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Why a Midnight Call Trumps a Morning Class

By Marilyn Murray

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Eight of us crowded around the small table in the little apartment. It was 2002, during my first trip to Moscow, and I was pleased to be invited for dinner with my new colleagues. While we ate, the other seven people had their cell phones placed prominently by their plates.

At first, I paid no attention to the fact that a cell phone on the table rang every time someone got up from the table and went into the kitchen. The phone was quickly answered with a few words and a chuckle. But when different diners began leaving and returning amid ringing phones and much laughter, I realized they were calling each other on their new phones even though we were all eating together. They told me that most of them had lived their entire lives in apartments without telephones. Now, they were excited about finally being able to communicate easily with friends and family from almost anywhere.

This has been confirmed by the astonishing fact that Russia's population of 142 million owns 224 million cell phones, giving the country the fourth-highest concentration of cell phones

in the world. By comparison, 103.9 percent of the U.S. population owns cell phones.

My cell-phone dinner was the first of numerous occasions in which the importance that Russians place on communication was impressed upon me — especially when close relationships are involved.

More than once I have asked students why they were tired in class and the answer went something like this, "Well, my friend called me last night and asked me to come over to her apartment for some tea. I hadn't seen her for a few weeks, so I went. We had a wonderful time." I then would ask, "What time did she call?" The quick response was, "Oh, it was about 11 p.m., and I didn't get home until 2 a.m."

For many Russians, communicating and relationships are far more important than punctuality and staying awake in class, even though they have an investment of time and money in their education.

When a Russian makes a friend, it typically is a lifetime commitment and not taken lightly. They are generous to a fault and almost always will be there to encourage and support each other, especially during difficult times.

Their relationships enabled them to survive, particularly when they were citizens of the Soviet Union. When walking down a street during Soviet times and seeing a line, they habitually joined it even if they did not know what they were waiting for. They just knew that if they were fortunate enough to obtain a pair of shoes, even if they were the wrong size, they could always trade them with someone for something they desperately needed. People carried a little mesh bag called an avoska (meaning "just in case") for the time they just might be lucky enough to come across a line that led to someone selling soap, toothbrushes or other scarcities. They frequently bought all that was allowed and did not trade the most precious items, instead giving them to family members and friends. They looked out for each other. In addition to personal relationships, having connections, or blat, was vital during Soviet times. Knowing someone or knowing someone who knew someone typically meant the difference between having food or shoes or not. It also determined professional or political careers and, ultimately, even personal safety.

Community was a major tenet of the Soviet system. Unlike the United States, where people are encouraged to be independent, responsible for themselves and to value their personal space and private time, Soviet citizens were taught that they were part of a system and to be proud of the role they played in keeping that system functioning. They were told that to sacrifice for the good of the country was an honorable thing, so living in cramped communal housing was accepted as normal and the right thing to do.

Communal housing became the norm after the 1917 Revolution, when large manor homes were requisitioned and families living in terrible conditions were brought in to share dwellings. Necessity forced the expansion of the practice when World War II battles razed many homes. The communal apartments contained six or more rooms, each of which housed a family that could consist of three (or more) generations. All these families tended to share a bathroom and a kitchen. Often there was no hot water and sometimes no water at all. In the villages, bathrooms and running water generally were nonexistent — and this still is the case today in parts of Russia.

When I ask my class participants whether they had ever lived in communal housing, numerous hands are raised. When questioned about their experience, invariably some said they had positive childhood memories:

"I thought it was great because I always had other kids to play with."

"It was good because my mother and father both worked long hours, and I was left alone. I usually could go to one of the other families, and they would feed me."

"I remember when one family in our large communal apartment got the first television I had even seen. Now as I look back, I feel sorry for that family because almost everyone in the whole apartment would crowd into their little room every night and expect to be allowed to watch the TV, too. It was like anything that belonged to anyone else, also belonged to us. We had a right to it."

When asked how their parents, especially their mothers and grandmothers, liked communal living, they often remembered numerous arguments and fights, especially in the kitchen. Of course, there also were people who had fond memories of having neighbors who were kind and became like family.

For people raised in communal apartments, these conditions become their baseline for normal. One of my colleagues remarked: "I didn't grow up in a communal apartment. My family lived in a normal three-room apartment." I asked how many lived in the apartment, and she replied, "Me, my mother and father, my grandmother, my older brother, his wife and their baby." I responded that they were very fortunate to have been able to have a three-room apartment to themselves. She answered, "Oh, we all lived in one room." I then asked if other family members lived in the other two rooms, and she quickly replied, "Oh no, they were strangers — there were three in one room and five in the other. We all shared one bathroom and one kitchen."

When I said, "Then you lived in a communal apartment," she was shocked and remarked that she thought the term "communal apartment" only applied to big complexes that had many rooms down a long hallway and contained six or more family units. Her apartment, containing 15 people from three families who did not know one another, was normal.

One of the biggest challenges of these generations since the Soviet collapse is to learn to create a balance between being supportive and enjoying family and friends, and also being respectful of one's own health and needs.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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