

YOUR BLACKBERRY

—by John Freeman

Once upon a time, elevator rides were silent. The bathroom was for, well, using the bathroom. Dinner time was about sharing a meal with friends or family, and mornings were about waking up. Most radically, home was simply home. Work may have been on our minds, but it wasn't in our hands (or pockets).

But now, thanks to the BlackBerry (and the iPhone, and the Treo, and all the other hand-held e-mail devices), we are always connected.

The modern BlackBerry, which dates to 2002 (a two-way pager by the same name came to market in 1999), has evolved into something sleek and handy and almost discreet. Using it is like taking an electronic cigarette break. The problem is, we're all e-mail chain-smokers now. Anytime a moment opens up, we fill it with e-mail.

The BlackBerry starts by infiltrating your morning. Then e-mailing replaces reading on your commute. Next you have it under the table at meetings; surely no one notices your thumbs clicking. Finally, it winds up at your bedside.

Enabled by an umbilical attachment to the hand-held, the average office worker sent and received 100 e-mails a day in 2009—almost as many telegrams as a high-output operator sent in Western Union's heyday.

But those operators simply passed messages along. We're supposed to think and respond and sort as well. How are we doing? Not very well, considering how many of us spend our mornings and nights and weekends replying to e-mails in an effort to get to the bottom of our inbox.

The problem is, the more e-mails we send, the more we receive. So the empty inbox is a phantom, an impossibility—and the attempt to achieve it the ultimate Sisyphean task.

Barring a full-fledged revolt, our electronic fidget is here to stay. It almost makes one nostalgic for a long, awkward elevator ride.

John Freeman is the editor of *Granta* magazine and the author of *"The Tyranny of E-Mail: The Four-Thousand-Year Journey to Your Inbox."*

