

## CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

by Michele Hiczewski



As I wandered aimlessly through the aisles on a recent trip to the grocery store, my ears perked up as I heard a nearby woman squeal with delight. “My God, it has been too long! How are you?” I whirled around expectantly, curious as to who was so thrilled to see me. Then I saw her. Much to my surprise, she was not even looking at me. In fact, she was not even talking to me. Her exuberance was directed at the person on the other end of her cell phone. I shot a rather annoyed glance in her direction, hoping that she might realize how intrusive her conversation was. But she kept on chatting as she continued her shopping, in a volume so loud that two tin cans and a string would probably have been adequate. Her presumption must have been that everyone else at the store that day actually cared about her conversation, or at best, did not mind having to listen to it. Me thinks she was wrong.

I must admit that cell phones, or rather the people who are addicted to them, are a continual source of both amusement and aggravation to me. The cell phone itself is a wonderful invention, and there are many practical uses. Quick communication is essential in the event of medical emergencies, natural disasters, and power outages. Family members with miles between them can communicate easily, and who can forget the final heart-wrenching phone conversations between loved ones and the victims of September 11<sup>th</sup>. All of these situations are examples of acceptable cell phone use, which is in times of emergency or unusual circumstance.

Unfortunately, the word “emergency” is subjective. It can constitute anything from a broken leg to a broken fingernail, and this is where things have gotten out of hand. Think about the last cell phone call you made. No, not the most important one but the *last* one. Think about how critical that call was, and what else you were doing while making that call. I’ll wager a hefty bet that many people were driving while talking, and that it would be a real stretch to say that the call was an urgent one. I used to assume that if someone was talking on their cell phone while they were walking or driving, there must be something really big going on in their world. Then I started listening to some of these conversations, which I do not feel is an invasion of someone’s privacy. If I am in earshot of what is being said, confidentiality is out the door. I soon realized that Jacob’s soccer game, Suzanne’s dry cleaning and Nana’s geranium plants were some of the big things that were going on for people that day, as well as the details of Little Shane’s stomach virus. That particular conversation not only aggravated me, but it also left me feeling a tad queasy.

The wearing of a cell phone is now as much a part of our wardrobe as a belt. You can decorate it so it will help to accessorize your outfit, and you can download virtually any noise or song to replace the sound of a normal ring. After all, if you are going to have something with you all day long, it only makes sense to try to personalize it a bit. The big question is, why are people so hell-bent on wearing an electronic device, stuck to their side like some kind of Siamese Cyber-twin? Could it be because it makes them feel important? Just clip one of these shiny gadgets onto your belt and you immediately acquire a perceived air of importance. You now appear to be someone who is so valuable to society that you can never be out of reach. Of course, the most important phone call you probably receive most days is from your spouse, inquiring as to what is for dinner that night, but nobody will be the wiser. You will give the appearance of a person who needs to be accessible 24/7, in the event that the transplant center has finally found your matching kidney.

Cell phones have also turned us into an amazingly inconsiderate and ignorant group of people. I witnessed a very upsetting example of this several months ago, as I was out having dinner at a nice restaurant. Two teenagers and two older adults, presumably their grandparents, were sitting next to me. After placing their orders, each of the teens immediately pulled out their cell phones and began to multi-task, by checking their voice mails, returning calls, and even text-messaging. Their

grandparents sat there patiently, the expressions on their faces a mix of confusion and hurt, but the youngsters were far too occupied to take notice. After their meals arrived, they were interrupted several times by additional calls, one of which lasted through the entire meal. Obviously the thought never occurred to them to turn their ring tones to vibrate, or heaven forbid to turn off their phones completely. When the check came, signaling the end of the meal, the two teens rose and went immediately outside. Their eyes never left their phones and their fingers clicked away rapidly, as they sauntered obliviously out the front door. The grandparents stayed behind paying the bill, no doubt feeling it was money well spent to have shared such a wonderful meal with their family.

I would love to say that this was an isolated incident and that these two teenagers were exceptionally rude. Sadly that is not the case, and it is not just teens that are behaving in such an insolent manner. Adults can shoulder a fair share of the blame, as they trade-in common etiquette for the latest apparatus in communication technology. The invention of the Bluetooth means that you can actually leave the device hooked to your ear as you go about your day, making it nearly impossible for anyone to determine if you have someone on the other end or not. This insures that you will not be interrupted by anyone who wants to have a face-to-face conversation. Heaven forbid that you might actually make eye contact or smile at a person as they pass by. Once upon a time, such introverted behavior would have been considered odd, but today it is completely acceptable.

The sad truth is that people just cannot put their cell phones away, no matter how inappropriate the time or place. The NY State law that prohibits the hand-held use of cell phones while driving is a joke at best, and places that request people to turn off their phones before entering are usually ignored. It is not unusual to hear noisy, juvenile ring-tones sound out in churches, theatres, restaurants, and even yoga studios. Why do people feel that these rules do not apply to them? Are they completely oblivious to the fact that this is downright rude behavior or do they just not give a damn?

When I am out in public, I am constantly reminded that I am in the minority regarding my feelings about cell phone use. I have had the same cell phone for eight years now, a virtual antique by today's standards. No camera, no text messaging, no Internet access, and there are only seven ring tones to choose from. But I can send and receive calls with it, and even though there is a voice mail feature, I have yet to take the time to learn how to use it. I subscribe to the old belief that if I miss a call from someone, they will probably call back.

Yes, they will probably call back —unless the call is just not that important. ...And I bet it won't be.