

# Talk is Cheap.



## living out loud

BY KATHRYN MARTINI

After four long years of waiting, my wife and I have finally acquired iPhones, thanks to Verizon. A friend fondly refers to hers as "The JesusPhone" and I concur. If I believed in God, I would be certain that S/He had something to do with the miracle that I now carefully cradle in my hand at all times, often staring at it like a new mother waiting to see what her baby may do next. I'm fairly sure I've spent the equivalent of my next paycheck downloading apps, songs, books and ringtones; luckily my paycheck isn't that large and I have a wife who keeps the family in groceries or the children would have to skip a few meals this month.

Now that Verizon and AT&T are both carrying the most amazing device known to humankind, I suspect the commercials will get quite interesting—maybe even someday lifting the contract of indentured cell-vitude that's enslaved me and bringing down costs.

Before iPhones and cell phones I loved actually *talking* on the phone. When I was a smoker, I started each morning with coffee, a cigarette and a call to someone—usually my best friend at the time. I would puff away, sipping my cuppa and gossiping or laughing about something or someone, catching up or making plans. It was my ritual and even after I quit tobacco and had to take care of babies, I kept my call as a part of my daily routine. I'm not so old, but today we live in a different culture—

and although iPhones and applications aren't free, the communication aspect has become pretty darn cheap.

I moved to Oregon in 1992, leaving family and friends on the East Coast. Keeping in contact with them was my only connection to home. I would write letters but it was more important to me to actually talk to them, which I did quite often, even though the long-distance phone calls were often cost-prohibitive.

During the 1990s, it was a common occurrence to receive solicitations from long-distance companies offering incentives to switch carriers. This new competition was due to the break up of "Ma Bell," which virtually controlled U.S. telecommunications for more than 100 years. Bell Communications could no longer legally monopolize long-distance service, forcing consumers to have a local service (a "Baby Bell") and a long-distance provider. The three main long-distance companies, MCI, AT&T and Sprint, fought for customers.

I convinced my mother and grandparents to switch to MCI for their "Friends and Family" program—a plan that offered cheaper per minute calls to people who had MCI as their carrier—40 cents a minute on weekdays, later com-

ing down to 25 cents a minute. I remember watching the clock, counting my quarters as I chatted, not looking forward to what I knew would be (still) a huge phone bill.

My research on the Intertubes found that WorldCom acquired MCI, Verizon acquired WorldCom, AT&T became AT&T and, really, who worries about long-distance calls anymore? It's included in most cellular and home service plans, and those who still want to speak with friends and family far away can just use their 4Gs (*fourth generation* cell phones).

I honestly don't remember when my morning coffee and call ritual came to an end but somewhere along the way AOL stopped charging for Internet service by the hour, cell phone plans included unlimited texting and my morning routine was replaced by blog reading, Twitter and Facebook status updates. Even emails seem a bit tedious these days unless I'm trying to avoid a difficult face-to-face conversation with someone generally unpleasant.


Including our two JesusPhones, we have five devices on our plan and share 1,400 minutes each month with unlimited text and data usage. Last month, we used only 800 minutes of talk time. We did, however, use more than

20,000 text messages and 360 megabytes of data, with 12,000 of those text messages made by my 12-year-old daughter, all of them consisting of one or two word messages sent back and forth hundreds of times.

A few years ago, I would have surpassed 800 minutes myself, but even with my lack of actual vocal conversation, I don't feel as though I've become disconnected with people. If anything I feel more entangled and less autonomous than ever. I'm expected—and I expect—to return an email, text message or phone call immediately because I know the other person knows that I have it in my hand. There's no more hiding behind "the answering machine must have erased your message." And most people don't even leave messages anymore (the JesusPhone shows who left the message, eliminating the need to even retrieve it—brilliant.)

I can't imagine what's next—but I do know that, today, it's a busy world out there filled with lots of rapid-fire information. I no longer talk on the phone with relatives on Sundays or dread the long-distance bill. Twitter is free, Facebook is free, Scrabble is free and talk is definitely cheap. Unfortunately, data plans are not—but that just may be the next thing to go. ☐

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