

I JUST CALLED TO SAY I HEAR YOU

By Eufemia Fantetti

Recently, my father's telephone stopped working. Picture an old timey, push-button lifeless landline and one old timey, annoyed senior. Since my dad has no interest in technogadgets, the most cutting edge equipment he ever owned was somewhere on the Human Advancement Timeline between electric can opener and a lawnmower.

This necessitated a trip to Home Hardware where I asked the store clerk several head-scratchy questions about the replacement I was planning to purchase: "Will this work if I just plug it into the wall phone jack thingy?" and "Is there something special I have to do?"

"Noooo." The young woman spoke slowly. "It's just a regular phone."

I nodded like I knew what she was saying. I'd insisted my father let me pick up the replacement so he didn't buy himself a cheap contraption. My dad is famously thrifty when it comes to his own needs and generous to a fault when dealing with others.

Arriving at his place, I noticed a minivan parked next to his building and a phone company employee standing next to a cable box, splicing into a bunch of wires. This fellow assured me the lines were not down.

Inside, we admired the sleek, cordless-complete-with-answering-machine receiver. My father grumbled lightly that the voicemail was unnecessary and wondered how much his service provider might ding him for additional costs.

"Nothing. It comes with the phone."

After plugging in all the doohickeys and thinga-ma-bobs (stop me if I'm getting too technical), it didn't work. I unplugged and replugged all the parts. I went outside and asked the fellow if he was certain the line to my dad's place wasn't down; he suggested we call customer service and they would send someone else (someone like him but not him, especially not him at that particular moment in time) to deal with it. I mused that maybe the battery had to charge for sixteen hours because the User Manual noted that would be the amount of time required in the event of a power failure.

I left and kept calling my dad that night and into the next morning, getting a busy signal every single time.

This was no good: Pappy likes to talk to me every day at five. I could, and have, set my clock to his calls. When he got through to me the next morning from his sister's house, he asked me to call his phone company. I agreed and as he was about to hang up, head home, retrieve his phone bill to give me his account details, I remembered the flaw in this plan. I wouldn't be allowed to speak on his behalf without putting him on the phone and getting him to say that I was allowed to sort out the issue for him.

I started scrambling through my mental "To Do List" to figure out how to get back to the burbs.

"Is okay. No worry," my dad tried to reassure me. "I can makes myself be understand."

And therein lay the crux of my fretful state. As a child, I frequently translated for my parents in multiple scenarios—at the doctor's office, in the checkout line, at the pharmacy counter. Occasionally, I observed my parents increase their volume in an effort to be heard, no doubt frustrated that their welfare was in the hands of a chatty eight year old.

From that early training, I learned listening is not a skill everyone has. Interruption, repetition, offering unwanted advice in lieu of being attentive witnesses—humankind appears to excel in those categories. (I'm making a sweeping generalization, I know, but one that is based on hours and hours of childhood research.) Patient listeners are a resource the world could use in abundance. The ability to listen is the quality I most admire and the one I work at the hardest.

Some say it is our weakest competence. I tell this to my students and promise not to talk too long; we're not able to absorb spoken information for lengthy periods of time any more. Tangent alert: Every time I watch a Merchant Ivory film with a character attending a three hour lecture, I yearn to have the rapt attention span of a pre-internet world. But that's it, that's all I want. Hello, women's rights and decent hair care products. *Thank you, Future, you're the best.* Of course, I'm cherry-picking celluloid history chapters. The quote attributed to the stoic philosopher Epictetus, "Nature gave us one tongue and two ears so we could hear twice as much as we speak," would indicate we've been battling this *lah-lah-lah-I-can't-hear-you* issue for a long time.

Now add accented speech to the mix, and consider what a boring world it would be without the multitude of accents, the lost vowels, the clipped endings, and the musical phonetic fracas in mispronounced letter combinations.

I think back to my early student-living-away-from home days. The first few roommates I had would say a variation of the following: "I think your mom called? A woman kept shouting at me. I couldn't understand her at all."

I'd find out later that my mother simply kept repeating my name—a moniker that sounds quite different in Italian. I was surprised and then realized none of my friends had met first generation immigrants like my parents. They were completely unused to hearing the

cadence and inflection of *Italish*. They all found my mother's anxious-tone-threaded-with-mistrust too tetchy. Combined with her volume, well, what can I say? She was trying to make herself heard across four provinces.

My mom, oblivious to the way she sounded, would ask, "Don't your roommates speak English?"

In those years of being removed from everything familiar, I would comfort myself with memories of teachers who had supported and encouraged me throughout high school. The quality they all had in common: they were excellent listeners, even after twenty plus years of teaching, even though they'd heard it all before. They are the role models I still turn to when I'm uncertain how to proceed. They remind me to focus and listen, to ensure the other individual feels heard. Many misunderstanding can be avoided by taking this route.

My Pappy story has a happy ending. The phone company sent out a guy who found there *was* a problem with the line and he fixed it for free.

"You believe? The phone no was broke."

"Sounds like. But you needed a new one anyway."

"Sure. This I can take with me everywhere I go inside."

Pappy acts like for all intents and purposes, this newfangled telefono is a cellphone. Our next adventure will involve lessons in turning on the answering machine component.

Listening is a remarkable talent, an art form waiting for a renaissance. When someone really listens to you, you feel respected, connected, validated and worthy—this is an incredible gift to give a student.