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FYS On Letter Writing

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Nothing Like a Letter

Which excites you more: Getting a phone call on your birthday, or receiving a birthday card in the mail, handwritten by a loved one? There is nothing quite like a handwritten letter. I had the privilege of experiencing this firsthand throughout eight years at camp, where letters were my only way of communication to the outside world. My excitement receiving a letter from a friend or family member and my disappointment when I got nothing in the mail was unique to anything I've ever felt about any other kind of communication. My letters also hold incredible sentimental value to me, and I have multiple boxes under my bed full of letters I have received over the years. Letters allow for the formation of deep relationships in a different way than oral communication because a letter is tangible, it's personal, and its content is inherently meaningful.

Tangibility of a letter is one of its most significant aspects. It creates a physical connection between the sender and the recipient. Sitting down and writing out one's thoughts and feelings to someone takes time and effort, which makes the act meaningful. Even if the content of the letter is not very deep or personal, simply writing it and sending it is an act that is meaningful and shows the recipient that they are significant to the sender. Letters are also a physical documentation of the emotions between them. "A letter is an indelible record, an album of memory, a mirror of thoughts" (Roy, 5). They are association objects. The recipient can associate a letter with the sender. That is why people cherish letters, keep them safe, and even display them in their rooms or offices. The fact that letters last and that one can go back to them is important to their significance. Letter writing is used in therapy for this very reason. They "convey ideas in a permanent way" and they can "make misunderstandings more evident" (Davidson and Birmingham, 41). Because one can refer back to exactly what the sender said, communication is more clear and their relationship with the sender will be built on trust and transparency.

The intense personal aspect of a handwritten letter makes it so much more special than simply talking face to face with someone or on the phone. Each and every handwritten letter is unique, not one is exactly like another. This uniqueness conveys the nature of the relationship between the sender and recipient. There are many aspects of a letter that mark its uniqueness. For one thing, the sender's handwriting and signature. These things are a mark of the sender and part of their identity. In a book on a study on women's letters in 18th century France, the author found that the "closer one looks at particular women and their letters, the more individual they become" (Goodman, pg 7). Other things such as tear drops, the tone of the letter, or any pictures enclosed is a marker of the two people's relationship and their current situation. Length and tone of a letter is also a sign of whether or not the sender and recipient are close and how formal or informal their relationship is. Letter writing can be looked at as an art form. Each one is different, and the sender has to truly craft the letter. They must "take into consideration the abilities, needs and concerns of the person to whom it is addressed" (Roy, 9).

Anyone can just say what they're thinking and feeling when they are with someone - it's easy. But it's the fact that the recipient was worth the sender's time and effort that makes a letter mean more. The content of letters is inherently more meaningful than everyday oral communication. Speaking face to face, on a phone or facetime call is instant. You can say what you want when you want and you can always say another sentence or ask another question. Letters are different. They cost money to send and they take time to travel. People do not usually just write their stream of consciousness the way you can when speaking. You have to be sparing with what you say in a letter. You must pick and choose your words wisely, considering you have a limited space and you may not get a response for a long time. This naturally makes the content of letters more significant and deep, increasing their value.

In class, we looked at people who formed their relationships purely based on letters. Norma Clinton and Harry Kipp started talking through letters while Harry was away at war. The letters were effective at conveying who Harry and Norma were as people, so much so that after just a few letters, Harry had "plunged deliriously in love with Norma" (Carroll, 49). I believe this had everything to do with the personality in their letters, the uniqueness of them. Aspects that contributed to this were photos Norma enclosed in her letters, the tone and poetry of Harry's words, and the frequency of the letters they sent - all features I mentioned above. Who Harry and Norma were as people was reflected by the words and physical aspects of their letters. They ignited their chemistry so much that in only his 8th letter, Harry wrote, "I do love you. Norma, I want you to be my wife just as soon as I can possibly come for you" (Kipp, 50). Although they had never spoken or touched, they were even able to develop somewhat of a physical relationship through the words they wrote. When Harry was finally back from war, they married

immediately and stayed married until Harry died. Norma accepted Harry's proposal without even knowing what he looked like. All she knew were his words. This shows what incredible trust Norma and Harry put in their letters. Clearly, back when letters were the main form of communication, people wrote in a way that could make people feel.

In *84 Charing Cross Road*, Helene wrote to Frank's bookstore hoping to obtain books that she could not find locally. The result was a twenty year friendship across the Atlantic Ocean. Through letters, Frank and Helene built a deep bond, Helene got to know his family, and she sent them food packages due to the shortages after the war (84 Charing Cross Road, 38:02-39:03). They were extremely close, despite never having met or orally communicated. When Helene got news of Frank's death, she was devastated, as seen in the scene where Frank's wife writes a letter to her informing her of their loss. The movie portrays how she grieved him as a best friend, someone extremely significant in her life. Letters took their relationship from one of business to one of personal significance. They were so deeply connected and knew each other so well. Their letters were crafted so that their personalities shone through their words, attesting to the personality and meaningful content of handwritten letters.

As represented in Helene and Frank's pen-pal friendship, Norma and Harry's epistolary romance, my experience with camp mail, and I am sure everyone's experience receiving birthday cards, letters invoke a certain connection between the sender and the recipient. This connection is different from that of oral communication, whether that be a phone call or speaking face to face. The tangibility, uniqueness and personal touch, and meaningful content of letters contribute to the distinctive connections they form.

Works Cited

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