

Snakes better than phones

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

When it comes to flying, we all probably prefer snakes on a plane to something even worse that is now being dangled before us.

I speak of phones on a plane - cellphones. A couple of rattlesnakes and a cobra or two are a minor irritation by comparison with phones on a plane.

The possibility of permitting passengers to use their phones up there in the sky tends to pit them against each other in deciding whether telephones are a socially practical idea. If permission is given, we may learn that all phones are not-so-smart phones when it comes to making a call from the middle seat while sitting between two people who dislike listening to an electronic loudmouth.

When you cram passengers like flying sardines so tightly together, utter strangers sit bottom to bottom, competing for use of the scrawny armrests and trying not to slosh hot coffee on each other. I don't know about you, but I don't like to be in instant, intimate contact with anyone but my wife. So I can't relax in a seating system that leaves me virtually cuddling people I have never met.

Yes, it's true. I am one of those old coots who are slow to adapt to hugging male friends in this touchy feely, brave new century. When I go to coffee with male friends and with their spouses, I don't get grabby and start hugging people left and right, even though we sit in restaurant chairs almost as close together as those bizarre airline seats.

So I'm not real quick to form an instant airline friendship with oddballs I've never met and start jabbering with them, let alone listening to them jabber on their phones to invisible people.

Granted, the first-class seats up front provide a little more bottom space for the high rollers. But most of them don't want to get friendly because they are pretty darned important and they know it. Most of them don't seem to like talking to each other. They sit there daring one another to break the silence, glaring in a way that says, "Don't touch me. Don't you dare touch me."

Now the powers that be are threatening to let us talk on our telephones while sitting there in the plane jammed together with strangers. Do we really want to sit six inches apart listening to the dialogue of other passengers sharing their dreary lives with us? Do we really want to hear half the content of the conversation of the twit sitting next to us?

We already hear rude people in restaurants sharing intimate details of their private lives. Imagine how much worse that would be if they were sitting beside us, talking to some other twit about a pending divorce, bigoted opinions or their latest colonoscopy.

Mind you, I understand how essential it might seem to be calling your mom to see if your dying dad is hanging in there until you arrive on the plane. A high roller might feel the need to act on a sudden hunch that his troubled Gossipbook stock needs to be dumped immediately. And a clean-looking lady panics as she remembers leaving the water running in her bathtub at home. Some emergencies do tend to demand a quick, short phone call.

But how can you act on things like that without upsetting all the people around you? That will only make them more miserable than they already are crammed into those people stalls eating gawdawful airline pretzels that look and taste like sycamore twigs?

In the first place, if you do have an actual horrendous emergency, you might be able to talk an attendant into sending a message - or at least bring you a drink of water to wash down a tranquilizer.

On the other hand, perhaps a clever nerd could invent some kind of plastic bucket or soundproof helmet that you cram over your head while talking on your beloved smart phone.

Think of it as the cellphone version of "the cone of silence" featured in that old sitcom, "Get Smart." The cone of silence was a large plastic, sound-proof hood that flakey spies went under when they needed to discuss something they didn't want the bad guys to hear.

Something like that might work with cellphones on an airplane.

On the other hand, you never know when you might find a snake under your hood.

Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's Opinion page. His email address is wilberth@cableone.net.