

# CAPE COD TIMES

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## Column: Can you hear me?

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Every time I hear the phrase “*Can you hear me?*” two things immediately come to mind: that TV commercial and a bad cell phone connection.

But as kids get underway with a new school year, it also reminds me that those four words have so many other meanings.

It probably started when you were young and late coming downstairs to catch the school bus. Your parent would yell up to you to hurry up. When you didn’t answer right away, you’d hear “*Can you hear me? You’ll miss the bus!*” Those four words meant someone was looking out for you.

In high school as you developed some independence, you came into the kitchen before you left for school and your mother said, and it was always your mother, “you’re not going out dressed like that.” You remained silent, trying to feign that you were not listening to her while grabbing some orange juice. She continued whatever she was doing, but kept at you, “You’re not leaving the house dressed like that”; again, you ignored her. On the third salvo, you answered, “What? I’m fine.”

And then, without hesitation and with the perfect inflection in her tone and pitch that she had honed over the years, she delivered those four words like an Oscar nominee. “*Can you hear me?*” You understood without a translator that he wasn’t asking whether you should be examined for a hearing loss or wondering if she was speaking loudly enough.

Those four words took on other meanings as you grew up. In college, if you received a bad grade and the discussion turned to your lack of effort, the four words took on a meaning of wasting time and money. If you were making money at your new job, and you were asked about saving some for a rainy day, the four words had an ominous tone to them.

So, what about today? Are the kids headed off to college smart enough not to need to hear the four words? Do they know that you will still be looking out for them without hearing you call them down to breakfast? Will they manage their spending money the right way? Will they act like they’ve been in the end zone before and not call attention with some unflattering behavior? How do you know?

The simple answer is you won’t know. And that’s what brings me back to cell phones. You can call, email and text any hour of the day or night. Three ways you can ask the same question. Each time the message goes to the one device you know they have with them. If they don’t answer, it goes to voicemail. And if they have voicemail, a number will appear on their phone showing they have a message. Same thing for a text and an email. If they ignore the incoming call, text or email, their phone reminds them they have a message. It even shows them who made the call.

They may be out of earshot, but their cell phones shout out the “*Can you hear me?*” for you. And your meaning is more clear than any new ringtone.

*Jim Carroll recently relocated to East Falmouth. His career as a lawyer talking to jurors taught him the importance of speaking from the heart.*