

Cell phone sacrament: An outward sign of an inward grace

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

I did not own one for ages. The first reason was personal: driving the car was a kind of Sabbath for me, with nothing to do but listen to music and watch the scenery. Why muck that up with a ringing telephone? The second reason was ecological: if I detested the microwave towers that were springing up all over the countryside, then why participate in their proliferation? The third reason was numerical: I could barely juggle seven numbers, much less ten, but every new cell phone in the world nudged me nearer the necessity of dialing ten digit telephone numbers with weird new area codes.

I finally caved because I could no longer find a pay phone when I needed one. Driving home at midnight, wanting to let loved ones know I was safe, I circled three filling stations before I found a working pay phone. Attending a conference out of town, wanting to call a friend, I found the mounted wall booths opposite the ballroom where the pay telephones used to be, but the carpentry was all that was left.

I bought a cell phone in self-defense, hiding it on my person like the key to a Ferrari. What made me think I was so important? What did I have to say that required such high-speed delivery? Now I am as addicted to my cell phone as anyone else. All that sets me apart, as far as I can tell, is my keen sense of defeat. I have lost a huge chunk of freedom, and I know it—not only the freedom to sit quietly with my own thoughts, ready to respond to what happens right in front of me, but also the freedom to imagine that such single-mindedness is good use of my time.

With a cell phone in reach, shouldn't I be returning calls? Even if I am driving, shouldn't I check my voice mail at the college? Even if I am walking down the street, couldn't I talk to my sister-in-law? It has been so long since I have checked in with her, and dodging other pedestrians hardly requires my undivided attention. Besides, most of them are talking on cell phones—and walking dogs and pushing baby

carriages.

Recently I have met two people who have mentioned “technology fasts” to me. One teaches in a divinity school and the other is a college chaplain. Both have asked their students to refrain from cell phone use for as long as a week as a spiritual discipline, and both have faced unanimous incredulity. This is easy for me to believe.

Earlier this year, when I darkened my classroom to show a short video, I looked out to see half of my students’ faces lit up by the screens on their cell phones. When I asked them to stop checking text messages and watch the video, most were puzzled. What made me think they could not do both at the same time? They sent text messages while they watched television. They sent text messages while they drove cars. A student who works for my husband can text his friends with one hand while he operates a rototiller with the other.

When I told them about the engineer in California who was so busy text-messaging that he plowed his train into another train, killing himself and a lot of other people, this sobered the students. They had not heard the story, although one laughingly volunteered that his friend had almost killed him by text-messaging through a red light. I do not want to think about what it will take to sober these two.

On the premise that most people do not risk their lives for meaningless things, I asked the students to tell me about their cell phone use. Why was it so important to them? Why did they spend so much time focused on those tiny screens?

“I don’t have to walk five miles to talk to someone I care about,” one girl said.

“When one of us needs emotional support, we’re there for each other.”

“My parents text me,” a freshman said. “If I don’t text them right back, they panic. They want to know where I am, if I’m OK. My cell phone is their safety net.”

“Without a cell phone, you’d never know what was going on except in your own little world,” another said.

On the basis of these answers, I have begun thinking of the cell phone as a contemporary sacrament—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, which is the grace of communion with those not present in the flesh. Like any other sacrament, this one cuts two ways. Water sustains life, but you can also drown in it. A little wine makes merry, but too much intoxicates.

Where the cell phone is concerned, I think the edge is between the real comfort of human connection and the compulsion to communicate, driven by the fear of being left all alone in our own little worlds. What remains to be seen is whether we can learn to handle this potent sacrament without losing the sacred freedom to set it down. God willing, there will still be people to talk to when we turn our phones back on again, free to give them our undivided attention at last.