



PARENTING

The Wake-Up Call I Needed After All



Deborah Skolnik

Technology has made some things obsolete. But others, like kindness and generosity, are things the world will always require.



Sean McCabe for Reader's Digest

"What's that?" my ten-year-old daughter, Genie, asked, peering over my shoulder. She'd caught me laughing at a piece of mail I'd just opened. "Wake Up Service," it read in crude stencil, "\$2.50 per call leave message." At the bottom was a phone number and a drawing of a rotary phone, like the one my great-aunt Sara had owned 40 years ago.

"Is that mail funny?" Genie asked.

"Not really," I admitted. "It's just outdated."

She frowned. "What's a wake-up call?" she asked, proving my point. I explained how, before smartphones, people sometimes paid someone to wake them with a call. "Who sent this flyer?" she pressed.

"Probably someone who doesn't think wake-up calls are outdated," I answered. "And could you please..."

"Probably someone older, who doesn't think wake-up calls are outdated," I ventured, "and could use some money."

Her eyes lit up. "Can we order a wake-up?" she asked.

I snorted. "We don't need it."

The next day, I was awakened by Genie standing by my bed, poking me with the flyer. "Can we order a wake-up call?" she pestered.

"We don't need one," I reminded her. "At least I don't. I have you."

That evening, the flyer was still on my nightstand. I picked it up and headed for the recycling bin, past Genie, who was doing her homework. "Wait!" she shrieked. She leaped up and snatched the sheet away.

"I feel sorry for the wake-up man, if he needs some money," she said, tearing up. "Can't we order?"

I looked at the flyer with its drawing of a rotary phone. I remembered, again, my great-aunt Sara and her rotary phone. As a kid, I'd visited her over Labor Day, when Jerry Lewis would host his annual telethon for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. Inevitably, Aunt Sara would squeeze my hand, then reach for the rotary phone, dialing the number on the screen. Holding the bulky receiver between us, we'd announce to the operator, "We'd like to help Jerry's kids."

Now here was my own child, showing the same big heart I'd once been encouraged to have, and I was ignoring her. I've always told Genie to consider the less fortunate, but she's met none in our leafy suburb, blessedly free from worry and want. Finally she thought she'd found someone she could help, one on one. How could I blow that off?

I Googled the flyer's return address. It's amazing what you can find with just a few clicks these days. The address belonged to a man I'll call Raymond, who lived in a less prosperous town 20 miles away. He was in his mid-60s. We called him and, holding the receiver between us, the way Aunt Sara and I used to, told him we needed his services. "Great!" Raymond said in a shaky but friendly voice, clearly as amazed at receiving an order from a child as I was at our placing it (especially when Genie requested a 7 a.m. call on a Saturday). When I asked how to pay the \$2.50, he answered, "Mail a check."

Genie beamed all week. Friday night, I put the phone by her pillow so she could answer Raymond's call. She bounded to my bedroom to tell me all about how he'd wished her a good morning and told her to have a great day, which she did.

Technology has made some things obsolete. But others, like kindness and generosity, are things the world will always require. Many older people need to receive them simply to get by. All children need a chance to practice them, simply to grow. And parents need to let them. In the rush and hustle of my daily life, I'd temporarily forgotten that. I guess I just needed a wake-up call.



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