

Whatever Happened to Letter Writing?

Letter writing is not the noble enterprise. Remaining fully expressive is the noble enterprise.

Vivian Gornick

The other day I received a gift from a friend. Naturally, I wanted to thank him. I thought of phoning, but he lived out of town and was probably at work anyway. Besides, the gift deserved more than a phone call. I could have e-mailed, but he is not yet with-it digitally. Or I could have written a letter.

To phone, e-mail or write? That, in a nutshell, is the gist of a modern communication dilemma. I like to do all three. Sometimes one, sometimes another. But I write letters far less often than I wish I did or than I used to.

Fifty years ago people wrote letters. I was in grammar school then and each summer when I went to camp, I was asked to send a postcard home every day. I recall protesting, not so much because I didn't like to write, but because I couldn't imagine having anything new to say each day. "Well, tell us what you had to eat," I was told in reply.

I continued to send a letter home at least once a week throughout my college days and for many years thereafter until there was no longer anyone left to write to. In those days, we didn't telephone as much. It seemed expensive. And no one had ever heard of an e-mail or a fax.

All the letters I ever wrote home were saved. The little cards from camp, the letters I wrote whenever I was traveling and all of those I wrote as I grew older. At the end of each year, my mother tied them together with a large rubber band and put them in the trunk I had taken to camp each summer at the start of my letter-writing days. When she died, I didn't know what to do with that trunk packed full of my letters. I thought: this is ridiculous, no one, not even I, will ever be the least bit interested in reading them again. So I threw them all away.

The days of writing letters are over now. Very few individuals write them any more. Yet, I still like to write. I write to my children. They never reply. That doesn't deter me. Sometimes we

have a problem or disagree about something. So I write to explain myself. But I have learned that writing a letter about the matter never works. Yet when we speak on the telephone, it rarely takes more than a few moments to work things out.

In the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Letters* the editors, Frank and Anita Kermode¹, make the following claim. "Most of us write at least half a dozen letters of one sort or another every week, so that in the fifty or sixty years of a normal letter writing life many people must dispatch 18,000 letters." Am I reading that correctly? Who in the world could they be talking about? Since they are English, they are no doubt referring to people who live in Great Britain. But it is hard to imagine the British are much different in this respect than individuals who live in the United States. I suspect most of us are lucky if we write half a dozen genuine letters in a year.

As I thought about all this a while ago, I was led to wonder about the letter writing experience of other individuals. How often do they write a personal letter to someone else? Is it as infrequent as I suspect or closer to the Kermode's weekly estimate of at least half a dozen?

To find out I conducted an informal survey of students at the Northwestern School of Law in Portland, Oregon. I choose this group because I wanted a sample of well-educated individuals, who varied in terms of age, income and occupational status.² Students in in four different classes received the survey during the first week of the 1997 academic year. Of the 125 that were distributed, 112 were returned--an unusually high rate.

In the survey I asked the students if they had written a personal letter that day. Ninety one percent said they had not, while 9% said they had. I also asked them to estimate the number of letters they wrote each week. Almost half (47.3%) reported they never did, while 38% said they were lucky if they wrote once a week. The remaining individuals estimated they wrote between two and five letters per week.

¹ Kermode, F & Kermode, A. (Eds.) Introduction *The Oxford Book of Letters* 1995 Oxford University Press: Oxford.

² There were slightly more females (55%) than males (45%) in the sample whose members ranged in age from 19 to 60 years with an overall mean of 29 years. Although the majority (80%) listed student as their current occupation, they differed widely in the previous jobs they had held. Approximately 40% reported they had been employed by accounting concerns, 12% by law firms, while the remaining listed a variety of other professions.

I also asked the students to indicate their preferred method of communicating with someone else. Relative to the telephone and e-mail, letter writing was the least preferred. Only 4% said it was their first choice, while the telephone was ranked number one by 47% of the sample, followed, in turn, by e-mail (34%). The remaining 15% said they couldn't decide between the telephone and e-mail.

In a word, this well educated group of individuals confirmed what many have come to bemoan. People have more or less stopped writing letters and those who still do constitute a relatively small minority. However, even they don't write very often. When we asked the students why they didn't write letters any more, the majority (65%) said it was simply a matter of not having enough time. Others mentioned they were simply too busy (4%), too lazy (4%) or just didn't like to write letters (5%).

In a deeply felt lament of this situation the author Vivian Gornick³ reflects on the pressures that get in the way of writing letters.

A few days later I had to deliver a piece of information to a friend who lives in SoHo, one ZIP code away from my apartment. I reached for the phone, then stopped, my hand hovering over the receiver. I did not, at that moment, want to talk to my friend. Yet I wanted to speak to her. Suddenly, I wanted to write a letter. I wanted to tell my friend on paper how the information had come into my hands, what I had thought when I'd received it, what I was thinking now. I wanted to describe the light in my room as I was writing, the air as it felt when I came home, an exchange I had just had in the elevator. I wanted to narrate, not to transmit: to enlarge on the moment impose shape: achieve forms. It would be a different piece of information my friend would then receive, coming through the mail rather than over the phone.... No sooner did I sit down at the computer than the impulse began to fragment. I was tired. I was going out again in two hours. Did I have enough time to write this? I consulted the groove in my brain for letter-writing sentences. It felt stiff and narrow. So long since I'd written a letter! Maybe tomorrow. Then I remembered that my friend needed the information within two days. If I wrote, she might have my letter the day after tomorrow; then again she might have it in a week. I could not rely on mail

³ Gornick, Vivian. Letters are acts of faith; telephone calls are a reflex. New York Times July 31, 1994.

delivery. What the hell, I thought, take a chance. I turned on the computer. God, I was tired! I turned off the machine and picked up the phone.

Is the situation as bleak as Gornick implies? Has letter writing fallen victim to fatigue, convenience and the lure of instant communication? Gornick wrote her essay in 1994, before the explosive growth of electronic communication. So it is not surprising that she viewed the telephone as the primary enemy of letter writing. But much has changed since then. Within this short span of time, the world of letter writing has been transformed by the Internet. Individuals now dispatch countless letter-writing-looking documents that, taken together, must run into the millions each day.

After we administered our survey, several students told us they thought letter writing was making a comeback because of e-mail. They reported they never used to write letters, but now that they have Internet accounts they are much more likely to write to their friends and family than they used to. And much of what they write consists of letters or messages that bear a striking resemblance in both form and content to a traditional letter. Before the Internet individuals may have written letters or postcards. Perhaps now they write the same messages and send them over the Internet.

Several commentators have taken issue with this claim, arguing that electronic epistles bear only a distant relationship with traditional letters. Oxenhandler⁴ maintains they differ greatly in their *temporal features*, in the rhythms associated with how each is composed and sent. She writes:

....I used to love the feeling of dropping a letter into the box. For several days, the letter-in-transit would hover around the edges of my consciousness. This delay was an intrinsic part of the pleasure of letter writing. It had a special tense all its own: when the "must do" turns into the "just done." And, as the letter hovered, I also savored a kind of prescience in relation to my friend. During those two or three days, I knew, at least in some small measure, what would befall her: *a letter in the box!* As Iris Murdock has written, "The sending of a letter constitutes a magical grasp upon the future." But now the old magic has given way to the new. And though a fax or an E-mail may lie in wait for its recipient, it nonetheless gets from here to there in a matter of moments, and its waiting has none of the sealed mystery about it that attends a letter in its envelope.

⁴ Oxenhandler, Noelle. Fall from Grace *New Yorker*, June 16, 1997.

Others have pointed out that letters have a degree of *permanence* that is quite different than messages sent over the Internet. In a review of M. F. K. Fischer's *A Life in Letters*, Fussell⁵ comments: "Had she lived in another decade, many of her letters might have been lost forever, flashed on screen to be read and discarded in a matter of minutes. *A Life in Letters* reminds one of what is lost in the magic of electronic mail: permanence."

Others maintain that letter writing is a more *literate* form of communication than e-mailing -- "...letter writing was a noble enterprise that went uninterrupted until our own day, when technology has all but killed off the form." (John Bayley as quoted in Gornick. And the Kermodes admit that while it may be an advantage to transmit the written word instantly, they find it impossible to imagine that there will ever be "an Oxford Book of E-mail.")

I believe the authors of these critiques have prematurely concluded that letter writing has succumbed to the Internet. Sending an e-mail without much deliberation is by no means a universal practice. And it is surely not characteristic of messages composed off-line or until the author has time to reply. I often write messages off-line, especially when I want them to be well written. They are not composed in a frenzy or carelessly edited. Indeed, I write them with as much thought and reflection as I used to take long before the Internet was even imagined.

A student recently wrote that she does much the same. She told me about about a close relationship she had established with a "gentleman," as she put it, who lived in a distant state. It cost too much for them to telephone one another each day. So for economic reasons their correspondence was carried out primarily through e-mail. She wrote: "I can assure you that I spent ample time crafting those expressions, equal if not greater than most of my paper letters."

The recipient may take just as much time and care in replying, so that the entire exchange may take several days or weeks to complete. In this way, an on-line exchange can mirror the delicate temporal features of sending and receiving a letter through the mail. The correspondence can give rise most of the pleasures Oxhenhandler believes to be true of the traditional letter writing experience. The author can mull over what he or she has written, savor the period between the transmission of the message and its receipt, and take pleasure in imagining the reader's response.

⁵ Fussell, Betty. Calculated Seduction: M.F.K. Fisher A Life in Letters Correspondence 1929-1991 *New York Times Book Review*, January 18, 1998

In turn, the process can be repeated by the recipient in composing a reply and anticipating its receipt.

E-mail messages can also be every bit as tangible and as permanent as a valued held-in the hand-letter which is read over and over again. They can be saved in files or printed so that they are physically indistinguishable from a traditional letter. My student also confirmed this in her message by adding: "I also printed and kept every correspondence so that in fact I do have a paper trail of that period."

In short, e-mail messages do not simply disappear after they have been sent. Nor must they be replied to instantly. And there is nothing about e-mail messages *per se* that prevents them from being every bit as literate or poetic as traditional letters. Thus, I find wanting the claim that communicating on the Internet is any less "noble" than letter writing. All of the skills that go into composing intelligent letters can be readily applied in that setting.

Moreover, like so many others, I find writing e-mails far less effortful than penning them to paper. My typing speed far exceeds my handwriting. In typing a message on the keyboard my thoughts seem to fly right out onto the screen, whereas when I try to write them on stationary, a fair number are lost in the process. Like the students in my study, Gornick speaks of letter writing as a "chore," as "tiresome." There is little doubt about it--by contrast, writing letters on the computer is a breeze.

Is it too easy? Do we write e-mails when we *should* be writing traditional letters instead? I grappled with this problem recently in writing to the parents of the woman that my son recently became engaged to marry. I wanted to tell them how happy I was that he had, at long last, found someone who meant as much to him as she did. I wanted to tell them how much I admired their daughter. I wanted to try to arrange to meet them before the wedding.

I spent a good deal of time crafting this letter. Naturally, this was done on the computer. When I had finished, I puzzled over how to send it. Should I print the letter, put it in an envelope and post it in the mail? Or simply e-mail it to them? Yes, the posted letter still seemed the proper thing to do and I didn't want them to think I didn't know my manners.

But I wanted to communicate with them right away. I knew the letter would take the better part of a week to reach them. What would be so wrong about e-mailing it to them? In either case, the

message would be identical. I thought about situations that definitely call for a traditional letter. A condolence must surely be one. And yet I recalled that when my brother passed away a short time ago, I received at least a dozen e-mail condolences written by individuals who I had not heard from in years.

I was not the least bit offended that they wrote me this way. In fact, most were old friends who I was delighted to hear from. Following their initial message, we engaged in a lively e-mail exchange for a short time after. So in this case the Internet made it possible for us to reestablish a relationship that had all but vanished, even though it was occasioned by a situation that might have more "properly" been initiated by a formal letter. However, in all likelihood, the letter never would have been written in the first place.

"Get with it, Richard," I declared. I e-mailed the parents my letter. They replied in kind the very next day. We have been e-mailing each with pleasure ever since. Thank god for the Internet!

It is situations like this that explains why the Internet has restored the practice of letter writing to so many individuals. It has not, thereby, fostered a renaissance in eloquence, but the medium doesn't preclude it anymore than it precludes well-crafted sentences, smart editing or thoughtful revising. Taking the long view, I suspect that the Internet has given rise to new styles of writing that will eventually establish their own, quite respectable place in literary history. So perhaps the Kermodes are right after all. Over the course of a lifetime many of us do write several thousand letters. Only now we deliver them over the Internet rather than through the postal service.