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Snail Mail: Why Writing Letters Should Make a Comeback

The paper felt like cotton, soft and worn and creased down the middle. It was the first real letter I'd ever gotten that wasn't a sappy birthday card or a note from the bank. It was thick, making me wonder if it was too big to be just a letter. The envelope was addressed to me in a handwriting I would recognize anywhere, the scrawls of someone I hadn't seen in weeks. For months, we'd been writing letters to each other, knowing we'd be limited to them when he went off to the Coast Guard. It was awkward at first, seeing him every day at school and then receiving notes from him in the mail later that afternoon. But I learned to love it, the thrill of sending and, especially, receiving letters. I began to wonder why writing letters had become such a thing of the past, why I'd only received invitations or birthday cards in the mail and nothing truly sentimental, nothing that made me preserve the notes and signature. I watched as my friends ended relationships over email and determined their friendships based on social media.

It is no secret the world is going digital. Between emails, text messages, social media, and video chat, the handwritten note or letter is quickly fading into non-existence. However, with the loss of this art form, is the world going to lose something even bigger? Although most people in today's modern world would argue digital communication is the improvement of traditional letter writing, evidence suggests that this may not be true. After my own personal experiences as well as studying the psychological, emotional, and cognitive effects of handwriting on early mental development, it is apparent that letter writing should make a comeback in today's immediate, social media-driven society.

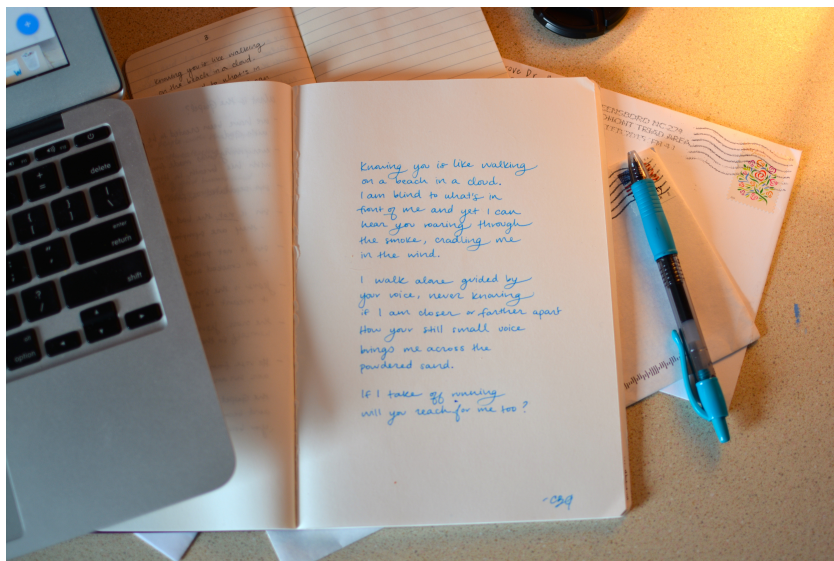
Today's society is overrun by social media, digital trading, and the ongoing attempt to make things more immediate; and although these qualities aren't a negative thing, they can also strip away the value and significance of communication. One of the greatest dangers of social media is how quickly and easily it is to throw out snide comments or lies without any real consideration of your words. Writing letters forces you to actually write out your thoughts and organize them into your stories, with your own signature at the end. Writing letters allows you to really understand your own thoughts and to have accountability for your words.

Exchanging letters enhances every kind of relationship. When my best friend went into the Coast Guard and moved a thousand miles away, writing letters was our only means of communication. It was the only thing I had to hold onto when we were separate, and yet I still felt like I was a part of his daily life. Even when he got phone access and we could talk every moment of every day if we chose, we still loved writing letters so much. Regardless of the type of relationship, there's something beautifully unnecessary about using the slowest and most difficult process of communication (besides carrier pigeons and smoke signals) just to tell someone about your day.

The reason why receiving letters is more meaningful is because they cost more, in both time and money. Emails, texts, tweets, and pretty much all forms of digital communication are essentially free. They're fast, easy to write, quickly sent, and leave much less room for error in their delivery. A recent study showed the average corporate email account sent or received more than 100 emails per day, and Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 now send or receive nearly 100 texts per day (Coleman). However, while these forms of digital communication are rarely significant, handwritten notes are perceived as valuable or unusual. They take minutes (or hours) to compose, each word specifically chosen with no "autocorrect" on which to depend for grammatical clarity. Drafting a letter involves choosing stationery, paying for stamps, and going

to the post office or mailbox. There's so much more effort and investment involved in sending letters, which conveys an element of value and costliness. Also, handwritten notes are often conveying personal sentiments of gratitude and appreciation, and create a more meaningful relationship regardless of whether one currently exists or not.

In 2012, author Philip Hensher, an English novelist, critic and journalist, wrote an essay for the *Wall Street Journal* in which he stated, “[t]he ready communication through electronic means that has replaced the handwritten letter is wonderful. But we have definitely lost something here, and those Skype, email and text exchanges won't be treasured in the way that my teenage letters, scribbled journals and postcards have been for years” (Hensher). His essay, “The Lost Art of the Handwritten Note,” emphasizes the gaps between digital and handwritten communication, the role handwriting plays in personality, and how digital archives are replacing the fond memories we have of postcards, love letters, and simple notes that were once the quickest way of communication. Hensher speaks to the issue at hand: letter writing is dying out and we're allowing it to happen with little regard for the consequences.



Picture 1: Photo by Celia Glenn, 2014

Similarly, John Coleman, a writer for the *Harvard Business Review* and co-author of *Passion and Purpose: Stories from the Best and Brightest Young Business Leaders*, writes, “[p]ersonal handwritten notes grow rarer by the day. According to the U.S. Postal Service’s annual survey, the average home only received a personal letter once every seven weeks in 2010, down from once every two weeks in 1987” (Coleman). His essay, “Handwritten Notes Are a Rare Commodity. They’re Also More Important Than Ever” continues by defending the art form and value of letters, addressing the popular opinion regarding their inconvenience, and outlining the benefits of handwritten communication. Some of these include the conveyance of value held in handwritten letters, better health and sleep, and the permanent impact they have. If letters are as meaningful as authors and individuals claim them to be, and the postal service is claiming the decrease in letters being sent, then it is implied that significant, meaningful communication is also declining as we dive into the world of digital messaging and move away from handwritten communication. How can we expect the consequences of this decline to be positive?

Writing letters isn’t just about communicating between friends or finding the less-popular way of sending messages, but is actually psychologically and biologically important. In fact, studies show handwriting is essential to early mental development in children and young adults. Anna Mikulak, a writer for the Association for Psychological Science, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the expansion of scientific psychology, wrote an article titled, “Getting It In Writing: Writing the Old-Fashioned Way May Enhance Learning and Memory” in which she breaks down the benefits of handwriting separated into categories of literacy, memory, and motor skills. In her 2014 article, she states, “our cultural shift from writing by hand to writing by computer could have downstream consequences that extend beyond the ability to produce consistent, legible, or neat script, influencing basic motor skills” (Mikulak). She clarifies the

research behind this conclusion by connecting the importance of handwriting to cognitive functions, saying,

[Researchers] investigated memory for lecture material in college students who took notes by hand and those who took notes on a laptop. . . . When it came to answering conceptual questions that required them to apply what they had learned in the lecture, however, students who took notes on a laptop performed significantly worse than those who took notes by hand. . . . Perhaps the most striking result was the fact that longhand note takers still outperformed laptop note takers on a test one week later, after both groups were given a chance to review their notes. (Mikulak)

Mikulak's research suggests that handwriting is an essential part of brain capabilities and skills in early development, a quality that cannot be replicated by typing. The studies included evidence stating, "[l]ike any motor skill, handwriting may become more difficult without practice, and research suggests that writing less by hand may even have consequences for our motor repertoire" (Mikulak). This also suggests that by removing handwriting from education at both elementary and college levels, students will begin to lose not only brain functions, but physical abilities as time goes on and as the education system begins to replace traditional note-taking with digital alternatives.

As much as letter writing can improve mental functions and improve relationships, it also lacks something technology has managed to succeed in: immediacy and simplicity. Today's modern society has provided the most efficient means of communication that allow people of all ages across the world to find out about news immediately, to communicate in a variety of ways, and to send multiple messages at one time. Technology today gives ways to advance how the world interacts, shares, spends, and lives; however, it is limited in its emotional significance.

In a study conducted by Common Sense Media in 2012, one thousand teenagers were polled to monitor social media use among 13-17 year olds and its impact on their social lives. According to the results, “29% of social network users believe that social networking makes them feel more outgoing; 20% say it makes them feel more confident; 15% say it makes them feel better about themselves; and 10% say it makes them feel less depressed” (Sumanik). This study shows that social media isn’t necessarily bad or useless. According to the research, social media allows many teenagers to connect faster and to establish confidence in their relationships. It can be an effective tool for making connections, building résumés, and establishing contact points between not only teenagers, but employers and job-seekers, families living countries apart, and artistic communities.

Technology isn’t limited to social media. In fact, the use of tablets and digital interfaces allows people to communicate who cannot physically write or speak. It creates a way to interact within a digital dialogue and to move past disabilities. In the journal article, “The iPad and Mobile Technology Revolution: Benefits and Challenges for Individuals who require Augmentative and Alternative Communication,” David McNaughton, a professor of psychology, counseling, and special education at Penn State University, considers the benefits and challenges of mobile technologies used to enhance communication for individuals with developmental disabilities, acquired neurogenic disorders, and degenerative neurological conditions. He writes, “These mobile technologies offer a number of potential benefits, including increased awareness and social acceptance of augmentative and alternative communication” (McNaughton). In consideration of this alternate perspective of technology in relation to communication, it is easy to see the benefits of having access to digital communication in personal, business, and global contexts. This article introduces the opposing opinion by showing the legitimate other side of my

argument and demonstrates how technology is used as the only means of communication for certain audiences.

Social media, digital archives, instant messaging; it's all important to today's international business and daily interactions. Social media has an incredible power in today's society, allowing people to communicate instantly, share ideas, interact internationally, and promote themselves and their businesses in an ever-changing way. It's a platform full of potential. The problem is not found in the use of social media, but rather its abuse as people use social media to create relationships via false accounts, use their platforms to destroy others, and use them to replace meaningful, personal communication. Their abuse is found in prioritizing the instantaneous exchange of information above the consideration of the mental, psychological, and emotional consequences. We must become aware of how to interact and trade and exchange in ways outside of the digital realms or we will be left with the hollow shells of relationships and declining brain and mental capacities.

It would be ignorant to argue that writing letters should replace today's digital alternatives and that we should start sending postcards instead of emails, but it is relevant to understand the huge loss to society if we start to focus on the immediacy and the efficiency rather than the value; if we start to focus on convenience over quality, we might start to let our own inventions determine the quality of our relationships. It is important to understand the limitations of technology and to understand when it's better and more personal to take on something more traditional and a little more complicated. Based on this research, and my own experience, letter writing should have a higher position of significance in the corporate, social, and personal worlds of our lives. Otherwise, we'll end up more digitally connected, but more emotionally distant than ever.

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