

PLEDGING TO WRITE MORE LETTERS

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



When I mail a card or letter to our grown daughter and son, I text them with the news that something is on the way.

As children of digital culture, they wouldn't otherwise make a point to check their postal mailbox each day.

Why should they? My kids do all of their business online and read their papers and magazines online, too. What's more, the chance that anyone would send them a handwritten letter is pretty slim. According to a CBS News survey conducted last year, just under a third of respondents had written a single personal letter in the previous 12 months. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents hadn't written a letter in the past five years.

I don't write very many letters anymore, either, and I have no illusions that they'll make a comeback. The speed and convenience of texts and email are undeniable, and I count them as pluses in keeping up with loved ones.

*To get more postal letters in my mailbox this year,
I'll probably need to write a few more myself.*

Even so, a handwritten letter remains a great gift, as I was reminded earlier this year when one arrived from a former journalist I'd worked with some three decades ago. Although I hadn't seen Stuart's handwriting in years, I instantly recognized his penmanship as I scanned the envelope.

The only trouble was making out the letter inside. The charm of Stuart's cursive — and its persistent challenge — is that it perfectly expresses its author, who tells stories as if spilling out everything at once. There's a telegraphic urgency in every line, with little regard to clarity in the slope of an l or the cross of a t.

So I struggled with it for an afternoon, like an Egyptologist hunched over a hieroglyph in the desert sun, until a narrative slowly emerged. I learned, in bright bits of revelation, about children now grown, trips recently taken, and a wife who had tumbled while skiing but was now on the mend.

None of this was nearly so efficient as email, where the story of Stuart's life would have instantly unfolded for me in neat rows of type. What I got from that handwritten letter, though, was the tangible presence of Stuart himself. Tracing the slant of his sentences across the page, I could sense, as if reading a seismograph, the vibrating heart of a man I treasure.

That's what a handwritten letter can do. This year, I'll try to write a few more myself.

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