

Globe Magazine

THE BOSTON GLOBE / APRIL 23, 2017



A week before my mom sold her house, I stood in her empty kitchen looking at the one thing still hanging on the wall: her telephone, its twisted cord in knots from decades of daily use. As a teen, I spent hours each day on a phone like that, gabbing with my friends, twirling the cord around my fingers. These days landlines—even cordless ones—don’t get a lot of love. “The only calls are from telemarketers!” goes the typical landline owner’s rant. No wonder that in the United States, nearly half of us have disconnected them. In those homes that still have one, the poor phone just sits there forsaken, like an ex who won’t leave.

I’m an outlier: I love my landline. The problem is getting my friends and family to actually call me on it. No matter how often I ever-so-gently remind every person I know that the best way to reach me is on my landline, not my cell, the only person who routinely calls it is someone named Rachel from Cardholder Services, always with great news about my credit card interest rate. I wish my friends were more like Rachel.

When it comes to actual phone conversations (remember those?), a landline trumps a cellphone, hands down. Landlines are the sensible shoes of the phone world. Boring but reliable. A cellphone, on the other hand, is your flashy yet undependable lover, always promising a good connection but rarely delivering, and often dropping you entirely. On a landline, you never say, “Can you hear

CONNECTIONS

A Landline Lover’s Lament

BY ROBIN EILEEN BERNSTEIN

me now?” What’s more, they’re easier to hold and don’t heat up like a baked potato. And you can kiss those mortifying butt-dials goodbye.

Even better, a landline prevents you from accidentally becoming “that jerk with the cellphone.” Sure, in public, I can let calls go to voice mail. But if it’s one of my kids or my significant other or my elderly mom, suddenly I’m the jerk screaming into my cell on a noisy subway platform or whispering furtively while paying for groceries as impatient shoppers behind me shoot virtual daggers at my back.

And speaking of leaving voice mail, don’t bother. Nobody listens to it. I don’t know why I dutifully wait for the beep, explain to my friend that I have to cancel our plans and then, as instructed, provide a call-back number—my landline, of course—reciting it twice for good measure. A second later, my cell rings. “Sorry, missed your call!

What’s up?”

I confess, there have been times (I refuse to say how many) when even in the privacy of my home, I’ve pretended to miss a cellphone call just so I can call back on my landline. To anyone I’ve done this to, which is probably everyone, I apologize.

When you think about it, though, it seems the real reason landlines are fast becoming obsolete is that, given a choice, we avoid phone calls altogether—even quick ones. We’d rather spend 10 minutes using our thumbs to compose a series of typo-ridden texts, which take the recipient another 10 minutes to decipher. If we need to reach a work colleague, we e-mail. Instead of laughing out loud at a funny story my friend tells me on the phone, I now type “LOL” in response to her witty Facebook comment. I suppose I should be happy that anyone still wants to call me at all.

The only demographic that clings desperately to the past—I mean, to landlines—is the 50-plus crowd. That includes me. I know I ought to stop being a Luddite, and I’ll get there eventually. In the meantime, don’t ask me to pull the plug on my landline. I can’t bring myself to cut that tangled cord. Not yet. Besides, I’m expecting it to ring any minute, and I’m betting it will be really great news, probably from someone named Rachel.

Robin Eileen Bernstein is a writer in New York. Send comments to connections@globe.com.

TELL YOUR STORY. E-mail your 650-word essay on a relationship to connections@globe.com. Please note: We do not respond to submissions we won’t pursue.