



It's no wonder we don't speak much to people anymore; we have grown fearful of voicemail.

Please (don't) leave a message

C. Douglas Phillips, MD, FACR

"I don't answer the phone. I get the feeling whenever I do that there will be someone at the other end."

—Fred Couples

I feel one of those rants coming on. It may take me a while to get through this one. I would ask for your forgiveness, but I'm presuming you read this column from time to time, and you already bought the ticket. Now, take the ride.

Sometimes I need to speak to people on the phone. Early readings, urgent findings, requests for immediate attention, just want to hear a human voice. You know what I mean. So, I look up their number and dial it. About 1 time in 500 a human answers the call. OK, so maybe I'm overestimating that, but anyway, you know where this is going: Voicemail.

Lord, give me strength.

The algorithms or phone trees that one enters are very reminiscent of the descent into The Maelström.

First, the perfunctory "Dial 911 if this is an emergency." All doctor's offices must include this, even dermatologists.

OK, select a language. This is the U.S., but English may not even be the first choice.

OK, wait for the "doctor" cue, or something that sounds like it. "Physician's office"

is common. They don't think we remember how to use the phone.

Now, pick the person I want to speak to. Select from a list by alphabetical order.

OK, almost there. Select connect to their office phone, not their assistant.

Hmm, not in right now. Must have stepped away from the desk. Acknowledge that I'll hold.

DAMMIT! Hit the wrong button. It disconnected me. Start again?!?!

Forget it. I'll text them.

I'll leave smoke signals.

I'll give myself a paper cut.

How much time do you think you waste in this circle of Hell each day? It's no wonder we don't speak much to people anymore; we have grown fearful of voicemail. I've heard administrators talk about how quickly a human (they always say that—"a human," like it's something rare) should answer the phone—AFTER the voice mail selections.

I hear a human on the line, and my first thought always is, "Holy !&*!@! Why did I call again?"

Good thing we radiologists almost never need to speak to a doctor, eh?

By the way, I'm not done with this little rant. More to follow . . .

Mahalo.

Dr. Phillips is a Professor of Radiology, Director of Head and Neck Imaging, at Weill Cornell Medical College, NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, New York, NY. He is a member of the Applied Radiology Editorial Advisory Board.