

The Lost Art of Letter Writing

By Irv Sternberg

When was the last time you wrote or received a letter? No, not a text message or email, but an old-fashioned from-the-heart piece of communication from a distant relative or friend earnestly inquiring about your health, your family or your recent travel to Timbuktu?

I'm thinking about the good old days when you pulled from your desk drawer a rich-looking piece of stationery, perhaps embossed with your initials in your favorite color. Then, using your favorite pen, you began to write in the beautiful cursive style you learned in penmanship class. The letters and words you created in your own handwriting were a reflection of your personality and your mood that day you were writing. Some of you created large, intricate capital letters with a flourish, others wrote in small, tight script revealing their own attitudes about life.

We practiced this art passing personal notes to our classmates and later to that pretty girl who lived around the corner or that cute boy who smiled shyly at you in the neighborhood candy store. And we were thrilled to receive such notes, along with the crossed-out words and postscripts on pages stained with chocolate milk and later coffee. Some of us conducted long-range courtships with letters because long-distance telephone calls were too expensive to tell your love how much you missed her and you couldn't wait to see her again.

As college students we wrote letters to our parents assuring them we were fine and would they please send money. In the service, we wrote letters again assuring our parents we were fine and to our girlfriends or wives expressing our devotion and desire to hold them in our arms. In those days, the arriving letters were treasures to be read over and over held close to the recipient's breasts.

Letters were leisurely exercises. They were written where you were: under the apple tree in the back yard with the sound of children giggling in the adjacent yard, or at the kitchen table while the folks chatted in the living room. Letter-writers learned to be patient. You wrote a letter then waited days, maybe weeks, for a reply. You learned that in the time it takes for a letter to reach its destination, anything can happen. Minds change, lives are lost, loves discarded. Letters brought equal doses of happiness and sometimes heart-breaking disappointment.

I think the last letters I wrote were to my wife and son in New Jersey and to my daughter attending college in Durango in the mid-1950s. I wrote from Iran, where I was working. Because of the time differences, it was easier to write than arrange telephone calls. I recall with fondness the nostalgia and pleasure of sitting down to write such letters, and the joy of receiving the replies.

Is letter-writing a lost art? I hope not.

As an anonymous retired postal worker noted: "We live in a cold universe, and it feels a little warmer when someone out there knows you're still alive."