

No Cell Phone, No Television

The company we transferred our phone service to includes three options in their basic package. For one option, I chose voice mail, that would store messages for us at the phone company. I opened the book that told how to activate and use voice mail and immediately lost my will to work through what appeared to be a very complicated process. "I'd have to be an engineer to set this up," I said.

Our answering machine still worked, and I decided to let it record any messages we received. I called the phone company to get us out of voice mail. We didn't want messages going to a place we don't know how to get to and use. The woman I talked to said, "You can choose another option to replace voice mail." She mentioned a hook up to cable television, and I said, "We don't watch television."

"Oh. Well, for your cell phone..."

"We don't have a cell phone."

"Oh," she said. "I'll bet you'd be interesting to sit down and talk with."

Maybe. Conversation with me might be boring. I know little about sports, celebrities, video games, happenings in television's world, or the newest gadgets to buy and become involved with.

I don't know much about contemporary music, either. I have a radio and a CD player, but I rarely listen to them, maybe three or four times in the last year, briefly each time. I like music, but when I listen to it, I listen to it. I don't use it as background to the rest of my living. Most of the time, I concentrate on something besides music. My primary involvement with music is when I play my guitar and sing songs I've written. I didn't mention any of that to the woman at the phone company.

Some friends and relatives express concern that media shortages in my life might lead to deficient education and deteriorating mental health. Sometimes, I think I will try to listen to more music and watch more movies, tv, and videos to keep people who care about me from worrying. My resolve to become more

involved with media washes away in practicing my songs or in writing an essay or a book or a new song, in reading books, magazines and newspapers or in doing nothing at all.

Sometimes, I sit still and listen to no sounds, find a quiet place in myself as close to no thought as I can find. I pray and meditate. Sometimes, I achieve quietness to meditate and pray and go to sleep instead.

For two weeks, during Christmas break from schools, I took care of a house, a greenhouse, and animals (One dog. one llama, five sheep, one goat, thirteen chickens, and one cat) for friends who went to Florida to visit family. Chip, the man of the place, was concerned. I walk down a steep hill to feed the ungulates. Snow might fall and cover the trail and add to the possible danger of the steep hill. I don't walk nor balance as well as I used to. Forty years ago, a drunk driver smashed into me. Advancing age makes lasting problems that came to me in that wreck more intense. My mobility and balance suffers in recent years, and Chip knows that.

Chip left a cell phone for me to use. If I was out tending the animals or walking in the back pasture for enjoyment, and if I fell and needed help, I could telephone. I tried to learn to use the cell phone. It had narrow bars, small buttons, and time limits on some operations.

My brother, Bob, an accomplished cell-phone user, came to visit and figured out how to use the cell phone. He showed me. He said, "Push this button. Yes. Then this white bar. Then this telephone icon... No, not the red one yet. The green one." I had trouble pushing one bar or one button at a time. My fingers are too big. I never realized before just how big and blunt-ended my fingers are. They work well for most things, but mastering this telephone might be beyond what I can do with my fingers.

Bob said, "You have to get to this button through three other pushes within three seconds or it reverts back to the beginning."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I looked for a way to change it, but I didn't find one. Maybe there's a book for it."

Bob's hands are as big as mine. Maybe his fingers aren't as blunt ended. I think that's how authors described gunfighters in

dime novels. “He had big, square hands and blunt-ended fingers.” Hanging close to wooden pistol grips. Black walnut.

Three seconds? I haven’t even gotten through my thoughts about fingers and hands and Bob and me and our working lives and how our work influenced our hands, made them big and square, or maybe our big, square hands influenced us toward physical jobs, and all the other distractions that come to my mind, and the three seconds is used up. I don’t even know yet what icon he means let alone can I hit it without also hitting three or four surrounding buttons or bars or icons or some combination of targets on the face of the machine. “It’s tiny.” I said, “If I did put this thing up to my ear, how could the sound go clear up to the microphone part? Am I supposed to move it down when I talk and up when I listen?”

I try twice more. Then I say, “Forget it.” I back away from the phone and any idea of learning how to use it.

But I talk to Chip where he is in Florida, via the land-line phone. He’s almost always relaxed, but this cell-phone thing, he isn’t as relaxed about. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t have left Emma’s cell phone there for you.” Oh. Emma gave up good in her life in case I need that particular good in mine. I appreciate that.

If I could, I’d feel guilty about not mastering the phone, but that feeling of guilt wouldn’t help anything. I already tried to learn to use the phone without success, so I just get stubborn. “I’m not going to use it,” mainly because I can’t. Chip and I talk briefly about how everything is going for me at his place and how everything is going for him in Florida, and then each of us goes back to what he’s doing.

An imagined scene begins to unfold in my mind as I walk about the place in the next few days. In this imagined scene, toward dusk, I walk across the back pasture as I often actually do, to enjoy the late afternoon. Dang me, I trip on a lava rock, fall, hit my head on another lava rock; there’s plenty of ‘em out there, with juniper trees and grass and small lava ridges sticking up above the ancient, lava-ash dirt. The ungulates already walked down to the loafing shed and now relax on the ground near the shed and chew cud.

I'm conscious, but if I'm going to get out of here alive, I'm going to need help. I struggle a big, square hand into my jacket pocket and fetch the cell phone. Clouds roll in and dim the remaining light. The day heads fast toward a ten-degree night. I hit my head hard. Am I bleeding? I can't tell if that's blood or rain or melted snow that comes away on my fingers when I touch the side of my head. Is it raining?

Hit the buttons. Hit the bars. One, this one, and then this one, and three seconds, and if I do it right, that will take me to the button that takes me to another button that decides if I'm qualified to dial a number. If I get there, I might have to prove who I am. What number? Maybe 911? No reason to figure that out unless I even get to where I can dial. Two seconds gone. Then three. I can't see what the buttons say. Or the bars. Some of these things go by color, and color disappears first as it gets dark. Dang. I'm not even sure what buttons and bars I'm supposed to punch, in what order, but I keep trying.

I'm cold on the ground at dusk. The sky above me shines lighter than the world close around me. Moon and stars light up the clouds. Dark shadows of juniper trees reach out into the lava-strewn and tree-strewn, grassy pasture. Someone grabs my arm or takes my arm gently, or calls me and calls me again. Is the voice harsh, or is that a gentle sound? I have trouble sorting sounds from the encroaching night around me.

I fell hard. My adventure in the pasture has taken a serious turn, possibly the most serious turn in my years in this material form. An escorter of souls comes to help me leave this material world, to guide me into the spiritual world. It tugs at my arm, gently, or not gently, depending on the reader's religious orientation or mine or on my concept or on our concept(s) of who gathers souls to where for whom.

I say "Wait a minute. Can you just wait a minute? I'm trying to ... It's even harder to hit these little tiny buttons with you pulling on my arm like that. Three and then goes four ..."

I punch a rigid finger (blunt-ended) at something in my hand and then at something that isn't even there anymore, since material objects, such as cell phones, probably don't transcend physical

existence into the spiritual realm (I don't know that for sure until I get there and look around, but I'm fairly sure they don't).

I need to prepare myself for eternity, prepare myself to merge into the one universal mind, prepare myself to meet and revere the force of life that transcends material existence. I need to compose myself for the final closing of my material existence, but I pay no attention to anything around me. I'm self-absorbed, materially-absorbed. I punch at an object in my hand, or after transition into the spiritual realm, maybe at nothing at all but memory, in a sad attempt to hang onto material existence instead of turning to the magnificent experience unfolding all around me and within me, the end of material existence and the realization of spiritual existence with all its beauties and beautiful colors and beautiful smells.

It wouldn't be polite of me to be so involved in material existence that I missed everything spiritual going on around me nor would it be supportive in any way of my continuing spiritual education.

Days passed, and the scene developed in my thoughts; I walked up to the chicken pen, up to the greenhouse, down to the loafing shed, or I sat in the house and sang and played my guitar, or I built an essay in my mind and rap-tapped it into my computer.

The heater thermostat doesn't work right, and the greenhouse froze one night, got down to 28 degrees. I sprayed everything with misted water. A long time ago, I read that spraying plants helps them live through a mild freeze. The spray didn't freeze into ice, which memory tells me is a necessary part of this save-by-spraying process. Nonetheless, all the plants lived through the freeze. Some plants had a few dried-out leaves. Some turned lighter colored but still lived.

Where Chip and his wife and their kids visited family in Florida, it reached 80 degrees. I sent Chip an email and described my imagined scene in the back pasture to him. He told me later he got a kick out of the story and read it to several members of his family.

Chip and his family came home, and I returned to my own home.

I use modern technology to help me put my writing into final form. I use my computer to run a word processor, to run a website editor to create a website I'm putting my work on, to email and to

record my songs. I use the internet for research, and to confirm my spelling or my correct use of a word.

I'm grateful for the technology we put to good use. I avoid technology I think might reduce my self-awareness or my awareness of the world around me.

Technology directed by human greed and the desire for inordinate power over others rapidly destroys our environment and the earth itself. War, the use and misuse of nuclear power, and hydro-fracking are prominent examples of technological power used destructively.

Enthrallment with technology absorbs so much time and attention now that too many of us don't have time and attention to investigate our moral responsibility as caretakers of the earth, as the only material beings who might be able to heal the damage already done to our environment. Humankind is overdue for its next evolutionary step, progression into benign, intelligent caretaker of the earth, kind to all members of our own species, kind to all other species, kind to the earth itself.

Spring blossoms in central Oregon. Some days develop warm and sunny. I have to get out, away from all my work, away from too much thought.

I walk along the river. The sound of water rushing toward the ocean fills sunshine around me. Wild geese fly above me, honking about their adventure with life. Their feathers sound against air. Smells of cold water, of life growing toward its future move in warm air. Wild mallard ducks on the river speak of spring in calls that sound like hysterical laughter. Kingfishers call high-pitched sounds through smells of spring and dive into the river. Wind blows into trees growing from lava formations that rise into blue sky. Small white clouds flee rapidly across the sky.

A man I walk toward looks into my eyes and says, "It's a beautiful day for walking by a beautiful river."

"It is. It is," I say. He walks briskly and is gone.

My smile and my exhilaration at meeting this poet of the day stay with me. A young woman walks toward me. She meets my eyes, says "Hello," and I say "Hello." She listens to the day around her, to my greeting, to the river running toward the sea, to birds, to wind, to

the blue sky. No wires. No electricity.

She walks up the path. I walk down the path, still headed the same direction the river flows toward the ocean. I feel fine. This fine day is made even finer by my contacts with people who seem to be right here, in this moment, undistracted by sounds of other times or by thoughts of other places.