

Or so I hear

I am one of the 10 percent of adult Americans who don't own a cell phone. It's not that I think cell phones are the work of the devil, or that they aren't handy, it's just that I am far too busy listening to other people's conversations to have one of my own.

I am not a people watcher, but I am a member of the same genus and species: I am a people listener. A conversation pirate. A thief of other people's words. I don't know if I was born an enormous eavesdropper, or if I became an earjacker, a highjacker of other people's dialogue, when I became a writer and was always in need of fresh material. I am sure of one thing though, I find other people's conversations infinitely more interesting than my own.

Although I don't own one, cell phones have been a blessing to me and have extended my writing career 20 years longer than it should have been. I don't do my research in a library but in a restaurant booth where I can hardly write fast enough to record all the cell yells from people on their phones.

You all know who I'm talking about, the folks who invite other people to lunch and then spend the entire time talking to someone else on their phone, talking louder and louder above the din of other cell phone addicts. They seem to be completely oblivious to their lunch guests or the other diners. Talk about obscene phone calls! I know it's rude for me to listen in on other people's conversations, but the way I see it, if they want to blab at such decibels then I have a responsibility to listen. I should at least show them that courtesy.

You'd be surprised at the things I've heard. (Or maybe you wouldn't.) There have been many occasions when I could have blackmailed husbands, embarrassed wives or tattled on kids with the information I overheard. And evidently I'm not the only person who listens in on other people's conversations because the word of the year is "halfalogue," which is that half of a conversation you hear involuntarily.

Unlike me, my wife is very quiet, which is just one of her many attributes. She can go to a dinner party and not say two words. But she's a great listener and often after dining out we'll have our

own conversation about what the people in the next booth were discussing.

Sometimes it's hard to just sit there when people are getting their facts wrong or contemplating bad lifestyle decisions. Often I just want to blurt out, "Can you be a little more specific? Has your husband cheated on you before and exactly what disease did he give you?" Or, "Look, you're broke. And you eat too much. I'm just saying, instead of spending \$10,000 on a tummy tuck, next time you shouldn't order the whole fried chicken, two desserts and 'the works' on your baked potato."

Cell phones have benefitted me in many ways. Like shepherders and lonely cowboys, I have the irritating habit of talking to myself. But now when I talk to myself instead of people thinking I'm a mentally disturbed homeless person, they think I'm talking on my cell phone. Which I don't have. But they don't know that.

With hands-free headsets and phones now no larger than a pack of Tic Tacs, it's easy to convince people you're actually talking to someone. When I talk to myself and see people looking at me funny, or trying to find the cell phone on my person, I'll just say real loud, "Sorry Bob, I'm starting to lose you. I'll call you later when I get in a better area." Yeah right.

Or if I see someone I don't like and don't want to talk to, I'll just say, "Hello, Joe." Then I turn to the person I don't want to talk to and say, "I'd love to visit, but it's really important I take this call." Then I look for a restaurant so I can complete the fake call so that everyone can hear me and see how I'm so technologically savvy that I have a cell phone that no one can see.

Gee, I must have the latest model!

Thanks to Bluetooth I have all the benefits and status of owning a cell phone without ever having to charge a battery or pay a bill to AT&T, Vonage or Verizon.

It's the Pitts

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