The Lost Art of Letter Writing

By Anthony Ray

Packed away on a storage shelf in my bedroom sit three boxes which contain nearly five hundred letters, spanning a timeframe of over 150 years’ worth of communications. The oldest – a Civil War letter; the most recent – arrived yesterday. Each one of these envelopes contain a small snapshot into the daily life of an individual who experienced joy and grief, love and loss, war and hardship, life and death. They convey a small insight into the mind of the writer through their penmanship, the way they spell or misspell words, and in the tone of their writing. Some of their most intimate thoughts and feelings have become tangible in the ink and paper upon which they have touched and breathed. They record personal and social history. They are voices that have outlived their beings.
Opening the mailbox and finding something other than bills, junk mail, or packages is becoming less common due to the advent of instant messaging, social media, and other forms of digital communication. Within the past twenty years or so, we have lost the art of letter writing. We are less patient. We have lost the ability to engage in meaningful dialogue that doesn’t descend into hateful rhetoric. And, while humanity has always struggled with these qualities, I can’t help but think that this shift has had negative consequences on the ways we communicate with one another.

We no longer have to wait days, weeks, or even months to receive a reply to a question or to hear how a friend is doing. We no longer need to know how to spell words correctly – our phones, tablets, and computers do that for us. The dictionary and thesaurus sit collecting dust on the bookcase. We no longer practice penmanship or cursive since we can glide our fingers across screens instead of pens across paper. We no longer have to consider our words and the consequences each one possesses once they have been read by the recipient. We can fire off a rapid response as our fingers furiously strike letters on a keyboard, hitting send without even proofreading what we’ve just written. We no longer have to live with the letter a little longer after its conception, no need to read through it one more time, fold it, place it in the envelope, seal it, stamp it, and place it in the mailbox.

We have gained a lot in this digital age. But we have lost the quality of time and effort.

Our lives have all drastically changed since the beginning of the current global pandemic. In many ways, we have all been thrust back into a time we consider to be quite primitive. For many, our lives have
slowed almost to a halt. We are not used to being alone – let alone, being alone with our thoughts. For some, it is unsettling. For others, it is a respite from the chaos that has always surrounded us. And yet, while we’ve all been thrown into a time that in many ways feels more archaic than this so-called “advanced” society in which we live, we still live with the “comforts” of modern technology. I still can’t help but feel that its “blessing” has been more of a curse.

So, what does letter writing have to do with how we live in the midst of a global pandemic? I believe it can help us in how we cope and how we view humanity. Since the beginning of March 2020, I’ve sent nearly eighty letters, averaging about five letters per week. In the past three months, I’ve learned a lot as thoughts flow from my mind, through my arm, down into my fingers, and out the tip of a pen. Here are some of the lessons I’ve learned:

**Thought**

When your hand cannot move as fast as your brain, you are left with more time to consider. It wasn’t uncommon for someone to approach me as I sat typing on my laptop at a coffee shop and say “Wow! You type so quickly!” as my fingers created a constant rhythm of percussive key-clicks. Rarely do you hear someone say “Wow! You write in penmanship so quickly!” Writing by hand simply takes longer than to swipe your finger across a screen and hit “send” or to punch out a series of letters. As a result, you’re forced to think and consider your words more carefully. Once ink has been applied to paper, it cannot be as easily removed as if one were to hit the “backspace” a few times. The word has become physical. And even when whiteout has been layered
on top, it still lies just beneath the surface, existing – if only clandestinely.

**Patience**

Patience and thought go hand-in-hand. By virtue of its nature, to be more thoughtful means to be more patient. It takes time to write a letter in cursive. It takes time to consider word choice and syntax, how words will fit together, and how they will relate to the physical page. It takes time to look up addresses, seal envelopes, and walk them to the nearest mailbox. It takes time for letters to be received, to be answered, and to be sent. And then the process repeats itself. Often, the most excruciating moment in the letter writing process is placing it in the mailbox. It is then out of your hands – literally – and the wait for a response commences. Through the process, you learn how to be a little more patient with others and with yourself.

**Creativity**

Something as innocuous as a blank sheet of paper can, in actuality, be quite terrifying. It represents nothingness waiting for somethingness to fill it. It is quite literally what we project our thoughts onto, our deepest fears and emotions, or greatest triumphs and joys. It is where we create a narrative, ask questions, give a response, and allow a glimpse into our innermost being. It is a slate onto which we can tangibly manifest our thoughts in an artistic fashion – the way we cross our Ts, dot our Is, curl and swirl our letters. It is an act of creativity to take pen to paper, to see the anger etched into sharp lines, or the love found resting in soft curves. It is not solely creative in the sense that we are expressing something creative but in *making* something creative. The Hebrew
word *davar* means both “word” and “thing.” When we put intangible words onto tangible paper, we create a “thing” that can be cherished as a physical manifestation of thoughts, ideas, and emotions.

**Love**

Few things in the world convey our love as sincerely as when we give our time and attention to someone else. When we pour ourselves into a letter, we creatively express our love in sharing our thoughts and feelings, ideas and concerns. The act of sharing love not only has the potential to brighten the life of the recipient, but also that of the sender. After writing a letter or two, I always feel much happier, as if I, too, have gained something having given myself in the form of a letter. Beauty is found in the love it contains, living longer than either the sender or recipient and preserving their memory for future generations to enjoy.

Love, Anthony