

Coming home to roost

by Tony Beckwith ©1998

THE OTHER DAY, THE NEWSPAPER REPORTED that about two thousand homing pigeons had lost their bearings and disappeared. The birds were competing in races and failed to return home. Pigeon enthusiasts were puzzled and acknowledged that no one really knows how homing pigeons do what they do. The race organizer claimed that these birds use electromagnetic fields to help them navigate and speculated that cellular phone activity might interfere with that process.

THE FIRST PHONE I can remember was on the kitchen wall in my grandparents' house in Buenos Aires. It was probably one generation beyond the kind you had to crank with a handle. The rotary dial was on the front, just above the speaking tube, and you listened through a small earpiece that hung in a metal cradle on the side. The earpiece was attached with a length of cable that was no more than a couple of feet long, so there was no mobility, no strolling around with a long, curly cord trailing behind. You stood right there in the kitchen, yelling into the mouthpiece, and everyone marveled at this new technology.

A few years later we moved to Montevideo, Uruguay where we went for quite a while with no phone at all. At that time, in that place, you didn't just order a connection and have it installed the next day: you put your name on a list, and you waited. We relied, during that period, on the kindness of the proprietors of the café on the corner. They had a wonderfully modern, elegant phone, made of black plastic, that sat on the counter by the window. It had a neat little newfangled talking-and-listening device that sat in a cradle across the

top. I can still remember the sturdy feel of that handset, into which I poured who knows how many entreaties, excuses, promises, and an assortment of stories of one kind or another. As I grew older, strayed a little farther, and came home a little later, I began calling the café to advise my anxious parents not to wait up. The proprietors were unfailingly gracious about sending somebody to fetch my father to take these calls. He repaid their kindness by ordering cups of coffee and the occasional glass of wine. It was an arrangement that seemed to suit us all.

In the mid-fifties we were traveling in northern Uruguay, on our way to a family vacation in southern Brazil. A few miles from the border, my father decided to call ahead to check on our accommodations. The operator quoted an astronomical price, and explained that—since there was no direct link between Uruguayan and Brazilian telephone networks—the call would have to be routed through Montevideo, up to New York, back down to São Paulo, and on out to our hotel that was, at most, a hundred miles away from where we were. Instant, easy communication at

the flick of a switch was still some years away.

I've sat in drafty post offices, hotel lobbies, and telephone booths in various parts of the world, waiting (for hours, even days, sometimes) for calls to be put through to some faraway number. These calls were often plagued with a crackling sound that made conversation difficult or pulsating waves of roaring, gray noise that swept it away entirely. We struggled, often against enormous odds, to discover whether everyone was well and—for some mysterious reason—what time it was at the other end of the line. But just getting through, being able to communicate, was worth it all. And all the time, our technology kept improving. One day, we thought, we'll all be wearing those Dick Tracy watches, just you wait and see!

Well, that day seems to have arrived. We carry cell phones on our belts, in our purses, in our cars. We can call and be called by anyone, anytime, anywhere. I thought I'd be ecstatic when we finally got to this point, and for a while I was. But then I read about those pigeons, and now I'm not so sure. ★

