

*Fred D. White*

ON WRITING LETTERS BY HAND

I MISS WRITING LETTERS BY HAND. Like just about everyone else, I've succumbed to the efficiency and speed of email; but I'm trying to rekindle the delight I used to feel when composing letters with pen and ink, on quality stationery. Even if one's handwriting resembles the scratching of epileptic chickens, one projects more personhood through cursive than through digitally processed words on a screen. Handwriting analysis may not be scientifically valid, but a shadow of oneself does emanate from cursive script, one of the reasons it's such a delight to receive handwritten letters. Margaret Shepherd tells us in *The Art of the Personal Letter*, "Writing letters by hand sets the gold standard for making yourself truly present to your reader."

Even so, writing a letter by hand and sending it off via the USPS seems laughably inefficient in these digital times. Why continue to rely on a postal service requiring between one and four business days to deliver a letter in the U.S. when we can send and receive e-mail anywhere in the world, at any time, instantaneously, for free? Let me offer a few reasons . . .

In addition to its personal touch, handwritten letters encourages verbal copiousness and expressiveness. Perhaps it has to do with the feel of forming words and sentences with our fingers. Letter writing, after all, is a venerable literary genre, as old as civilization. Egypt's pharaohs wrote advisory letters to their subordinates; Cicero and Pliny the Younger were inveterate letter writers; Ovid wrote eloquent verse epistles; and of course Saint Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, Romans, Ephesians, Corinthians, Philippians, and others comprise a significant portion of the New Testament. Many epistles were also penned by the apostolic fathers of the early church—Ignatius's letters to the Ephesians, Polycarpus to the Philippians, and the papal encyclicals\* written to propagate official church teaching—a two-millennium legacy from St. Peter to Francis I.

And let us not forget the personal letters that reinforce friendship or vindicate undying love—from Eloise and Abelard in the twelfth century to today. Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne during the last agonizing years of his life as he wasted away from the ravages of tuberculosis captivate us as much as his poetry.

*February 1820*

*My sweet creature*

*My sweet creature, when I look back upon the pains and torments I have suffer'd for you*

*from the day I left you to go the Isle of Wight; the ecstasies in which I have pass'ed some days and the miseries in their turn, I wonder the more at the Beauty which has kept up*

*the spell so fervently. When I send this round I shall be in the front parlour watching to see you show yourself for a minute in the garden.*

*God bless you, Love,*

*J. Keats*

Anais Nin tells Henry Miller: "The very touch of [your] letter was as if you had taken me all into your arms"—a conceit reminiscent of Emily

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Dickinson, who in June 1869 tells her self-appointed “preceptor” Thomas Wentworth Higginson that thoughts transmitted through correspondence “is the mind alone without corporeal friend.”<sup>1</sup> There is much to be said about taking the time and effort to write letters elegant in appearance as well as content, enabling the recipient to sense the writer’s presence almost physically. And that’s just the beginning, the instant reaction to receiving an actual physical letter and opening the envelope to unveil the gift of words within—the moment of intimacy, of mind touching mind by way of stationery and hand-crafted script. They nourish the soul, these material gifts of paper and ink.

Composing letters by hand is a charming act of defiance: you are going to produce epistles of quality and elegance, which your recipients will likely preserve, e-mail and Facebook ephemera be damned. You are also showing your recipients that they are special—not simply because they’re relatives or friends, but because they are intrinsically worthy of the extra time and materials required for producing a letter by hand. Letter-writing counteracts the disconnectedness imposed by distance. A substantive letter can bring you and your recipient closer together than a phone call, text-message, or tweet.

An important, often overlooked finishing touch to the handwritten letter is the postage stamp. Most people do not think twice about stamps; they’re just receipts, in effect, for prepayment of postal delivery, and are irrelevant to the letter itself. Yet, because stamps must be displayed on the letters and parcels to be mailed, they are elegantly designed, presented as miniature works of art, commemorating national heroes, landscapes and monuments, historical moments. Stamps deserve to be paid better attention.

Perhaps you’ve seen the 1963 film, *Charade*. The murdered husband of Mrs. Regina Lambert (played by Audrey Hepburn) had hidden in proverbial plain sight among his personal effects a quarter of a million dollars. No one—not those laying claim to the fortune, not the government agent (played by Cary Grant), not the widow, not the Police Commissioner, can find it . . . because the murdered Charles Lambert had converted the money into rare stamps and affixed them to an envelope containing a note to his wife saying that his dental appointment had been changed. On three occasions, Charles Lambert’s travel bag containing his personal effects are dumped out and scrutinized, including the letter. No one pays any attention to the stamps! It’s beyond the realm of possibility that they could possess intrinsic meaning, let alone pecuniary value! Ignoring the preposterous notion that anyone could be stupid enough to affix stamps worth a quarter of a million dollars to an envelope, the movie nevertheless reflects the fact that for 99% of the non-philatelic minded public, stamps simply do not make the slightest blip on their radar, and they are just as mind-blown flabbergasted suddenly to realize, along with Tex (Charles Coburn)—one of the treasure-seekers—as he ambles through an open-air stamp show near where Mrs. Lambert’s murdered husband was supposed to have met someone—that those stamps were the object of this whole desperate search.

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<sup>1</sup> The word encyclical stems from the Greek *enkyklike*, a “circular [i.e., widely circulated] letter.”

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It should not be this way. Although The U.S.P.S. has been issuing colorful and fascinating commemoratives, it ought to do more to raise consciousness about the role stamps can play in education. Charles Davidson and Lincoln Diamant—an artist and a historian respectively, demonstrated both the aesthetic and the historical aspects of stamps in their beautifully illustrated *Stamping Our History: The Story of the United States Portrayed in Its Postage Stamps* (Lyle Stuart, 1990). Even the ordinary definitive issues like the Forever stamps depicting the Liberty and the American flag are beautifully designed. The only problem is that they've lost their luster from over-exposure.

Not so long ago the U.S.P.S., to promote letter writing, issued a striking set of jumbo-sized stamps in 1974 commemorating the Universal Postal Union by reproducing in full color works of art depicting letter writing and reading (e.g., Gerard Terborch's "Lady Writing Letter"; a detail from "Boy with a Top," showing an inkwell and quill pen, by Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin). Every other stamp in the series bears the motto . . .

### Letters Mingle Souls

If the U.S.P.S. thought it was a good idea to publicize letter writing in 1974, think of how much more urgently such publicity is needed today. Post offices ought to sell stationery and pens in colorful displays. Hang posters of children writing letters to pen pals overseas, franking their envelopes with colorful stamps. Images of beautiful people, young and old, engaged in the act of composing letters with pen and paper should appear in public places. Imagine the impact on society if there were as many TV commercials exulting in the pleasures of letter writing as commercials for erectile dysfunction meds. The U.S.P.S. would soon recoup its losses

Letter writing is a good way of practicing both creative and expository writing because letter writers are always keenly aware of their audience of one. They are more inclined to get their ideas across clearly, to speak in intimate, natural voices. It's not easy conveying your personhood when you're obliged to treat language as code. Also, paper letters are almost always kept; they become part of a family legacy, to be shared with children and grandchildren—and if the letter-writer achieves any degree of fame, with the public. Finally letter writing slows us down—and how urgently we need slowing down! Writing by hand keeps us more in tune with the rhythm of our thoughts and the too-frequently overlooked nuances of our lives.