

Blessed

Adrian Kosmaczewski

2009-07-17

I'm blessed.

This post is about life, about the tiny little things that make our current world a great, truly enjoyable experience. Grab a cup of tea, sit and relax on your chair, and read. This is clearly a blog post suitable for a Friday afternoon.

I remember the day ENTEL (Argentina's former national telecom company, back in the 80's) installed a telephone line at home. I remember that day very well, because I was 16 years old. That's right, I lived without a phone for most of my childhood(*). No phone rings, no answering machines, no dialing pads, no twisted black rubber cables, nothing. Cellphones were just science fiction. Really. Just like video conferences and handheld communicators.

We at Argentina we were so used to not having a phone, that I remember all the little tricks we had to use with friends to meet up, or with my mother to keep her updated on my whereabouts. For example, it was common for people to just drop by, ring and see if you were there for a mate on a Sunday afternoon. There was no way they could tell you they wanted to meet you (other than by regular mail or telegram, which is kinda weird anyway), so dropping by was the only option left.

And nobody complained about it. It was cool, it was pure surprise.

OK, OK, not having a phone was not always cool, particularly when my grandmother fell ill in 1985 and calling for an ambulance became an almost impossible feat; my mother had to run to the nearest bar to call for it, since there weren't public payphones nearby - at least not working ones.

But we managed to live a happy life. It might sound ridiculous, but I never thought of the fact of not having a phone like a major issue. An annoyance at most, but not a major problem.

And the day we received our phone, it looked like this:

(source)

I think the picture speaks for itself. That was at the end of 1989, a couple of weeks before the Berlin wall collapsed, and right in the middle of one of the

worst hyperinflations known to modern economists.

I also remember the day the phone started to be useful, too. That was like 3 months after they installed the line, but that's another story. Suffice to say that, one day, the phone rang. Neither my mother nor me knew what to say when picking it up.

(really) Fast forward 20 years later, I'm living in Switzerland, I'm married to the lovely love of my life, I live in an apartment with a big window over Lake Geneva, and I write software applications for a small, incredible phone.

A lot has happened in the middle. A lot.

I remember my mother struggling to bring food home back in the 80's. As simple as that. She worked as an employee in a state-run company, which was privatized a couple of years after we left the country. Living in Argentina in the 80's was a difficult task, with incredible inflation and low salaries, and it mostly consisted in buying dollars (in the black market) the day you got your payslip, and selling them (in the black market too) whenever you needed cash.

My mother also used to play with credit cards, which at the time were not tied to inflation rates; that meant that you could buy today in the supermarket for 200 pesos of food, which was around (say) 10 dollars, and pay the following month, when the same 200 pesos (+ interests) would be changed for 2 dollars.

These tricks were not always enough. And some times, in spite of all the efforts of my mother, the fridge would be particularly empty, to the greater sorrow of this brave woman. Now that I'm an adult, I begin to understand the level of desperation she had to suffer, and the enormous effort she made every evening to have a smile on her face.

One day, back in February 1991, my mother and I left Argentina for Switzerland. She had been in this country twice, in 1954 and 1963. I had never been here; heck, I had never even left the country before. Not even to Uruguay.

I remember hearing people speak in French and English for the first time in my life. I remember not getting a word of what people said on TV or the radio. I remember not getting all the jokes my schoolmates said during breaks, and I remember getting myself into trouble for mistranslating words or phrases.

I have a Polish family name, and two passports; my father lives in Buenos Aires and my mother lives in Geneva. My wife comes from Bolivia. I am grandson of migrants who travelled across the Atlantic back in the 20's and the 30's. I am son of a migrant who did the journey back 60 years later.

I am a migrant. My wife is a migrant. My family is a family of migrants.

Even if I can freely move through the customs offices of most major airports, I feel as a migrant, and I understand the pain that comes with having to leave part of your life behind, of being different, of dealing with incomprehension and being an outsider.

I can't support "northern" macro immigration policies, just because I lived the process at micro level. I can't justify censorship, because I know the cost of communication. I can't support dictatorship, because I've lived in one, and I remember it very well.

I remember when my mother went to the PTT (before Swisscom existed) to ask for a phone line for our first apartment in Geneva. The woman at the counter asked her when did she prefer the technician to come by our place.

My mother clearly did not expect that question.

The guy came in the following day, and when he left, my mother picked up the phone, and incredibly enough, a tone sounded. The look in her eyes said it all.

However, even if we had a phone, and even if my mother called some cousins to tell them she was back in Switzerland, just one of them called back. Even worse, the cost of international communications at the beginning of the 90's was prohibitive, and we slowly lost contact with many friends in Argentina.

We had a phone, but not many people to talk to. That was the major tradeoff.

Somehow, many pieces of my life (people, meetings, encounters, places) have come accross in a delicious yet uncanny way, assembling a whole that amazes me, in this very day.

And that's why I say I'm blessed. As we all are. We have food in our plates, we have phones ringing with friends on the other side of the line, heck, we have e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, GPS, iPhone, Google, Skype - which effectively means that yes, we live in a sci-fi world with video conferencing and handheld communicators. Communication is a commodity. Information flows a gazillion times faster than it did 20 years before.

The infinite possibilities you are offered in this world are our greatest asset. Many times we forget this, but here I am, humbly reminding me (and my readers) about this very fact:

We are blessed. Now pick up your phone, open up your Skype or fire up your e-mail client, and call or write a friend with whom you haven't spoken for a while.

(* For those wondering, my mother had moved to that apartment in 1970, and asked for a phone at that time. In 1985 she subscribed to the "plan Megatel",

created by former argie president Raúl Alfonsín to create 1 million phone lines before the end of his term in 1989. At about 25 dollars per month, that phone costed her about USD 1500 until 1990. Check this article (in Spanish) for more information.