



Reasonable Voice

The Power of the Handwritten Note

I don't know about you, but I still go out to my mailbox each day hoping to find something there besides a stack of catalogs from companies I've never heard of for products I don't ever buy. Each day I reach inside that box, I have a momentary holiday full of hope for something personal, and I'm not talking about my monthly utility bill.

Every once in a while, I'm rewarded with a notecard or letter from a friend, former student or work colleague. But more often than not, I'm resigned like so many others to the synthetic endorphin rush that comes from a personal email, text or (...I'm a bit embarrassed to admit), the comment on Facebook that comes with electronic postage.

Don't get me wrong. Emails, texts, or Facebook tags are an efficient way to get a message to someone – I know Generation Z-er's even consider email pretty much dead and prefer to rely on more immediate message platforms. And I do use texts with my own family members and friends all the time. But it's just not the same as a personal note, and it's a bit of a cop out when it comes to really connecting with someone. I actually find it fascinating when someone from work "friends me" and comments regularly on my Facebook page, yet doesn't even acknowledge me in the hallway.

Since the inception of the written word, successful leaders have made it a practice of sending personal, handwritten notes to congratulate, inspire, encourage, or show appreciation. When you send one, you are imprinting more than words on the page. Your handwriting conveys a personality and style, and the paper itself sends a message about how you are approaching the task.

Sometimes these notes can be pretty powerful. I still have a handwritten note sent to me by author, social activist, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel after I wrote to him as a freshman in college. I had just read his first book, *Night*, for a class assignment, and I felt compelled to reach out to him based on the profound impact his writing had on me. I was shocked and elated when he actually wrote me back with a personal, handwritten letter of his own. That was the beginning of an incredible friendship.

I have long held up that example to students in my own classes at Syracuse University - that a personal note to just about anyone is not a waste of time, and may yield some pretty amazing results. I've had students receive notes back from CEOs, four star generals, and even world leaders. One graduate student boldly asked a governor of a major U.S. state if he would consider being interviewed for a paper,

and he promptly agreed. Another actually got a job offer from a CEO as a result of a sincere, but boldly-written personal note. Nothing ventured – nothing gained.

What I'm suggesting, however, is not to simply look at this as a way to gain something, but as a way to give something. My target of three handwritten notes per week (which I admittedly don't always fulfill) was inspired by the habits of some of our former U.S. presidents like George H.W. Bush. When I follow through on it, I feel like I am completing some kind of circle. These notes can be written to anyone you'd like, for any positive purpose. Thank someone for a job well done or an effort that helped. Let someone know how much you value them. Send along a news item or clip with your note that shows a client you are paying attention. Tell one of your kids how proud you are of the work they are doing.

We live in a world where it seems like the most influential "notes" are judged by the ability to compress a pithy retort into 140 characters, and then hope it might trend. That's OK... but next week, try to write 3 handwritten notes to individuals you'd like to connect with, and drop them in the mail.

I believe some good things will happen.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Meath', with a large, sweeping flourish above the letters.

Michael Meath

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