



August 24, 2008

EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

Connected, Yes, but Hermetically Sealed

By [BEN STEIN](#)

“MAN is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,” said Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

What would Rousseau have made of the modern-day balls and chains with which we shackle ourselves? They are not made of steel or iron, but of silicon and plastic and digits and electrons and waves zooming through the air. These are the chains of all kinds of devices, like the BlackBerry, the [iPhone](#) and the Voyager. These are the chains with which we have bound ourselves, losing much of our solitude and our ability to see the world around and inside us.

Consider an airplane flight. We are soaring across the country. We listen to music. We read books and newspapers. We sleep and dream. If you are like me, you look at the cloud formations and listen to Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A major. Maybe you talk to your neighbors.

You are free to think and to reflect on existence and on your own small role in it. You are free to have long thoughts and memories of high school and college and the first time you met your future spouse.

Then, the airplane lands. Cellphones and P.D.A.'s snap into action. Long rows of lights light up on tiny little screens. These are people we absolutely have to talk to. Voice messages pour in, telling of children who got speeding tickets, of margin calls, of jobs offered and lost. The bonds of obligation, like handcuffs, are clapped back onto our wrists, and we shuffle off to the servitude of our jobs and our mundane tasks. A circuit is completed: the passengers who were human beings a few moments earlier become part of an immense, all-engulfing machine of communication and control. Human flesh and spirit become plastic and electronic machinery.

What if we didn't have cellphones or P.D.A.'s? We would still have duties and families and bosses, but they would not be at our heels, yipping at us constantly, barking at us to do this or that or worry about this or that. We would have some moat of time and space around ourselves. Not now.

Consider another example: Walk down the Avenue of the Americas in Manhattan, between Central Park South and 45th Street. Almost every man and woman is on the phone or scanning the screen of a BlackBerry. No one looks at anyone else (except me; I stare openly and voraciously). It is as if each person were in a cocoon of electrons and self-obsession and obligation. Each of these people might as well be wearing a yoke around his neck.

There is no community here — or on the streets of any other city. Beverly Hills, my home, is far worse. There, people are hermetically sealed off from one another, not taking in the air or the stupendous buildings or the sky or just the miracle of confronting the earth as it is.

Or consider our beloved young people. I see them in Beverly Hills, in Malibu, among magnificent homes, next to the mighty Pacific, walking along avenues of mansions and towering palm trees. They walk in rows of three, each on a cellphone, not even talking to the people next to her.

I keep thinking of my happiest moments of youth, walking along Sligo Creek Parkway in Silver Spring, Md., coming home from Parkside Elementary School (long ago closed) or along Dale Drive, coming home from Montgomery Blair High School. I could smell the leaves burning in the late fall, think the long thoughts that young people are supposed to have, and dream of my adult life, when I would have the love of a great woman and a Corvette. Those were moments of power.

Now, there is no thought or reverie. There is nothing but gossip and making plans to shop or watch television. The cellphone and the P.D.A. have basically replaced thought. When I was a young White House speech writer, we communed with one another and otherwise read and wrote quietly in our offices. We had mental space. No more.

I spent much of the summer in my beloved Sandpoint, Idaho, far north in the Panhandle, overlooking Lake Pend Oreille. People there still have some freedom of thought. They walk along the streets without phones. They ride in their boats and water-ski or fish without any talking over the airwaves. They talk to one another. They look up at the sky. Children line up to swing on a rope over Sand Creek and then drop into the creek. Businesspeople walk to their appointments, greeting the people they see, not talking to a small plastic box. In other words, they are connected to the glorious Bonner County sky and water and land, and, most of all, connected to their own ruminations.

WHAT would we do if cellphones and P.D.A.'s disappeared? We would be forced to think again. We would have to confront reality. My own life is spent mostly with men and women of business. I have been at this for a long time now, and what I have seen of the loss of solitude and dignity is terrifying among those who travel and work, or even who stay still and work. They are slaves to connectedness. Their work has become their indentured servitude. Their children and families are bound to the same devices, too.

But try a day without that invasion of your privacy. Or a week. You will be shocked at what you discover. It's called life. It's called nature. It's called getting to know yourself. I have a close friend who is in prison. He used to be imprisoned by his P.D.A. He has many stories, but the most haunting one is about how, without his phone, without his P.D.A., he has come to know, for the first time, who he is.

Will the rest of us ever get the chance? Will we ever throw away the chains that go "ping" in our pocket? Or have we irrevocably become machines ourselves?

Ben Stein is a lawyer, writer, actor and economist. E-mail: ebiz@nytimes.com.

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