The Power of the Written Word

In today’s milieu of e-mails and texting, the mere mention of letter writing draws haunting stares and anxious twitches. Many people in their twenties have never written a letter and mailed it in an envelope with a stamp on it, albeit some have remitted payments in that manner. Just fifty years ago, letter writing was the predominant method of personal communication. Today it is less common than an Inverted Jenny.

Even before the effluence of “Forever” stamps, I asked about a dozen people in my office how much it cost to mail a letter (ten of the twelve have graduated college, with an average age of thirty years). Only two of the twelve knew (it was 42 cents at the time I inquired), with the bulk of the others off a penny or two, except for three not having any idea. Responses included, “Is mailing a letter the same cost as paying a bill?”; “Who mails letters, anyway?”; and “The last time I mailed something was for my mother, and she put the stamp on it.”

“Kids say the darndest things” echoed in my mind as a way for me to rationalize those last comments. Then, introspection whacked me upside the back of my head. Except for thank you letters and greeting cards, when was the last time I wrote a letter? Hmmmm. Well, oh, never mind!

It seems we save letter writing for the “really important” things in our lives. When my son was applying to colleges in the early/mid 1990s, he was accepted to six of the eight schools to which he applied. The other two “Wait Listed” him, about a month apart, with a caveat stating that they rarely accepted applicants on the “Wait List,” and not to hold out for their acceptance. I suggested immediately that my son write a letter to the Dean of Admissions, explaining his interest in the college, why this relationship could be meaningful and his desire to attend. Within two weeks, an acceptance letter arrived in the mail. Two weeks later when the second “Wait List” letter arrived from the other college, I did not have to “suggest” to my son to write a letter; he had mailed it before the day was over. A week later, another acceptance letter arrived.

The power of the written word can separate us from and propel us past others who do not take that initiative. When Gail and I travel, we send postcards to our grandchildren, Sophia and Wade. After we return from a trip, we point out the picture on the postcard and the stamp, and tell about the place we visited. To the older Sophia, who just turned four in January past, and whose attention span is significantly longer than her 2½-year-old younger brother, we point out where we were on a map. Now, when we tell her we are “going to Sacramento this August,” she asks, “Can you show me on the globe?” I do, and point out where my brother lives in Los Altos and where Disney World is located — she smiles broadly and I catch a glint of the wonderment in her eyes, when I put my finger on Orlando.

I noticed Sophia liked to draw on colored paper (what we used to call “construction paper”) and then gift the Crayola-laden artwork to friends and family. “Sophia, would you like to write a letter? You can draw a picture, put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it and mail it to someone,” I inquired. I love it when a plan comes
together. She said she would write her first letter to Tata Gail (Tata is the Arabic pronunciation of the word for Grandmother and Jidu is for Grandfather). Placing my finger where each letter should be written on the envelope, Sophia deliberately and methodically placed the address more or less where it belonged.

The discussion of which stamp to use on her envelope took more time than it should have taken. She chose the Cars Mater and Lightning stamp from the Disney/Pixar “Send a Hello” sheet. We walked up to the mailbox on the corner (one of the advantages of living in the city) and she mailed her first letter.

When my wife received the letter, we both got misty. She showed it to Sophia who beamed with joy. Sophia has since written more letters and is excited to continue. Of the handful of letters she mailed to other four-year olds, two have written back and another has said they are in the process. It’s contagious! I know how much fun it was to get a letter addressed to me when I was a kid, as long as it wasn’t from my school principal.

Well, not to be denied an opening or opportunity when it presents itself, I asked Sophia if she would like to have a sheet of the Art of Disney “Celebration” stamps. Nestled neatly within the sheet reside five Snow White stamps (with Dopey — her favorite Dwarf), mixed among the likes of Ariel and Flounder, Alice and the Mad Hatter, and Mickey Mouse and Pluto. Snow White is her favorite Disney character, she tells me, several times. The next day I got a three-ring binder and printed “Sophia’s Stamp Collection” in lightly stroked pink script (her favorite color), added the image of the Snow White stamp and slipped it into the front cover sleeve. She was delighted with the single-page stamp album, as evidenced by her opening and closing it several times and showing it to everyone in the house as “My Stamp Album.”

A few days later, I presented a Lewis and Clark Expedition Bicentennial Pane to Sophia, after explaining the expedition and showing her on a U.S. map the area traveled. She looked at me and said, “But I don’t like that stamp.” Even though she could recount the Lewis and Clark story to me and show me roughly on the map where the expedition took place (off maybe by a state or two), she did not want the sheetlet in “her” album. I said okay and put it away. The Lewis and Clark stamps would appeal to kids a few years older than Sophia. I had a
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It was through this experience that I just discovered that not all stamps are for all people. For years I was one of those who thought “Commercialism” when I would see cartoon characters and TV shows on U.S. postage stamps. “What place do they have on our stamps?” Well I just learned the answer to that in full living color. These stamps were issued to help draw new collectors, in this case youth, into the collecting fold. It is a win/win situation; the Postal Service makes a profit, as they deserve to make on each issuance, but in the process, new stamp collectors are engendered by the icons of their generation. Thank you to the Postal Service for helping me to lead Sophia towards stamp collecting. The last time I was over at her house she asked, “Jidu, do you want to play stamps?”

I hope my recounting can help others to have similar results. It’s been so much fun to share this time with Sophia, watching her grow up and being able to have a positive influence on her development. Inspire other young people to write a letter; show them how it is done. They will love you for the experience. Write one yourself. Use this centuries old manner of communication. E-mails are but digitized charged particles floating in the ether; the written word is almighty and forever. Let your expression make an impression for that special occasion.

By the way, the Lewis and Clark sheet is now in her album with two other Art of Disney sheets, “Romance” and “Friendship.” I guess she learned how to bargain in the process. How sweet it is!

Volunteer Profile

Nancy Shawley

I first began working at the APS through the Experience Works program, a federal program managed by our local Career Link, in August 2010. After my period of work ended, I wanted to stay active so I thought of volunteering at the APS through the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program would be just the ticket. I like the jobs they have for me, which include mailing preparation, researching stamps in the Scott Catalogue, and processing donations. Each time I come in there is something different to do and it keeps my interest active. I never realized there were so many stamps in the world. I was awe-struck by the volume of them and still am after all this time.

Everyone is friendly and easy to get along with at the APC, including the members who stop by to visit. Everyone makes you feel welcome. I enjoy my interactions with all the people I see each week when I volunteer. That’s what makes you want to keep coming back.

Before I retired, I was a medical secretary for a home health agency in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania for eighteen years. I like classical music, planting flowers, decorating for the holidays, and spending time with the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. My family is most attentive to me and I feel very blessed.