



The Joys of a Handwritten Letter

by Gregory J. Davis

The walk to the mailbox has always been laden with expectation for me, beginning with the walk itself. After a long day at school, and now, years later, at work, I leave the house to amble the 30 meters or so to the box, savoring the season, the breeze, and the fresh air against my face after a day indoors. I open the box always with a sense of enjoyment of the unexpected. As I open the door, seeing the mix of journals, magazines, bills, and circulars, I always hold out the hope for that "gold ring" of items one might find: the rare but most-treasured: a personal, hand-written letter.

Word processors are ubiquitous now, as is email, and I can quickly type a page or six on my home or office computer before sending those electrons flashing at light speed around the globe to, say, home four miles away, or perhaps to New Zealand, as far away as one might be and still reside on Earth. And yet, it is that facility that in some ways detracts

from true communication, the ability to, in the words of E.M. Forster, "only connect." How much sweeter it is to receive a hand-written letter from friends such as my former professor J. Hill Hamon just a few miles away in Frankfort, Kentucky, cancer researcher Sarah Gunningham in Christchurch, New Zealand, or college student Katie Rose Taulbee in Richmond, Indiana. And why is that?

To begin, and herein lies the crux for me: unlike an electronic communication, the hand-written letter engages the totality of the intellect, the heart, and the senses. What stamp did my friend choose, a typical issue or commemorative? What type of stationery, utilitarian or something more whimsical? What travels did this letter take from my friend's hands to mine? From friend to mailbox to letter carrier to post office, further travels by truck, automobile, and airplane, hand and machine-sorted, all the way to the final



letter carrier (and oh, what a debt we owe these men and women who venture out in all weathers to bring us these treasures!) Ah, the feel of that paper envelope in my hand as I choose how to open it and the characteristic sound of the paper yielding to a letter opener, pocketknife, or, in a pinch, my fingers. And then, yes, the faint smell of the paper and its ink, always generating amazement that after all these years as a pathologist working with formaldehyde solutions, I can still detect and enjoy such faint scents. What handwriting style did my friend use? Cursive or printing? Is the letter in calligraphic hand, lovingly and skillfully applied via one or more nibs? Am I able to surmise the emotional state of my friend through the quality of his handwriting and its size in this particular letter? I am gratified that my friend took the time to find paper and pen, to sit down, perhaps as I often do, with a steaming mug of tea, one of my dogs at my feet, to write a letter to only one person, not a forward or form letter to a host of friends or acquaintances.

We have many virtual acquaintances in our online worlds, but to take the time to write, yes, I'll say it: a "real letter" is to acknowledge to the other person: you are worth my time, my effort, and my thought. This was not an afterthought dashed off as I was multi-tasking, but an effort that telegraphs worlds of meaning and emotion. Envisioned as labor-saving devices, computers often have the opposite effect, causing us to work more hours and now not just in the office. The demands of work and other obligations often have us running about all day to the point of forgetting to where we might have been running in the first place. The act of writing a hand-written letter forces us to escape that frenetic world, however briefly, to offer ourselves and the addressee myriad gifts. In writing the letter, we slow down, we breathe for a moment, we choose to immerse ourselves completely in one task, that of connecting with and acknowledging our friend. Perhaps we don't have much of a dramatic nature to write; perhaps it would not make a "thrilling read" to one who didn't know you. I don't believe that matters one whit, as the friend on the other end of that correspondence truly wants to listen, to hear, to understand. It allows the writer and addressee to share, across time and distance, that mug of tea and companionship with one another. So, whether it's about the garden, the noises of the traffic on the street below, who said what to whom today, or grand ideas and whatever else, the act of writing is giving to that other person the gift of acknowledgment, a need that certainly

ranks highly for us humans not all that far behind food, water, and shelter. It is a gift that can never be given enough, costs only the price of a piece of paper, an envelope, and a stamp, and is returned many fold. In a small but significant fashion, the act of writing to another person gives us the opportunity to engage in the healing and repairing of our fractured world, as two individuals are able to reach out, connect, acknowledge, and celebrate one another.

I'd write a bit more, but it's time for me to check the mailbox. Keep in touch!



Greg Davis is a forensic pathologist who teaches his arcane art in the University of Kentucky Medical School. He is a remarkable man who is the best-read and most humane soul of all the thousands of former students I have come in contact with. Our conversations over lunch are electric and inspiring.

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