

WRITING LETTERS

For a while it seemed that the telephone was going to undo completely letter writing because we want our information immediately. Then along comes email and the fax machine that uses the telephone lines to send both business and personal correspondence.

Nevertheless, letter writing appears to be as lively as ever even though there is no decrease in the use of the telephone. But the telephone is not a substitute for a long, intimate visit with a dear friend when we sit down in a quiet place and close the distance between us with pen and paper. That is intimacy!

Letter writing from any period reaffirms our common humanity. Even the letters home from young soldiers in the ends of the Roman empire differ little from those today. The routine summary with health reports, queries about friends and family, and gentle requests for some special thing is a way to keep in touch.

For St. Paul, letters were the glue that held together the separate young churches spread out around the upper part of the Mediterranean.

Saints and scholars, like Jerome, Augustine and Cicero, wrote hundreds of letters that became the standard for theology, philosophy, and Latin epistolary style.

The love letters of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning still warm the most cold and cockled heart. And Jane and Thomas Carlyle, Lord Byron, and Charles Dickens all have left us a vast record of daily life and thought in their volumes of letters. Even in the age of science, the correspondence of Darwin, Priestly, and Einstein is as valuable as their published writings.

But a personal letter offers an opportunity to speak freely and informally. From these gems we have an intimate view of the everyday, the commonplace of our shared humanity, like a short series of letters between a young woman and her husband in the 1850s from Piedmont North Carolina. She had been left to manage the plantation while he travelled selling their wares. The two of them have left us a short, intimate peek at a time of loneliness and separation softened by a letter from the hands of a loved one.

In October of 1850 the young wife, who is pregnant, is at home with one-year-old Willy, and Molly Frances, 2 months. Her husband had already been away three months. She wrote: "Dear Husband. I received a letter from you at last, it afforded me much pleasure to hear that you was well; but I was very sorry to hear that you got on so slowly. I hope you will meet with better luck for you don't have good luck at home I don't believe that our help Branson works more than half his time, he has not commenced sowing the wheat, I don't believe that he would have hauled up the fodder in a month if William and Abe hadn't a helped.... I have not got but two pieces of meat left. I sent some wheat to the mill and of all the flour, it is the worst you ever saw.... There is two of your hogs dead. And Dr. Coles' hogs rooted up and destroyed all of them potatoes over in the field, all but two or three baskets full [But] We all are well. Willy is very lively continually. Write soon."

She signs her name and then adds this plea on the envelope: "Come home in less time than three months." Then as if to keep from becoming too negative with her reports, she added: "dont be discouraged altho' I have written a very disheartened letter. I don' like to keep any thing back."

Letters close the distance between friends. Write to someone soon.

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