

The Death of Letters

Letters have died. Rest in peace...we will never see your likes again, but we should mourn your passing.

The wondrous body of literature that comes from letters is so powerful, so enlightening and so special that it is a painful truth to say that the art of letters is no more and can never be again. Our species do not need letters any longer and they cannot be replaced by short notes, telephone calls or even visits. Letters are forever.

I am a prophet telling my followers how to behave amidst widespread persecution of this new sect. I am lonely so I write them to say what is important for me to say.

I am an American poetess and have personally helped finance a novelist/poet living in England. I write him frequently.

My best friend is a banker. I am a social philosopher. I write him often to share my thoughts and readings.

I am a scientist. I want to give the president of the United States some urgent advice.

I am a computer scientist visiting Israel. I am moved by the ancient cities and ruins. I feel the need to write my family about my thoughts.

All of us wrote our letters for one main purpose...to communicate. It took days, months, even years to receive answers depending primarily on distances involved and the means of transportation to the destination.

To assess blame for my letter obituary, start with Guglielmo Marconi. In 1895 he managed to send wireless messages over a couple of miles. He started something that has culminated in the personal computer, the Internet, e-mail and facsimile transmission. Don't forget to assess equal blame to Thomas Edison for the telephone and the Wright Brothers for the airplane.

We can get anywhere in the world in less than 24 hours; with special air fares, we can get back and forth in the continental United States of America for what it cost for an

extended vacation only a few years ago; we are able to communicate with our friends and business interests instantly by telephone and e-mails. Letters are so anachronistic now that there are few and brief. The dreaded Christmas saga letter, sent to everyone in the world, sharing with us all their vacations, how their neighbors Keisha and Gerald are doing, names and dates associated with our pets.

The art of writing graceful, well thought out prose in the form of a letter is lost forever to the technology of easy communication. The Internet has become a literary assassin.

It is 47 AD.

Paul of Tarsus is writing his comrades. He is an amazing man, traveling all over the Mediterranean, selling his conversion to others, preaching, teaching, cajoling. In a way he is the used car salesman of the embryonic Christian sect. He is often imprisoned. Several times he should have been killed.

He is always on top of his subject. Over and over again, he cajoles, gives no quarter when it comes to the doctrinal messages. I don't agree with a lot of his views concerning women, but occasionally, just occasionally he wrote something...well amazing.

I think he was lonely when he wrote this to his friends, perhaps late at night in a jail cell... in my imagination...when he wrote to his friends in Corinth, a small city in Greece.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a tinkling symbol.

And if I have prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

And if I dole out all my goods, and if I deliver my body that I may boast but have not love, nothing I am profited.

Love is long suffering, love is kind, it is not jealous, love does not boast, it is not inflated. It is not discourteous, it is not selfish, it is not irritable, it does not enumerate the evil. It does not rejoice over the wrong, but rejoices in the truth.

It covers all things, it has faith for all things, it hopes in all things, it endures in all things. Love never falls in ruins; but whether prophecies, they will be abolished; or tongues, they will cease; or knowledge, it will be superseded. For we know in part and we prophecy in part. But when the perfect comes, the imperfect will be superseded.

When I was an infant, I spoke as an infant, I reckoned as an infant; when I became [an adult], I abolished the things of the infant.

For now we see through a mirror in an enigma, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know as also I was fully known.

But now remains faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

It is September 7, 1921, Amy Lowell was born to wealth and prominence. The Lowell family were such overachievers it sounds like a Hollywood movie. Her paternal grandfather, John Amory Lowell, developed the cotton industry of Massachusetts with her maternal grandfather, Abbott Lawrence. The towns of Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, are named for the families. John Amory Lowell's cousin was the poet James Russell Lowell.

Amy was the youngest child of five. Her eldest brother, Percival Lowell, became an astronomer in his 30's and founded Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona. He discovered the "canals" of Mars. Earlier he'd written two books inspired by his travels to Japan and the Far East. Amy Lowell's other brother, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, became president of Harvard University.

What is not very well known is that she personally patronized D. H. Lawrence. She sent him money, wrote him often and eventually contrived to have him visit the United States. Thomas Hardy wrote her. She lectured extensively, was enormously influential internationally, in fact feared by the literati of the time, feuded with Ezra Pound, helped publish e. e. cummings. In short, a splendid example of a writer of letters.

Incidentally, one of her best friends was my great aunt, “Bessie”, Elizabeth Ward Perkins.

“Dear Lawrence:

I wonder if you have the slightest idea of how much pleasure your letter about 'Legends' has given me. I know what you mean by my insistence on things. My things are always, to my mind, more than themselves, but I do believe I have laid too much insistence upon them, and obscured the more important issues beneath them for my readers.....

"I read a few excerpts from an article of yours in an English paper on Walt Whitman. It does not seem to me that you have quite got him. I doubt whether you will quite get America until you see it. It is so different from any other country, but it seems to me the only country left reasonably alive just now. We have all the vigor and urge and zest which all the other countries have lost, but we lack the discipline of many generations of writers behind us, therefore the English technique still beats ours. In prose, you are miles ahead of us; in poetry, I am not so sure that, taking it by and large, the American output is not better than the English just now---yours and mine excepted, of course, and watching from the sidelines."

And 31 December, 1924

"Dear Lawrence:

I hear you are still in Taos....

You are the most indefatigable worker I ever saw; your energy amazes me. My many operations took a great deal of my energy away, but I hope to get it back again some day. I hear rumors that you hated New York....

I read your book on American Literature with a great deal of interest, and not a little divergence of view. The Puritans were not so puritanical as they have been represented but it takes some time to know that. Neither is my corner of America; until you have seen the whole of it you cannot be said to have seen it at all. But of course, you dear prejudiced soul, you will never believe that. If you will come to me without fail the next time you are in this region, I can show you something you have not yet seen.

Give my love to Frieda,and love to you from both of us also,

Affectionately yours,

Amy

It is 1838.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is writing my great, great grandfather, Thomas Grey Ward. They are close friends. They don't see each other very often even they both live in New England. My grandfather was younger than Emerson by nine years and he had recently returned from an eighteen month sojourn in Europe. This is the first of many letters Emerson wrote to my Grandfather Ward.

“Miss Fuller (Margaret Fuller, admired by all) thinks you have so much leisure, that you could come to Concord, if you would. I am particularly at leisure now, is disposed to be grateful for all good influences, and especially curious of information on art and artists, of which, however, I warn you, I know nothing. Will you not in these circumstances come and spend a day with me? If you are at liberty Sunday, come out here Saturday afternoon, and we will gladly keep you two nights.”

Another letter, dated 1850 from Concord:

“I saw Longfellow at Lowell's two days ago, and he declared that his faith in clubs was firm. 'I will very gladly,' he said, 'meet with Ward and you and Lowell and three or four others, and dine together.' Lowell remarked, 'Well, if he agrees to the dinner, though he refuses the supper, we will continue the dinner till next morning!'...Meantime, as measles, the influenza and the magazine appear to be periodic distempers, so, just now, Lowell has been seized with aggravated symptoms of the magazine, ...as badly as Parker or Cabot heretofore, or as the chronic case of Alcott and me. He wishes to see something else and better than the Knickerbocker. He came up to see me.. He has now been with Parker who professed even joy at the prospect offered him of taking off his heavy saddle and Longfellow fosters his project. Then Parker urges the forming of a kind of Anthology Club...so out of all these resembling incongruities I do not but we shall yet get a dinner or a 'Noctes.'”

Ever yours,

R.W.E.

August 2, 1939

We think of Albert Einstein as the pacifist, the man dedicated to the unified theory of physics even after he became renowned throughout the world as the most inventive, innovative, amazing theoretical physicist since Isaac Newton correlated all the basic laws of motion.

This letter was sent to President Roosevelt two years before America was involved in World War II. Einstein, a Jew, of course was concerned about what was going on in

Nazi Germany. What surprised me was that he was promoting “the bomb.” This letter is almost as famous as his theory of general and special relativity.

“Sir:

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in a manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future. Certain aspects of this situation which has arisen seem to call for watchfulness and, if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration. I believe therefore that it is my duty to bring to your attention the following facts and recommendations:

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable - through the work of Joliot in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in America - that it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future.

This new phenomena would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable - though much less certain - that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed. A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory. However, such bombs might very well prove to be too heavy for transportation by air.

The United States has only very poor ores of uranium in moderate quantities. There is some good ore in Canada and the former Czechoslovakia, while the most important source of uranium is Belgian Congo.

In view of this situation you may think it desirable to have some permanent contact maintained between the administration and the group of physicists working on chain reactions in America. One possible way of achieving this might be for you to entrust with this task a person who has your confidence and who could perhaps serve in an unofficial capacity. His task might comprise the following:

a) to approach Government Departments, keep them informed of the further development, and put forward recommendations for Government action, giving particular attention to the problem of securing a supply of uranium for the United States;

b) to speed up the experimental work, which is at present being carried on within the limits of the budgets of University Laboratories, by providing funds, if such funds be required, through his contacts with private persons who are willing to make contributions for this cause, and perhaps also by obtaining the co-operation of industrial laboratories which have the necessary equipment.

I understand that Germany has actually stopped the sale of uranium from the Czechoslovakian mines which she has taken over. That she should have taken such an early action might perhaps be understood on the ground that the son of the German Under-Secretary of State, von Weizsacker, is attached to the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institute in Berlin where some of the American work on uranium is now being repeated.

Yours very truly,

Albert Einstein

It is 1978.

I am in Israel and standing by the Wailing Wall, traditionally thought to be the last remnant of Solomon's temple. I watch the people pray. It is not unlike Christians at the tomb of Saint Francis in the cathedral of Assisi. Men in shawls, men in business suits, women of all description, some young, some old. They 'daven,' that is, they move their torsos back and forth rhythmically as they pray facing the wall. I am a stranger and do not really know the history of this ancient relic of Jewish past, but their connection to this slab of stone is tactile, almost alive. They touch it gently as they chant prayers aloud. This scene is so moving I am close to tears.

I feel I must write a letter. I don't even know to whom I will send it. I will figure this out later. Perhaps it is a letter to myself.

"It is where it all started for the western world, a land so ancient that the city, Jericho, is reputed to be the oldest in the world. Excavations recently have turned up evidence of a pre Canaanite civilization circa 3000 BC. It is where God told Abraham to go to found a great nation, to prepare the way.

The land Moses was only allowed to see just before his death. The land where Joshua was required, almost literally, to exterminate the inhabitants in order to settle there. At one time it was a big league country under the management of Solomon. For thousands of years, anyone that was anyone conquered Israel because of its strategic location.

"The sadness of the children of Israel in captivity, weeping at the shores of a river which reminded them of the Jordan, captives of Babylonia, producing some of the best poems in all of literature. The country of prophets, of saviors, of messiahs. The scene of tribal suicide at Masada, when after three years of resisting legion after legion of Roman siege, rather than be taken as slaves. These people, these "stiff-necked" people two thousand years later, and over 5000 years of one exile after another, are not to be taken lightly. They were given their land by God Himself. Consider that for a moment before you judge them today."

It is 1984 George Orwell's favorite year.

I am watching a video documentary aimed at impressing employees. I am an IBM computer engineer and I am impressed, not only with the straightforward delivery but the message which is 'the future.'

The presentation shows that something is happening, something transforming. The main idea was how facsimile technology caused a "paradigm shift" in mail delivery. The concept was correct. The presentation was professionally produced. How naïve we all can be when it comes to the beginning of a technology tidal wave. John Von Neumann, one of the premier mathematicians of the 20th century, a progenitor of the modern computer, had no clue. He thought that perhaps seven ENIAC computers would be enough to solve all the world problems in 1947. My laptop is one hundred times as powerful as those room filling, water cooled giants.

This was the main idea. Communication started with pictures on walls in caves, roughly ten thousand years ago. Once languages developed, messages or instructions were sent from one place to another by courier. When written language emerged, pictograms were transcribed on papyrus or other forms of delivery and were sent to employees, battle commanders or loved ones. Phonetic alphabets were another "paradigm shift" and represented a major change in the way homo sapiens could create and exchange information. Grammar and syntax were tied to the particular language or culture, but they could all be phonetically pronounced by means of alphabets.

The video scene shifted to the actual delivery mechanisms. First by foot, then by horse. By carrier pigeon. By sea. By rail. By air. Finally, the executive instructed his audience: the facsimile. Fax. All the mail deliveries prior to our ability to control electrons over wires simulating a written document, inched forward with the speed of snails. Delivery of mail from Milan to Naples in Augustus Caesar's time took several days. Delivery of mail from Milan to Naples in 1984 still took several days. Then....the narrator, a very taciturn IBM executive, finally made his point....came the Fax. This was the first major change in delivery time in history. From years, to months, to weeks, to days...all slightly downward slanting time savings on a logarithmic scale...until I could scan a letter to my own true love in seconds. In seconds. In milliseconds. Mail from Milan to Beijing from years to seconds. THAT is impressive, but it took two millennia to cause the big decrease in letter delivery time.

The executive got my attention. Smart guy, smart concept. He shows a logarithmic graph of the delivery time from Christ's time to our own fax time. Very gradual decrease and then it drops like a stone off a cliff.

The presentation is made before the Internet is even available to the public. IBM has had a worldwide communication network coddled by mainframe computers all over the globe since the mid-1960s. The military has had global communication systems since the 1950s.

Facsimile transmission is mail-in-a-hurry alright, but it isn't conversation. Electronic mail, "e-mail" is the final letter delivery point on the IBM executive's log curve. Instant messaging is possible. From Mexico, send a message to your sweetheart in London, and receive an immediate reply at virtually no cost, and with a minimum of craft. It is text conversation. Real letters are not any longer necessary.

So blame Marconi. Blame Edison. Blame the Wright Brothers.

We don't need letters any more.

Requiescat in Pace.

Post Script

Some years ago I thought that the Internet might revive letter writing, but of course that did not happen. E-mail messages are more conversational than carefully crafted, old fashioned letters.

But e-mail has done something I did not expect. I have developed a close friendship with two people largely through regular e-mails. My high school colleague, LeRoy and I, kept in touch over the years mostly with Christmas cards and the occasional letter. We were not close when we were in high school though we liked each other. We are very different temperaments but have a lot of common interests. We now know quite a lot about each other because of regular messages and probably because we like each other.

While neither of us take the time to compose letters, the collection of them over the last couple of years, the body of material taken as a whole, is quite revealing and, in fact, interesting. I know much more about the plight of the homeless, men and women of the street, from him and the organization he founded, "Loaves & Fishes" in Sacramento, California. In turn I have shared a number of things I have written, fact and fiction,

Here is a typical e-mail from LeRoy to me. His e-mails are actually letter-like in style, more structured than mine generally. I volunteer at a local soup kitchen which services and helps the poor of the community of Atlanta called "The Open Door Community" and was curious what LeRoy made of the Presbyterian Church's attempt to censure the minister and his wife who founded and manage it, Ed and Murphy. So I sent LeRoy an e-mail describing what seemed to be happening in this very affluent, renovated, one hundred year old section of midtown Atlanta. His response:

March 22, 2004

"Don,

Reading between the lines, it sounds to me like a drum beat has been organized in the real estate value community about the visibility of the scum of the earth who frequent/hang out at The Open Door. And because the mission of the Open Door is not to reform/make over these people, the charity lacks accountability to the broader community and thereby forfeits its right to church/community support.

I know, for example, that in the past Ed would not agree to the homeless being required to wait at the back door of the charity where they would be less visible. (Not that it placated the real estate value community here in Sacramento, but I built an interior courtyard in the early days so that the homeless would not have to stand in line on the North 12th St. expressway and then when that became too crowded, I built Friendship Park as a "waiting" area.)

If the drum beat exists, it will only get louder and if constantly resisted it will ultimately lead to a breaking point. Bound to. (MLK calls it creative tension.) The fallout is always unclear and uncertain and will cause a great deal of stress on Ed and Murphy, their supporters, the Presbyterian council, etc. It is not pleasant or fun and games - it is deadly serious stuff.

My personal view is that the drumbeat can best be resisted by sticking to the most simple gospel maxims: "feeding the hungry"; "serving the poorest of the poor"; "whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me", etc. Without question, the "feeding the hungry" is the strongest and most compelling message to use for resistance. And always repeat it on TV and radio at every opportunity. No other message or "explanation" or "rationalization" is needed - or is as effective with people-at-large.

Good luck,

LeRoy"

Here is another short one from LeRoy. He was the principal organizer and close friend of Cesar Chavez during the farmworker's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, The reference to my 'story' is one about terrorists. My eye is imperfect. His P.S. is interesting.

April 6, 2004

Don,

Looking back now, I realize I was not a very good high school teacher but I did exhibit some talent for motivating other people, which as it turned out, I put to good use in the farmworkers movement and beyond.

Good luck with your story - and your eye.

LeRoy

P.S. I finally figured out today what is happening in Iraq. Simple really, the civil war has begun and we just happen to be targets of opportunity - but not the real prize."

Harvey is another friend I have gotten to know through regular e-mail exchanges. I had only met him one time, and that briefly, before he contacted me through his long time friend, my eldest daughter Tracie, for help ridding his computer of some accidental and unwanted porn that had attached itself to his computer's innards.

I know quite a bit about Harvey by now. What he did during World War II, his work with the FBI, his legal background, his politics and the course he teaches at Northeastern University. He writes quite graceful, well structured messages, much more stylized than mine. His messages always have a formality that goes like this: information, commentary and weather generally in that order.

Here is an e-mail from him. I'll let him have the last word.

April 21, 2004

"Dear Don,

There's no question in my mind but that letter writing in the traditional sense has become a lost art. I agree that it's partially due to technology's advent, but I also think that it's partially due to a combination of other factors as well.

First, everyone seems to be in such a damned hurry that no one wants to take the time to not only communicate at any length, but also to think about turning a phrase, something that you and I do in virtually every one of our E-mails regardless of length or subject. But then again, do we teach kids how to do precisely that? Based on what I see with both my undergraduate and graduate students, I can't help but wonder if English literature is even taught any more. Our grade, and especially our high schools, are so focused on preparing students for tests so they can move on to the next grade, and ultimately graduate, that the quality of a meaningful, well-rounded education has been lost. I can't help but note that I dedicated one of my books to both my high school and Creighton English instructors "who taught me to love and the use of English." Wonder how many of today's students feel that way.

My biggest E-mail problem is their lack of permanence unless one is inclined to save messages. And much as I'd like to, there's a limit on space whereas hard copy could be easily kept. But, yes, you and I have become "letter writers" in the old-fashioned sense through the medium of modern technology, and for that I'm ever so grateful. Got home from a long-winded faculty meeting that served absolutely no real purpose. I think I attend more meetings in one academic year than I did in all of my years in the corporate world. Ain't life grand?

Another warm and sunny day today, with an even warmer but rainy one due tomorrow. Just hope the weekend is OK, at least once I finish grading my last final.

Be well and take care, my friend.

Harvey

Perhaps that is the most important distinction...we do not keep e-mails the way we kept letters. Lack of permanence.

Like us, finally.

Don Edwards
May 31, 2004, Memorial Day