

A Phone Call Never Placed

As Jaime leaned down to place flowers on each of his family members' gravesites, a tear rolled down his face. Who would have ever predicted that this elderly man would outlive them all to become the only living representative of that Hispanic family that grew up on an 80-acre farm in Grandview, Idaho so many years ago? First was the gravestone of Candido, his father, who died in his arms when the elderly man was still in his youth. This scene haunted Jaime until the passing of his mother, Victoria. As horrific as it was to hold his father as he died, he later learned that the guilt associated with not making it to Victoria's bedside before she passed on was far more traumatic. Years later, his older sister, Maria and his older brother, Luis passed away. Their monuments stand a few feet from their parents. Two younger brothers, Francisco and Miguel, were eventually interred in other cemeteries nearby.

But one gravesite shared by two of his siblings brought this elderly man, Jaime to his knees - the gravesite of his older sister, Eva and his younger brother Emmanuel. He never knew Eva who contracted meningitis and passed away before his birth. But the passing of Emmanuel was a memory that had haunted the man his entire life. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't forget the image of that tiny cherry coffin as it was lowered into the ground. As he reached into his pocket to pull out his flip phone, the image of the words "Emmanuel Martin Baraizarra, July 6, 1945, September 15, 1946" carved into the stone blurred as his eyes welled up with tears.

Some memories are so powerful that the passage of time and the normal memory loss of aging can never erase them from your soul. Such was the memory of the death of 14-month-old Emmanuel. September 14, 1945 was just like any other day on the family farm. Candido began working before daylight and Victoria took care of the house and six surviving children. A curious toddler, Emmanuel reached for a cup on the table only to spill scalding coffee on himself. Candido and Victoria rushed their young child to a rural clinic for treatment. Since these immigrants were bilingual in Basque and Spanish,

but had limited fluency in English, they took their then 11-year-old son, Jaime with them to translate. Upon their arrival at the emergency room of the rural clinic, the nurse gave Emmanuel a shot to alleviate his pain. Almost immediately though, it was apparent that something went wrong as Emmanuel began seizing and then lay unresponsive on the examination table. In complete panic, the nurse shouted out for Jaime to use the rotary phone on her desk to call the doctor for help. The young boy just stood there helplessly staring at the phone. Having grown up on a farm, the son of poor immigrants, Jaime had never seen a telephone. Completely baffled, he watched horrified as his younger brother's eyes rolled back and he took his last gasp of air. Upon later investigation, it was discovered that the nurse made a medical error and administered the wrong shot to young Emmanuel. No matter how many years had passed the memory of not calling the doctor haunted Jaime. He couldn't imagine making the medical mistake and he often wondered whether the nurse responsible shared in his guilt.

Years after Emmanuel's death, the smell of coffee and the sight of a telephone triggered memories that made Jaime nauseated. To this day, when someone drinks a cup of coffee in his vicinity, Jaime politely leaves the room. He eventually made peace with the telephone though. Growing up during a time when payphones were located on every street corner, it was impossible to avoid them so he eventually learned to suppress his anxiety. But one radio broadcast from the late Paul Harvey gave him a new perspective on the value of a phone.

Although very few people are aware of the history of the now disappearing payphone, Harvey spoke of the inspiration behind the invention. During the 1880's the inventor, William Gray, was living on a rural farm. One day, his wife became seriously ill and was in need of medical attention. Having no telephone in the house, Gray had to walk several miles to a local factory where he asked to use their telephone to call for medical assistance. Gray's wife eventually recovered but the experience inspired him to create pay telephones that anyone with a few coins could access. The irony is how many people

my age can sing the lyrics of Maroon 5's song "Payphone" but have never even seen or actually used a real payphone.

Even though at the time of Emmanuel's death the rural clinic had a rotary phone, Jaime came to a realization. Avoiding phones wouldn't bring back his little brother and the phone itself didn't lead to his brother's death. The cause was simply Jaime's inability to use it. Like every other American, Jaime eventually had a land line installed in his own home.

Years later, that very rotary phone that once made his heart flutter would bring the medical attention necessary to treat his own daughter. One day, his daughter passed out while climbing a flight of stairs only to have a seizure after tumbling to the bottom. This time, the phone brought the ambulance necessary for her treatment.

Since the time of William Gray, the telephone has undergone an evolution. We all know the iconic image of the 1950's telephone booth. Even though payphones could be found in most public locations until the 1990s, most American households had first rotary phones and then cordless touch tone phones. With the introduction of mobile phones, payphones are now archaic. Most businesses today have either had their payphones removed or now have only a hollowed out shell where the payphone once stood.

As Jaime held his Jitterbug flip phone in his hand as he stood at his younger brother's gravesite, he realized that the technological advances of most modern day mobile devices have rendered him incapable of using most of them. How many times has he watched his own children and grandchildren download smartphone apps and surf the web with ease? How these moments have become so reminiscent of the most painful memory of his life, the moment where he stood there helplessly staring at the phone as his younger brother died.

When I use my own smartphone, I sometimes wonder if there will one day be a moment when I, like Jaime, have been left behind by technology. Will I someday stand helplessly by as my own children and grandchildren manipulate some new device with ease? How I can relate to both Jaime and his daughter because Jaime happens to be my grandfather. The young girl who needed medical attention after fainting down the stairs and suffering a seizure happens to be my mother. If history were to repeat itself and someday I should have a child in medical distress, I only hope that I have the technological skills necessary to avoid sitting idly by. I hope that someday when I, too, reach my golden years that I will spend my retirement unburdened by memories questioning my own past actions, and rather be able to celebrate the time I have remaining with my family and friends.

As I listen to the lyrics of Maroon 5's "Payphone", I can't help but notice the similarity between the singer and my grandfather. Both would like to use the phone to reconnect with lost loves. Unfortunately, no advances in technology will ever enable my grandfather to find peace and reconnect with his dead brother. Wouldn't it be ironic if I should someday locate the now vanishing payphone and I, too, find myself utterly clueless as to how such an archaic device actually operates?