

When my grandfather, Lars Erickson, left Sweden in 1882, he was not yet eighteen years old. He never saw his mother or father again, he never heard their voices, and letters went back and forth across the Atlantic only sporadically and unreliably.

In 2015 family members--or anyone else--can track each other in every move they make. Voice communication is only a few "clicks" away, e-mail, instant messaging, visual "Skype," text messages, Facebook and other social media--all these methods of keeping in touch with each other are employed in ever-increasing intensity to ensure that we can keep connected.

On the surface this would seem to be a vast improvement over the means of keeping in touch that the young immigrants and their families had available at the time Lars came to America. I have to wonder, though, if there was some "middle point" after which the benefits of communication began to decrease. Letters sent through our postal systems now take just a few days, and there are seldom problems with delivery. Phone calls require only pressing a few buttons to have nearly instant voice connection with friends and family. Sometimes, I wonder if we really need, benefit from, or even want more.

When we were children, we had the freedom of the woods, meadows, and fields of our neighborhoods. We knew we were responsible to be home by supper time, or whenever our mothers expected us. They could not track us by electronic devices, could not call or message us to see where we were and what we were doing. In all probability, there were times when we did not want our mothers to know what we were doing or where we were. But, we also learned to take care of ourselves, to refrain from activities that were too dangerous, and to go to places from which we could return without the help of someone we could call or text. It seems to me that the ability to take care of oneself is a basic survival skill that is being circumvented by excessive parental control.

As adults, too, we need to be alone sometimes. When I see young people at high school basketball games, for instance, with their phones clutched in their hands at all times, with their attention not on the game

but on something they are scrolling through on their phones, it saddens me. Will they ever experience the pleasures of silence, of having only themselves for company, of sharing the details of their lives with only a few close friends, of attaching some import to the word "like?" Will they know the satisfaction of sitting quietly at a desk or table, hearing only the slight scratching of a pen or pencil as they contemplate and consider what they are composing in a handwritten letter to a friend?

I wonder, too, how much productivity of workers is declining as more and more employees are texting, updating their Facebook pages, or surfing the web during working hours. If I were an employer, I would expect that the people working for me would have their minds and energy focused on their jobs.

There is also the question of courtesy. I don't feel inclined to sit down and talk with a person whose attention is more on his or her phone than on the conversation we are having. Are we really as "connected" as we believe when we cannot listen to one another?

Mostly, though, I feel sorry for people who must be constantly tied to their phones. I have seen the anxiety--nearly panic--that occurs when a system is "down" or a computer or smartphone does not work properly. Perhaps, it is time to self-regulate our use of these devices. A tool is a wonderful thing when it is used properly. When it is a person's master, then it becomes a burden. The ability to rely on oneself becomes nonexistent. I wonder how many of us really want that.