

# A Crutch or an Anchor?

by EMMA LIND '09

**S**TUMBLING ALONG Mount Auburn Street on my way to my Social Studies 10 lecture, I barely manage to juggle *Wealth of Nations*, this morning's *Crimson*, and the peanut butter sandwich I am carrying in my mouth. And then I feel it, in the depths of my book bag, just out of reach: the unmistakable vibration of my cell phone.

At first I ignore it, but it keeps ringing as I push my way up Plympton Street. In a few seconds, I feel the telltale single vibration alerting me to a text message. I assume it's one of my friends, asking me to pick up something on the way to lecture, so I stop on the steps of the Crimson building, letting my books fall to the ground, and rummage through my bag until I find my phone. Sliding it open, I see that the text message is from my mother.

"Hi." One word that really doesn't seem to warrant the fact that I just spilled my life all over a Cambridge sidewalk.

According to Mapquest.com, my home

in Illinois is 1,011.5 miles away from the Crimson building. But thanks to the wonders of modern technology—or rather, our parents' delayed but ultimately successful mastery of it—we Harvard students are rarely more than a few clicks away from our families' fingertips.

The ease and skyrocketing popularity of communication via instant message, text message, and thefacebook.com has largely changed long-distance communication from "Emma, the cat choked on a chicken bone and died" to "Emma, I saw what's-her-name with what's-her-face at the grocery store today and they said hi. Do you want me to send you more Q-Tips?" And if the ability to stay in constant contact with friends from home makes the transition to college less abrupt, the simultaneous virtual proximity to parents and guardians who are hundreds or thousands of miles away can skew the dynamic of parent-child separation.

College, especially if it involves a long-distance move, can mean a completely unfamiliar way of life for students. But in many cases, including my own, the change seems to scare the parents more than it does the child. Doing laundry, eating healthily, and making time to study are all valid concerns for wide-eyed freshmen, but often even more so for their parents. During my first month at college, I repeatedly reassured my panicking mother that I was able to do my laundry, despite the fact that she had forgotten to get me rolls of quarters before I left Illinois. While I gleefully swiped Crimson Cash

into the laundry machines and turned all of my socks a pleasant shade of baby blue, my mother suggested getting a laundry service. I can only guess that she had visions of my traipsing around campus in pajamas for want of clean clothes.

Of course, this scenario was presumably as common 20 years ago as it is today. What's different is the way that instant communications bridge the geographical gap between students' lives at home and their lives at school. Lucy Caldwell, a sophomore in Adams House, notes that when her mother was a student at the College in the 1980s, she spoke to her parents on the phone for 30 minutes a week. She talked to her mother for the first 20; when her father got on the line for the last 10, he reminded her not to repeat anything she had already told her mother. That way, she didn't waste precious minutes telling her dad things that had already been relayed to her mom.

A similar strategy guided my communications with my parents when I went to summer camp, where we were allowed 15 minutes of phone time a week. Chatting was impossible, and so our conversations became chances to share crucial information only: a far cry from the long discussions about politics and school I had over family dinners at home.

Compared to her mother's experience communicating with her own parents, Caldwell's mother-daughter relationship is intimate, despite the distance between Cambridge and her home in Arizona. Caldwell attributes this largely to technology.

"My mom is literally the first number in my cell phone," she says. "She knows everything that is happening in my life, and we probably talk five or six times a day." Caldwell says she calls her mother for everything from asking advice about a term paper to bemoaning a newly broken nail. She admits that having her mother



constantly at her fingertips is probably a crutch of sorts, but is relatively unconcerned about what it may be doing to her, besides delaying an eventually inevitable separation. What she notices more is her mother's dependence on hearing from her: "Most mornings we talk on my way to class, but if she hasn't heard from me by about 11 A.M. her time, then she calls me to see if everything's okay."

The question that arises is whether instant communication has a stabilizing or debilitating effect on undergrads away from home for the first time—and on the parents who may have trouble letting them go. Is instant communication a way of making sure students are adjusting to life at Harvard, or a way for parents to creep further into their children's lives just when they should be easing back?

Dean of freshmen Thomas A. Dingman acknowledges that cell phones and e-mail have had a big impact on the lives of Harvard students, who are rarely out of close contact with the folks back at the home-stead. "Read the headlines," he says. "Parents are like helicopters, hovering over their children, leaving Harvard wonder-

**"Parents are like helicopters, hovering over their children."**

ing how to respond." Often, he says, he and a student meet to decide on the best path to resolve a certain issue, and then, even before the student leaves the building, he or she is on the phone with parents.

This may seem counter-intuitive. After all, in surveys of Harvard freshmen, students indicate that they value the advice of their peers very highly. The same holds for me. But in my experience, I have found that Harvard students are more willing to dispense their own unsolicited opinions than they are to take the time to work through a difficult situation with a friend. Parents, on the other hand, have a more vested interest in a child's well-being. Often, it is easier to get in touch with a parent or guardian than it is to reach a roommate busy with an Expos paper, and

this can exacerbate students' long-distance dependence on their parents. Dingman sees students' tendency to resort to their families for help making the "tough calls" as an impediment to the naturally occurring process of learning through trial and error.

Of course, not every parental relationship runs the fine line between mothering and smothering. For some families, a child's independence is a milestone reached long before the son or daughter trots off to college. Admittedly, my family situation is a relative incubator for over-attentiveness: the only child of two retired parents, I am a prime candidate for micromanagement.

Still, I am reluctant to chalk up my closeness to my parents entirely to my specific situation. After all, I know international students who talk to their parents daily, while friends of mine who live mere seconds off campus go weeks without exchanging words with home. Similarly, Caldwell is one of three kids, and I know single children who rarely chat with their families. Obviously, each student's relationship with his or her parents reflects more subtle family dynamics than what is immediately apparent. But what is remarkable is how technology has made distance, which was once a major barrier to communication between students and families, something peripheral if not entirely irrelevant when considering how close undergraduates remain to their parents once they go to school.

My relationship with my parents has grown during college from one of primarily physical dependence to one of long-distance emotional support. Now that I am feeding and clothing myself, and even making my own money without the constant presence of my family, I have come to appreciate their role in the first 18 years of my life much more. Because I am fortunate enough to have my family paying my tuition, I tend to defer



to them when I make a decision that directly affects my college career. More important, though, are the times when I turn to my parents for advice from outside the Harvard bubble, such as whether or not to join a social club, or sell my soul to the world of consulting, or pursue my passion for writing. Being able to reach out and touch someone in Illinois as I'm walking across Sever Quad is less of a crutch, and more of an anchor. And I'm starting to find my mother's attempts at newfangled communication less intrusive and more endearing.

Last year, the away message on my AOL Instant Messenger read, "Lamont for the night!" I was referring to the library, but my mother had a different idea. When I returned to the computer, I had a series of messages reading, "Who is Lamont?????" and "Why aren't you writing back to me?????"

Instead of being irritated, I now take pleasure in my mom's loving attempt to mother me from afar, when in reality, I'm doing okay on my own. She's coached me through 19 years of growing up. The least I can do is teach her a little about chatting on-line. ♡

*Berta Greenwald Leddecky Undergraduate Fellow  
Emma M. Lind '09 is a social studies concentrator who lives in Winthrop House. Only once has she ever worn pajamas in lieu of clean clothing.*