. Ballads and folktales are full of these dramas of fate altered, usually cruelly, by thwarted communication. Human anguish stands, in the collective imagination, on a lonely windswept shore, clutching a letter that spells doom — or mourning one that never came.

Yes, tragedies there have been, in past cellphoneless ages, and I suppose it's real fear that drives us to suckle so hungrily on this particular techno-teat. The problem is, we are only creating different, no less defeating, dilemmas for ourselves.

Our troubles now are those of overexposure, of too much communication of too much that is unimportant, and too little of what truly is. Comedian Dan Redican, once of *The Frantics*, now of *Puppets Who Kill* on the Comedy Network, once sang a pithy song whose title perfectly captures the problem: *I Miss You When You're Here*.

I pine for the days when people cultivated solitude, and could cope with a bit of loneliness, should it sometimes descend. Not only cope with, but enjoy it.

More than any cellphone or Internet communication device, there is something we can all turn to, as our best hope for getting through this life with a semblance of dignity and grace. It's invisible to the outside world, marvellously protean and portable. It provides hours upon hours of silent entertainment and, so far, is free of monthly charges.

It's called an inner life. Don't leave home without it. I put it in the "use it or lose it" category.

- 15 And a society that loses it, en masse, is the most frightening thought of all.

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NOTES

Moirra Farr teaches magazine writing at Carleton University, has written several essays and reviews, and is the author of *After Daniel: A Suicide Survivor's Tale*.

"Everybody Knows" A 1988 song by Leonard Cohen and Sharon Robinson that contains the lines "But there's gonna be a meter on your bed / That will disclose / What everybody knows."

COMPREHENSION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does Farr show that she thinks the advertiser's idea of "never being alone" is scary?
2. How does the use of a cellphone intrude on public space?
3. What does Farr think of cellphones in the classroom?
4. Paraphrase (put in your own words): "Ballads and folktales are full of these dramas of fate altered, usually cruelly, by thwarted communication" (paragraph 9).
5. What advantages are there to not being in constant communication with loved ones?
6. What does Farr mean by an "inner life"?
7. Most of us have very little quiet and solitude in our lives compared to what our ancestors had. Do people need this kind of time? Why or why not?
8. Can there be too much togetherness, or does absence make the heart grow fonder?
9. Consider the title of Farr's article. Does it have a double meaning? What ideas are conveyed in it?
10. Do you think cellphone use in public is a problem? What are the problems caused by cellphone users?
11. Do people really need to be constantly available by telephone?

LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Hyperbole One method of emphasizing a point is to draw it beyond its normal limits. Hyperbole, or exaggeration, makes something larger, something stretched out of proportion, something distorted. For example, Farr uses exaggeration to mock cellphone owners with such phrases as "mass hyperventilation" and "their Earth-shatteringly urgent dealings."

Use of "you" Although the use of the pronoun "you" to mean people in general should be avoided in academic writing, in informal essays such as this one by Farr, "you" is used to make a more direct connection between writer and reader.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an instructional essay explaining the proper etiquette for using cellphones. Include some of the features such as built-in cameras.
2. Write an essay explaining the advantages or the disadvantages of having just a cellphone rather than a land line. Do not focus just on the advantages of cellphones in general.
3. Read the lyrics of Leonard Cohen's song "Everybody Knows" (available on the Internet). How valid are these lyrics to today's society and in particular to what Farr is writing about?
4. "Don't leave home without it" used to be a slogan for the American Express credit card. It has now made it to everyday expression that people use and recognize. Choose one advertising slogan that has become part of everyday language and explain why it is effective as a business tool and why it became popular.
5. Do personal music players, such as Walkmans, also intrude on public space and cut listeners off from the people around them?
6. Some cellphone companies offer a variety of services to help users lie about their location and get out of difficult situations. For instance, taped background noises and business-like backdrops for cellphone cameras can be used to mislead people about where someone is. Pre-arranged calls help people extricate themselves from a situation like a bad blind date. Write a report on some of these features and their use.