

# High-tech 'miracles' keep us connected

My son came home from college last week. Due to the storm, his flight was 48 hours late. My wife and I threw our exhausted arms around him at midnight, three tiny drops in a sea of people at Denver International Airport. John Lennon once said "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." I guess we wound up with two days of life we weren't counting on.

It's fashionable nowadays to talk about how technology and capitalism are divisive forces that weaken the personal connections in our lives. I've devoted most of my life to technology and capitalism, so I take such criticism personally.

Still, those critics are way off base. It is capitalism and technology that enable us to overcome challenges such as weather and distance, while at the same time maintaining and even strengthening human connections. Consider our family's 48-hour misadventure.

Our son was on a flight from New York. As soon as we found out weather might be a problem (thanks to advanced weather forecasting technology), I called my brother on Long Island. He picked up his cell phone while on a train heading home.

How amazing is that? How incredible is it that I, from the comfort of my home, surrounded by a howling blizzard, can instantly communicate with my brother on a moving train thousands of miles away? Even more so, how awe-inspiring is it to live in a world that takes such things for granted?

My brother said sure, no problem, if his nephew needed a place to stay he was always welcome.

Now our son had a place to sleep, but when was he going to be home? When would the runways at DIA be cleared? When would the highway patrol open Interstate 25? When would my son's flight be re-booked?

Thirty years ago, if my parents had wanted to answer those questions they'd be juggling multiple phone numbers, annoying busy signals and interminable hold times. I suppose they could also have watched one of the Big Three's news channels, waiting in helpless frustration until they were told what others thought they needed to know. Cell phones were, of course, nonexistent. In



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the heavily regulated environment of the Bell System, the very idea was unthinkable.

But this is the 21st century. I headed to the Internet and fired up my browser.

First, DIA's Web site told me exactly what the situation was and when the airport would reopen.

Next, I visited the Colorado Department of Transportation's Web site for highway conditions, refreshed automatically every two minutes. Then it was on to the airline's home page, armed with our son's confirmation number. At any

time, a mouse click would tell us his latest flight information.

So far, we had three windows open in a single browser, impossible a few weeks ago but easy to do with Internet Explorer's latest release. The world's most powerful company had to add that feature in response to pressure from Firefox, a free browser developed by some whiz kid not much older than mine. How about that competitive market process?

Still, a mere three windows was child's play. I knew the display wouldn't be complete without every geek's favorite Internet trick: Real-time flight tracking. When our son's latest rebooked flight was finally airborne, we watched a superimposed image of the plane fly across a satellite map of America, updated every two minutes. We left for the airport when our boy was somewhere over Pennsylvania.

I thought about holding up a sign at DIA: "Max Fagin, home for Hannukah!" but changed my mind thinking it'd embarrass him. Still, he did arrive home on the last night of Hannukah. His sister stayed up and had the menorah ready when we stumbled in at 2 in the morning. We turned out the lights, lit the candle, and began to sing.

Hannukah is a festival of freedom. Ultimately, it is freedom that makes the wonders of the modern world possible. You always chant two blessings on each night of Hannukah. But on the first and last nights, you add an extra blessing of gratitude. With all eight candles lit and our son finally home, we sang our hearts out. It just felt right.

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