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I'm curious: when was the last time you wrote a letter to someone using paper? How about during the past week...in the last month...in the past year?

In our era of email and text messages, we often opt for these instant electronic forms of writing rather than putting pen to paper to send a note.



Maybe you've thought to yourself, "I don't take the time to write the letter, find an envelope, and then see if I have a stamp of the right amount to get a letter mailed." Sometimes we might find the effort too great to mail a letter, but for one elderly woman, she was so concerned about getting her letter mailed that she asked for help.



In the post office she was unable to address the postcard she wanted to send to a friend. She asked a young man if he would address the postcard for him.

The man gladly agreed to do so and even offered to write a short note on the card for the elderly woman. After a short note was dictated, the young man handed the postcard to the woman. She looked at the postcard, handed it back to the young man, and asked, "Would you mind doing one more thing for me?"

The young man had thoroughly enjoyed this act of kindness and answered, "Certainly, what else may I do for you?"

The woman replied, "At the end of the note could you add, 'Please excuse me for the sloppy handwriting?'"

When's the last time you sent even a postcard? Years ago, lovers wrote back and forth across the distances that separated them, sharing their thoughts and anticipating a letter in the mailbox in reply. These letters saved in a shoebox under the bed or in a closet allowed them to read those letters over and over again, savoring each word.



One 16th-century young woman expecting her first child wrote a letter to her deceased husband. When archaeologists excavated the ancient tomb in South Korea and found a mummified 30-year old man, he was holding this letter from his wife in his hand, which read in part:



June 1, 1586

You always said, "Dear, let's live together until our hair turns gray and die on the same day." How could you pass away without me? Who should I and our little boy listen to and how should we live? How could you go ahead of me?

How did you bring your heart to me and how did I bring my heart to you?... You always told me, "Dear, do other people cherish and love each other like we do? Are they really like us?" How could you leave all that behind and go ahead of me?...

You are just in another place, and not in such a deep grief as I am. There is no limit and end to my sorrows that I write roughly. Please look closely at this letter and come to me in my dreams and show yourself in detail and tell me. I believe I can see you in my dreams.²

A love letter, written from the heart, to express one person's longing for another, celebrating the belief that love never ends.

In a similar way, Paul's letter to the church in Rome expressed God's unending love, an eternal love that never gives up on humanity. Paul wrote

the letter to house churches in Rome, places that he had not yet visited. In this Letter to the Romans, Paul was introducing himself in preparation for a visit to them. He began with inclusive words expressing the broadness of God's love, a compassion that included the Gentiles, those normally considered outside the religious group: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul expressed his thanks for their faith and indicated that he prayed for them regularly. He wrote how he longed to visit them so that they could encourage one another. In his letter, Paul wrote that he had been prevented from visiting them, and since he could not be with them *right away*, he would instead sit at a desk and *write away* all the things he wanted to say to them.

Have you ever felt this urgency—that you wanted to do something *right away*, but you were unable to do so? In today's quick electronic world, it doesn't take much to *write away* an instant message, sending words around the globe in a



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speed that the apostle Paul could never have imagined.

Even though we have the capacity to spread words of hope in such a rapid way, I'm always saddened to read harsh words suddenly hurled at others on Facebook or Twitter. We have the ability to send words in the fraction of a second, sending thoughts into cyberspace before contemplating the severity and consequences of those words. I've heard stories of hurt feelings and misunderstandings that have occurred when harsh electronic words have been sent too quickly, when someone wanted to write right away without thinking.

When author E. B White, who wrote the famous children's book *Charlotte's Web*, received a letter from Mr. Nadeau about the bleakness of the world, White replied with thoughtful words of hope instead of words of despair:

North Brooklin, Maine

30 March 1973

Dear Mr. Nadeau:

Write Away, Right Away
May 19, 2019

Rev. Dr. Douglas Cripe
Central Christian Church, Elkhart & First Christian Church, Mishawaka

Romans 1:1-17

As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness.

Sailors have an expression about the weather: they say, the weather is a great bluffer. I guess the same is true of our human society—things can look dark, then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed, sometimes rather suddenly. It is quite obvious that the human race has made a...mess of life on this planet. But as a people we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time waiting to sprout when the conditions are right. Man's curiosity, his relentlessness, his inventiveness, his ingenuity have led him into deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable him to claw his way out.

Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day.

Sincerely,
[Signed, 'E. B. White']³

Words are powerful. The words we speak. The words we write. The old saying we heard as kids isn't really true, that "sticks and stones will break our bones, but words will never hurt us." Words can hurt, and when Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, he chose his words carefully, trying to encourage them even though others might find their faith



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something to ridicule. “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (NRSV) “It’s news I’m most proud to proclaim,” he wrote, “this extraordinary Message of God’s powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! (1:16, The Message)

Paul could have used exclusive words to draw a tight circle around his kind of people, lashing out against the Gentiles, the nonreligious people, but instead his words brought everyone inside God’s family.

Poet Edwin Markham, born in 1852, echoed Paul’s words centuries later when he wrote the poem entitled “Outwitted”:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:



We drew a circle that took him in!

Have you ever felt shut out of a group? Ever been a rebel, a heretic, kept out because you believed something that others did not? I imagine each one of us can recall a time when we’ve felt left out. Who was the one who drew a circle and included you?

Imagine yourself writing a letter today, welcoming someone to this church that may feel left out. To whom would you write? Who are those considered heretics or rebels that you would like to draw a circle around and welcome to God’s family?

Once you imagine the person who needs a word of encouragement, *write away* a letter of hope. Do it today, *right away*.



³ *Letters of Note*, www.lettersofnote.com/2012/01/wind-clock-for-tomorrow-is-another-day.html

¹ Hodgkin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3223-3230). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #479 (adapted).

² *Letters of Note*, www.lettersofnote.com/2012/09/how-could-you-go-ahead-of-me.html