

## Phoning home

God, like an attuned parent, hears not just the words we say but also the hidden parts of our hearts.

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

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Century illustration (Source image: Osama Saeed on Unsplash)

College and university campuses often host summer programs for high school students. After a few weeks of respite once the undergraduates head home, the arrival of dozens or hundreds of teenagers marks a different mood on campus. You can't help but feel the excitement of these adolescents as they experience their first taste of college life and, I imagine for many, their first extended stay away from home. The typical college junior is already jaded about life on campus. A high school

junior, however, is noticeably excited about spending a few weeks living in a dormitory and eating cafeteria food.

I heard the group of high schoolers long before I saw them. A group of four young Black teenage boys joined me at the smoothie counter in the student center. As we all waited patiently for our drinks, they laughed, joked, and presumably shared TikTok videos on their phones. I just enjoyed this brief time in their happy presence. I took delight in the fact that they were spending their summer on a college campus and that the realities of racism or harmful stereotypes hadn't derailed this possible stepping stone to a college education.

One young man stepped away from the line to take a phone call, which was shocking to me because I'm often reminded that Generations Z and Alpha don't actually answer their phones. My own daughter texts me from another location in our house, content to have an extended conversation back and forth via texts, despite the fact that a one-minute voice call would quickly answer my questions about dinner.

The teen returned to his friends at the smoothie counter with a sheepish "my mom" to his peers' unasked question of why he answered the phone. But it was said with a smile, and with tenderness, and with obvious love for the mother on the other end of the line. This was someone's beloved son; some mother somewhere had sent her precious bundle away from home to enrich his life and to open up doors of opportunities for him. I couldn't help but think that there may have been a quick "I love you" that ended the phone call, perhaps with a furtive look around to make sure that no one else heard.

On this college campus during a late summer afternoon, I had a glimpse of a young man moving through the world, interacting with his peer group, and enjoying the first freedoms of adolescence. I saw this child, loved by God, made in God's own image, who was also dearly precious to the person who had called him. And I couldn't help but reflect on the human and spiritual value of something as simple as a phone call to or from home—those small gestures of connection that remind you that you are not alone in this world.

I understood why that mother needed to hear her son's voice, despite what I am sure were many text messages exchanged between them. When you are close to someone, the sound of their voice tells you so much. You can hear their sorrow or

joy; you can tell if something is wrong or if everything is going right, just by listening to them say a few words. And for those who love you and know you well, even the slightest changes in your tone or inflection can tell them more than thousands of written words ever could.

This is the truth that is revealed when we pray to God. Beyond the words we say, God hears the hidden parts of our hearts. We can recite the words of the Lord's Prayer or quote from the psalms, each time using the same exact words. Yet God listens to the deep recesses of our soul, whether we are speaking from a posture of sorrow and doubt or from a position of joy and gladness. Sometimes, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. And sometimes those same words are a cry for help, an expression of our deepest longing. The God who knows you, the God who formed you, hears the inflection in your voice and in your heart, not simply the words on your lips.

If a human parent or spouse or best friend loves you so much that merely greeting them by phone can solicit an "Are you OK?" or "What's wrong?" then surely the matchless and perfect love of God exceeds even these human responses. When we pray, when we spiritually phone home to God, we are assured of a divine presence that understands our utterances, groans, and silences. We are promised that the Holy Spirit will make intercession for our sighs that are too deep for words.

Sometimes I want to walk around campus and tell our students to answer those phone calls from home. I want to tell them to save that voicemail or audio message from a parent or a sibling. I want to hold up a sign to remind them that someone who loves you is calling. Someone whose time on this earth is finite needs to hear your voice. In the fullness of time, you understand how precious those calls from home are—that they will not always last. And one day you may mourn the loss of that beloved person who insisted on hearing your voice just to know that you were OK.

If that inevitable day of loss comes, we can rest in the promise that we can always call our spiritual home. That as we pray, as beloved children of God, we are heard, seen, affirmed, and cherished. We can remember that there is a heavenly parent who rejoices in the sound of our voices, comforts us in our silences, and understands our every tone and inflection.