



COME DINE WITH ME*

*but don't bring your BlackBerry

ARIEL LEVE WANTS TO HAVE DINNER WITH YOU, NOT YOUR PHONE. HAVE SOME MANNERS AND TAKE IT OFF THE TABLE, SHE SAYS

ILLUSTRATION DORRANCE

It happens all the time. You find yourself in a situation where the person you are about to share a meal with shows up and immediately places their BlackBerry on the table. A few years ago, this used to say: I'm important. So important, I can't be unreachable. This was annoying, yet tolerable, because at least you felt something major was at stake. People needed them – significant people, people way more significant than you.

But now, look around. Every table in every restaurant has at least one patron with their phone on the table. They're ubiquitous. Sprouting like fungus on every public surface. How many important people can there be in one room?

I went out for coffee recently with a friend who is unemployed, broke and single. As soon as we sat down, his phone appeared, and he said, 'Just in case.' Just in case what? Just in case he couldn't take an hour out from doing nothing?

Whether you're contributing to the world or not, the instrument needs to be close by. If it's in your bag or pocket, that's too far away. Why? Because something could happen. It has to be in eye-view so that at any given moment, you can be available – to someone else.

And therein lies the problem. What about being respectful of *my* time? I don't want to sit and watch someone else tend to their life because, given the choice, I would prefer to tend to my own.

Imagine if, in the middle of lunch, I pulled out my tax return. Of course, I'd preface this with, 'Sorry, this won't take a second and then I'm yours.' I would then fill out these forms while my lunch partner waited patiently for me to finish. How is this different? I'm using our time together to put my needs first. And frankly, doing my taxes is a lot more productive than having lunch with 80% of the people I know.

Just because you feel compelled to stay connected to the world at all times, doesn't mean you have to. Even President Obama puts away his BlackBerry when he's having dinner with Michelle. If the most powerful man in the free world can manage to get through a dinner without checking emails, how is it that you can't? On some level, you must know that's rude.

And it's not that it's become rude, either; it always has been. Only now, no-one feels guilty, because everyone is doing it and people have accepted the futility of hoping it will go away.

The worst is when your tablemate thinks they're including you, by giving you a play-by-play of what they're reading on their email. As they scroll through, they recite the contents of their entire inbox: 'The babysitter has shown up and... oh, the FedEx I sent never arrived... my appointment at the dentist is confirmed.' If I'm barely interested in the contents of my own emails, what makes you think I'm interested in the contents of yours?

Recently, after what I thought had been a pleasant dinner with a friend, he reached for his phone, which had been (uncharacteristically) ignored throughout the meal. Spotting my disapproving look, he exclaimed, 'But I've been good!' Unbelievable. Was checking his phone the reward for sitting through dinner with me? Had he been dreaming of it all the time?

Yes, the world is a dangerous place. All sorts of terrible things can happen while you're busy ordering sushi, and information is vital. You must, at all times, have access to email and text to sustain your life, or you might miss out.

Maybe this whole issue bothers me because I don't mind missing out. Maybe I've chosen to miss out and I resent that you haven't. Or maybe I'm just old-fashioned. I remember a time when paying attention to the person seated in front of you was a given, not a gift. 📱