

Dial H for headaches

TOO MUCH TALK

THIS CHRISTMAS we cannot escape the seasonal cell phone campaign, ranging from those creepy Rogers elves playing with themselves in bathtubs to the monkey-see monkey-do shtick from Telus. Not even the subway is sacred, where anyone would be hard pressed to get a signal.

I don't get it. I don't want to be that available to anyone, ever. As our personal privacy shrinks to a dinky few feet inside our office Habitrail boxes, as we try to work through the constant onslaught of e-mail interruption, as we are increasingly plugged in but tuned out of the physical act of being alive, the last thing I want is to have my already over-stimulated environment electronically invaded by the trill of a cell phone.

My partner agrees. She didn't even like talking on the phone back when we had to physically dial.

Cell phones are vile and lead to bad manners. Ever been in a meeting interrupted by someone who has to take a call? Rude. Has your serenity been shattered in a restaurant by the idiot beside you gabbing into his cell, apparently, about nothing? Inconsiderate. And why do cell junkies speak so much more loudly than the rest of us? Perhaps their eardrums are being radiated and they are going slowly but inexorably deaf. We can only hope. Perhaps prolonged cell exposure simply melts the brain.

Why else would cell addicts think we would possibly care if Steve can meet them at 11pm at Babylon, that Cindy has a cold, or that they are stopping for Kibbles 'n Bits on the way home? We have our own little lives to worry about. We should be spared the detailed drivel of strangers. This has become a culture that just talks too damned much. I miss silence. I crave it, and so I vowed not so long ago that I would never, ever, buy a cell phone.

Hypocrisy is not an attractive trait. It was inevitable, I was driven to it, but these rationalizations sound as hollow as the content of most cell conversations. In fact, I simply caved. I am now the reluctant owner of a hateful little device foisted upon me by the Rogers elves.

Let me explain. Have you noticed the dearth of pay phones lately? There are alarmingly few where once they thrived. On sleepy street corners in every town across the country innocent pay phones are being systematically hunted down and exterminated. They are as anachronistic as carbon paper. There ought to be protests: "Bring back telephone

booths, a part of our cultural heritage." "Think Superman, think living, breathing operators." "Ban the cell." It could work.

In the meantime, the looming extinction of phone booths means people like my partner can't call people like me with convenience. So it happened one weekend when she was away, as she often is in her line of work, that I didn't hear from her. This wouldn't have been a problem, except for a violent snowstorm that threw cars off the 400 at the rate of 10 per kilometre. Naturally, I started to worry. By Sunday night I was convinced she sported a



KATE BARKER

Jane Doe toe-tag in the Barrie morgue. It was a legitimate cell phone moment, a time for which cell phones were originally intended; to call loved ones to announce a safe arrival. There are few legitimate cell phone moments. The others involve violently ill children, blown tires and highway carnage. Point one for the evil Rogers elves.

Point two is embarrassing. I am not blessed with a sense of direction. My partner had a compass installed in the car to circumvent my navigational shortcomings, but regardless, the only way I can figure out which way is north is to imagine myself standing on a map of Canada facing Hudson's Bay. A few weeks ago I accompanied my beloved to a farmhouse. I was sent away armed with a map against my directional ineptitude so that I could pick her up. The map however neglected to name the street upon which the farmhouse stood.

Worse, I didn't know the name of the farmhouse's owner. Worse still, my negative sense of direction screamed illogical coordinates to my rattled brain as I aimlessly circled fields, fences and the occasional horse in rapidly diminishing light. Farmhouses, I realized then, are oddly identical. So I did the sensible thing. I cursed my own idiocy, pulled over and burst into tears. I did find the farmhouse in the end, or rather, the car did. Like a loyal old horse, she coaxed me onto a nondescript road and there it was. Cell phone moment number two was clearly upon me, and I resented it.

We decided not to share our cell number with anyone, to only use it in those rare and legitimate cell phone moments. We have made these kinds of promises to each other before. All I can say is if one day you see me fish out my cell and hear me say something insipid like, "Hi. Not much. I'm sitting on the bus," then please — just shoot me.

Kate Barker is a regular contributor to Xtra.