

INFORMATION PLEASE.

When I was quite young, my father had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember well the polished old case fastened to the wall. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother used to talk to it.

Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person - her name was Information Please and there was nothing she did not know. Information Please could supply anybody's number and the correct time.

My first personal experience with this genie-in-the-bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there didn't seem to be any reason in crying because there was no one home to give sympathy. I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway - The telephone!

Quickly I ran for the footstool in the parlor and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up I unhooked the receiver in the parlor and held it to my ear. "Information Please," I said into the mouthpiece just above my head.

A click or two and a small clear voice spoke into my ear. "Information."

"I hurt my finger. . ." I wailed into the phone. The tears came readily enough now that I had an audience.

"Isn't your mother home?" came the question.

"Nobody's home but me." I blubbered.

"Are you bleeding?"

"No," I replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts."

"Can you open your icebox?" she asked. I said I could. "Then chip off a little piece of ice and hold it to your finger."

After that I called Information Please for everything. I asked her for help with my geography and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math, and she told me my pet chipmunk I had caught in the park just the day before would eat fruits and nuts.

And there was the time that Petey, our pet canary died. I called Information Please and told her the sad story. She listened, then said the usual things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was un-consoled. Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers, feet up on the bottom of a cage?

She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, "Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in." Somehow I felt better.

Another day I was on the telephone. "Information Please."

"Information," said the now familiar voice.

"How do you spell fix?" I asked.

All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. Then when I was 9 years old, we moved across the country to Boston. I missed my friend very much. Information Please belonged in that old wooden box back home, and I somehow never thought of trying the tall, shiny new phone that sat on the hall table.

Yet as I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left me; often in moments of doubt and perplexity I would recall the serene sense of security I had then. I appreciated now how patient, understanding, and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle. I had about half an hour or so between planes, and I spent 15 minutes or so on the phone with my sister, who lived there now. Then without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said, "Information Please".

Miraculously, I heard again the small, clear voice I knew so well, "Information." I hadn't planned this but I heard myself saying, "Could you tell me please how...to spell fix?"

There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, "I guess that your finger must have healed by now.

I laughed, "So it's really still you," I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time.

"I wonder, she said, if you know how much your calls meant to me. I never had any children, and I used to look forward to your calls."

I told her how often I had thought of her over the years and I asked if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister.

"Please do, just ask for Sally."

Just three months later I was back in Seattle. . . A different voice answered Information and I asked for Sally.

"Are you a friend?"

"Yes, a very old friend."

"Then I'm sorry to have to tell you. Sally has been working part-time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago." But before I could hang up she said, "Wait a minute. Did you say your name was Paul?"

"Yes."

"Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down. Here it is I'll read it 'Tell him I still say there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean'.

I thanked her and hung up. I did know what Sally meant.

To Kill an American Written by an Australian Dentist...

You probably missed it in the rush of news last week, but there was actually a report that someone in Pakistan had published in a newspaper an offer of a reward to anyone who killed an American, any American. So an Australian dentist wrote an editorial the following day to let everyone know what an American is, so they would know when they found one. (Good one, mate!!!!)

An American is English, or French, or Italian, Irish, German, Spanish, Polish, Russian or Greek. An American may also be Canadian, Mexican, African, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Australian, Iranian, Asian, or Arab, or Pakistani or Afghan.

An American may also be a Comanche, Cherokee, Osage, Blackfoot, Navaho, Apache, Seminole or one of the many other tribes known as native Americans.

An American is Christian, or he could be Jewish, or Buddhist, or Muslim.

In fact, there are more Muslims in America than in Afghanistan . The only difference is that in America they are free to worship as each of them chooses.

An American is also free to believe in no religion. For that he will answer only to God, not to the government, or to armed thugs claiming to speak for the government and for God.

An American lives in the most prosperous land in the history of the world.

The root of that prosperity can be found in the Declaration of Independence, which recognizes the God given right of each person to the pursuit of happiness.

An American is generous. Americans have helped out just about every other nation in the world in their time of need, never asking a thing in return.

When Afghanistan was over-run by the Soviet army 20 years ago, Americans came with arms and supplies to enable the people to win back their country!

As of the morning of September 11, Americans had given more than any other nation to the poor in Afghanistan.

Americans welcome the best of everything...the best products, the best books, the best music, the best food, the best services. But they also welcome the least.

The national symbol of America, The Statue of Liberty, welcomes your tired and your poor, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores, the homeless, tempest tossed. These in fact are the people who built America.

Some of them were working in the Twin Towers the morning of September 11, 2001 earning a better life for their families. It's been told that the World Trade Center victims were from at least 30 different countries, cultures, and first languages, including those that aided and abetted the terrorists.

So you can try to kill an American if you must.

Hitler did. So did General Tojo, and Stalin, and Mao Tse-Tung, and other blood-thirsty tyrants in the world. But, in doing so you would just be killing yourself. Because Americans are not a particular people from a particular place. They are the embodiment of the human spirit of freedom.

Everyone who holds to that spirit, everywhere, is an American.