

I've been **thinking**...



A Time to Text and a Time to Call July 2013

I've been texting, I mean *thinking* about texting, as well as dialing, handwriting, and face-to-face talking in our hurry-up world.

These days we call the US Post Service [sic] *snail mail*. But in 1775, Ben Franklin's innovation sped up letter travel between Philadelphia and San Francisco from forever to a few months.

In 1844, Samuel Morse accelerated message delivery exponentially. Transmitting words at the speed of light, the inventor's telegraph made Abraham Lincoln our first *online* president, enabling the commander in chief to chat instantaneously with his generals on the front lines.

In 1862 the transcontinental railroad relegated the year-old Pony Express to mothballs by whisking letters from coast to coast at 30-some miles per hour in under ten days.

A decade and change later, Alexander Graham Bell was awarded a patent for the telephone (1876). Within a year, Rutherford B. Hayes had the disruptive technology installed in the White House telegraph room. It was a bit like the first fax machine—not much good when only one existed. But eventually a few others acquired telephones, and early-adopters began communicating real-time. It would be another 50 years before President Herbert Hoover had the first phone line installed in the Oval Office and could connect with virtually any home or office in the country. By 1960, our national grid was comprised of 80 million phones.

As a ninth grader each evening during the third week of October 1962, I connected with the operator on my dad's rotary-dial telephone—attempting person-to-person calls to John F. Kennedy. An Oval Office visit was out of the question. The prospect of instant gratification was more appealing than hunting and pecking at our Smith-Corona, rummaging about for a stamp, and waiting on the mail snails.

I had thought through and written out talking points, which my memory fails to resurrect after five decades. But I'm certain they were brilliant. I do recall my ego being propped back up after learning JFK probably didn't take my calls because he was tangled in more pressing matters—like the Cuban missile crisis for starters.

Today with my iPhone I could text, Tweet (let's not go there), e-mail, or call President Obama if he'd give me his number. Not that I've finalized my talking points. Anyway, I'm fascinated by which communication options we favor these days when reaching out to others.

Four girls were sitting together in a restaurant. Instead of talking with each other, their faces were glowing, and their fingers were text messaging—at enviable speed. I couldn't help myself, and blurted out, “Are you all texting each other?” They laughed. Whew. I guess someone was saving gas money.

In his fascinating book, [Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails](#), Tom Wheeler notes, "Lincoln's appreciation of the telegraph was its ability to instantaneously communicate over great distances." But he went on to say, "Where a face-to-face meeting was not possible, [Lincoln] preferred a well thought out letter."

Our sixteenth president's hierarchy of communication placed highest value on sit-down meetings, then handwritten letters, and finally telegraph messages—backwards, it seems, to how we reach out today.

And I wonder how often efficiency is costing us effectiveness?

Deciphering communications always requires some reading between the lines, but I'm pretty sure distance between those lines tends to expand or contract depending on the method.

Like yesterdays' telegrams, today's text messages are brief, full of abbrevs, and prone to ambiguity. Had Lincoln sent "FIRE AT WILL" in dashes and dots, would the recipient assume there was a fire at Williamsburg, that he was to shoot the enemy when ready, or view it as an executive order to execute a guy named William?

In a scholarly article: [Egocentrism over e-mail: Can we communicate as well as we think?](#) professors Kruger, Epley, and Parker found, "Not only do e-mail senders overestimate their ability to communicate feelings, but e-mail recipients also overestimate their ability to correctly decode those feelings." The authors explain, "Without the benefit of paralinguistic cues such as gesture, emphasis, and intonation, it can be difficult to convey emotion and tone over electronic mail."

But facts can be blurred as much as feelings in brief messages. For example, observe how the subtitle of the professors' article may be read two ways: "Can we communicate as well as we think?"

Carefully crafted, lengthy letters don't always solve the problem. Wheeler tells of a missive carefully written by "Honest Abe" and notes, "After fully venting his frustrations, he turned the page over and wrote, 'Not sent.'" "Hitting the 'Send' button on an e-mail," Wheeler reminds his readers, "is an easy, but irreparable, action."

Subtlety of thought and tone of voice missing from snail and e-mail suggests that sometimes we'd be better off picking up the phone. I'd bet all the cell phones in China that had the telephone been available Lincoln would have chosen it before a letter when face-to-face was not possible.

However, just as good letters require careful composition, the best calls result when involved parties have prepared well for communicating their thoughts and feelings.

My friend and communication genius Darlene Price, is the founder and president of [Well Said!](#) In the interest of becoming a better communicator, I religiously pay attention to her communiqués. That's because everything she *writes* (e.g., e-mails, articles, and books) is, well...well said. Same when she speaks. I've watched her videos, sat on the edge of my chair through a live lecture, and talked with her by phone and face-to-face. I don't know if she texts, but she's an advocate of thoughtful communicating, whatever medium may be required.

Before your next important call, I recommend investing ten minutes with Darlene's July 2013 e-mail: [Speak with Impact on the Phone: Twelve Tips for Better Telephone](#)

[Meetings](#). Be forewarned. You won't be able to resist subscribing to her monthly e-mails.

Ha. I just hung up with a colleague who lives a thousand miles away. We had filled each other's mailboxes with back-and-forth e-mails for the past few days only to end up totally confused. A few minutes on the phone clarified everything, and we enjoyed some stories while we were at it.

With Lincoln, I've found the least ambiguous and most effective conversations occur face-to-face. They are also the most rewarding. In addition to adding tone of voice and body language to the conversation, they enable both parties to look into each other's eyes—"the window to your soul." (Shakespeare).

I think it's hilarious that on Bell's fist telephone call, which was to his lab assistant across the hall, the inventor simply said, "Mr. Watson, come here. I want to see you!"

It would have been more enjoyable, and I would have learned more if I could have noodled on all this with you over the phone or a lunch. Anyway, thanks for reading. I'd love to know what you think. Here are a few options for connecting with me:

- Text or call: 425-655-6797
- Email: mark@hospitalrx.com
- Fax: Can't. The fax machine disappeared from my life about when I shed my wristwatch in favor of checking the time on my iPhone.
- Slug mail (it's a Pacific Northwest thing):
2506 W Lake Sammamish SE, Bellevue WA 98008
- Drop by the office: address above

Four years after my attempts to get the President on the phone, TouchTone® began disrupting dialing. Fax machines were decades off. The Internet was not even a glimmer in anyone's eye. And the young prophets, Simon and Garfunkel, admonished us, "[Slow down. You move too fast.](#)"

Now that Lincoln and Bell have slowed down, I bet they're happy to be off the grid.



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