

Gilly Adams

Paper Lives

When I first met O he irritated me. There was something smug about him. Although I got to like him better as the workshop progressed I would never have imagined that we would meet again. But he sent me a book that he had mentioned and I was obliged to write to thank him and our correspondence began. For a year we wrote to each other regularly, at first by post and then by fax - long screeds that emerged slowly from the machine in my study covered with handwriting that became familiar.

Gradually, as the months passed, we revealed the details of our lives to each other and started to share deeper thoughts and emotions. We confined ourselves to paper, we never used the telephone, and our words on paper created something palpable between us; something that had not existed previously. We had fallen in love. Finally we were obliged to meet again to find out whether being together in the flesh could fulfil the promise of our letters.

In our real meeting something was gained and something lost and it seems to me in retrospect, (that place where it is easy to be wise), that in the seven years we spent together we searched to rediscover that palpable something from our paper lives.

That quest proved unsuccessful and eventually we decided to separate. I had always kept his letters and faxes and, through a quirk of circumstances, when O finally left he abandoned his file containing my side of the correspondence; so our entire exchange remains in my possession. It sits in a box in my study and I have to decide what to do with it. I look at the closely written pages and the faxes that have faded in patches; I observe the shape of the words and their patterns on the page and I am ambivalent about reading them again...

*But that was in another country,
And besides, the wench is dead.*
Christopher Marlowe

*Letters last. Letters are
documentation.
Letters create history.
They are vehicles for
the big and small things of our
lives and thus they
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They cannot be retracted;
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Gilly Adams. Photo: Julia Varley

Ten years later that relationship seems so unlikely to me that I am reluctant to re-enter its atmosphere and confront the woman I was then, the woman whose thoughts and feelings I no longer entertain.

Letters have always held some magical power for me. They represent another dimension, a realm where words are chosen carefully, where it is possible with struggle and effort to say what I really

mean, to attempt a kind of truth that is not achieved in everyday life. This habit of attributing significance to letters began when I was in secondary school. I had a best (girl) friend and a boy friend who was the first great love of my life. Although we saw each other almost every day, either on the bus or in school, we wrote to each other regularly. We exchanged those letters furtively for they created a counterpoint to the daily round, a separate medium where much deeper thoughts could be expressed and the business of emotional communication practised.

Decades later some of those letters returned to me unexpectedly. My friend's family moved house and in the clearing out process she found our ancient correspondence. Her father appeared on my mother's doorstep bearing a bundle held together with a rubber band. I pondered over the significance of being reunited with my young self and decided to consign them to the bottom of a chest where they have lived ever since, awaiting the time when I will have the energy to reread them, when I can overcome the fear that rediscovering the girl I was will make me weep for something lost.

In so many ways letters hold such power and significance for me that I regret the coming of email despite the benefit of instant and speedy communication that it brings. My post contains only a sorry mixture of bills and circulars, too rarely enlivened by the sight of familiar handwriting and the pleasurable anticipation of entering for a short space into the intimate world of the letter writer and receiving the gift of his or her words.

Letters challenge us to say exactly what we mean and to find the most elegant means of doing so, but there is an implicit danger. Letters last. Letters are documentation. Letters create history. They are vehicles for the big and small

things of our lives and thus they can be used to convey the anger and distress we cannot manage face to face: they have the capacity to poison. They cannot be retracted; it is not possible to press the delete button and make everything well again. There was such a missive in the history of the Magdalena Project that I would undo if I could. Justified though it seemed at the time it has burned down the years with unanticipated heat and painful consequence.

Sometimes letters should carry a health warning.

And yet. And yet.

The letter remains for me the place where everything may be said, or perhaps where everything may be said exactly how I want it to be said. Some time ago I reached a very black cave in my life. Depression has been a recurrent theme but on this occasion it endured so long and felt so all encompassing that suicide seemed a realistic solution. I stayed with friends because I was afraid to be alone and relapsed into a kind of catatonia from which it felt impossible to emerge. Then I started walking. Each day I would drive myself to a different point on a nearby canal and, whatever the weather, I would tramp along its banks, calmed by the flow of water and the subtle changes in the landscape and reassured by the unlikelihood of getting lost.

And as I walked I wrote letters in my head. Beguiled perhaps by the memory of the childish thank you letters I had discovered in my mother's treasure box after her death, it seemed to me that I could not exit without making some kind of settlement, some kind of account of my actions. So I listed everyone of significance in my life – those I loved, those to whom I felt obligation, those to whom there was some outstanding thing to be said – and composed for each a detailed letter of

thanks, explanation and resolution. I couldn't leave my life without telling my love and gratitude for the gifts made to me by others or completing what was unfinished. The necessity was to be precise; to find the specific words that would embody exactly what I desired to say. It was a mammoth task.

I can't say now quite how the darkness receded and allowed me to find a safer shore on which to rest. It was a long slow process from which I emerged fragile but determined, testing each day for the way forward like someone walking gingerly on icy ground. What I do know is that the letters in my head were a kind of life line that helped me to emerge from the dark cave. They connected strongly with the work I had been doing on personal story-telling and performance; they offered a creative challenge; they brought me back into my life and helped me to heal.

Letters have always held some magical power for me.

GILLY ADAMS (Wales) is a workshop leader, director and dramaturg who specialises in the development of text for performance. She has worked in theatre and radio drama and has been involved with the Magdalena Project since its beginning. She is a member of the board of The Open Page.