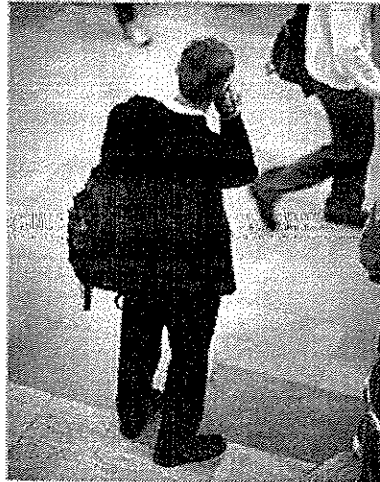


Complaint Box | Immobile on the Phone

BY PAMELA A. LEWIS OCTOBER 16, 2009 11:44 AM

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Richard Perry / The New York Times Standing still at Grand Central Terminal.

This is a city of people who are constantly on the move. But lately I have noticed many who are completely immobile. Their favorite places to stand are on the subway stairs, either at the top, bottom or halfway up; at times, they camp smack-dab in the middle of the sidewalk. Regardless of where these people choose to stop, they are all engaged in the same activity: talking on their cellphones. And while they chatter away, like statues newly bestowed with the gift of speech, the rest of us are obliged to perform something akin to interpretive dance to make our way around them.

I had a close encounter with this new brand of boor this summer. Before even reaching the entry to the station, I spotted her from a distance. As if glued to the top step and leaning against the steel railing, she was a textbook image of the cellphone user: oblivious to everything save the words she uttered and the ones coming from the stylish model she pressed firmly to her ear. As I neared the stairs, I felt my blood pressure inching up, yet I was determined to stay calm and noncombative.

"Excuse me, please," I said, dredging up a courteousness I really didn't feel. No reaction. Once more into the breach: "Excuse me, I need to get by," I repeated, adding more force to my tone. The statue turned her

head, glowering at me. Mere seconds separated that indignant stare from my fate: Would I be tongue-lashed with a barrage of profanities? Hurlled down the subway stairs I needed to descend? Or worse, would I be dispatched by the cellphone itself, swiftly transformed into a Bond-like instrument of death?

The statue moved slightly, just enough for me to make my way down; as the distance grew between us, I heard her grumble profanely something about “these people asking me to move.”

I like the cellphone. There’s one in my handbag, and on occasion I use it. It’s practical and fun. But it has also changed our behavior, and not necessarily, I am discovering, for the better. Whether it’s calling and texting while driving, or blocking the path of other pedestrians while conversing, the banging sound of civility’s bar as it is lowered another notch is being heard more frequently.

It is always difficult to know at exactly what point such a shift occurs; when, say, the importance of one’s call outruns everyone else’s need to funnel down subway stairs or walk along the sidewalk. Yet its effects, however slight, can be felt.

We can call all we like; the least we can do is respectfully step aside while doing it.

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