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Perspective

Do You Communicate Well?

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

It had been a long, tiring day. I got home about 6:30 p.m. and sat down to read the morning's paper. The phone rang. The children were out in the yard so I answered it. A female voice on the other end of the line said, "Bet you don't know who this is."

I've heard this so often that I've developed a pat answer to those fools who think that you ought to be able to recognize their voices on the other end of a wire 10 miles away. So I said with as much kindness as I could muster, "No, I sure don't. You win the bet. Who are you?"

"SHE GIGGLED and said, "Oh come on, Davie, you remember me don't you." I stared into the telephone earpiece. Enough is enough. Not only did I not know who she was, but she didn't know who I was either. I'm Jamie, not Davie.

"No," I replied, "but from the sound of your voice I would say that you are middle-aged, have false teeth, and that you are fat, sloppy, and dip snuff."

There was a long pause and I finally heard an indignant voice say, "Well . . ." and she hung up. I never did know who she was — or who I had been talking to. Nor did she.

I LEFT the telephone a bit disturbed. Maybe I hadn't acted in my best ministerial manner. But for a giggley voice to say, "Bet you don't know who this is" is a little too much for me at the end of the day. So, two ships pass in the night — neither knowing who the other is. And I chided myself for not having acted with a bit more kindness.

I remember the story about a completely automated power plant in Britain. The powerplant only has one attendant, and at night he goes home. When he leaves the plant he cuts on an automatic machine that is supposed to dial his home phone if a malfunction should occur in the plant. Then a pre-recorded tape would mechanically describe the situation.

Sure enough, one night a malfunction of a serious nature did

happen at the plant. As planned, the machine went into its pre-planned emergency procedure. It dialed, and then began its endless repetition of the mishap: "Number one generator is malfunctioning. Number one generator is malfunctioning." On and on it droned.

BUT THE call never went through. And the next morning the attendant arrived and found the whole plant out of operation. Another malfunction had taken place — this one in the dialing system of the telephone. And so when he got to the phone it was still growling, "Number one generator is malfunctioning. Number one generator is malfunctioning." While at the same time a recorded voice of the telephone operator was repeating back into the phone, "I am sorry, but the number you have dialed is not a working number. Please hang up and dial again."

I've thought about this a thousand times. How much real communicating do we really do?