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The pen is mightier than the sword

Advances in technology erase art of letter writing, replace personal sentiment with electronics



The new media revolution has made communication easier and brought the whole world closer together. Of course, communication is also more frivolous, less novel and outright mundane.



DAVE JOHNSTON
columnist

No matter what new features are invented, nothing is as special as the old-fashioned letter, and students should revere this ancient art form.

Technology has brought down long-distance phone rates and made video-conferencing a reality for anyone with a connection to the internet and the right batch of software. Yet when it is so simple to send a message to the other side of the world, people pay less attention to the content.

It is wonderful that anyone can pick up the phone and "chat" with a friend for several minutes, but once they hang up, the experience is gone. There is no record of the conversation — just fading memories and an impending phone bill.

Letters, however, allow both the sender and receiver greater expression. Phone calls do not come on colorful stationery, carry handwritten greetings or have doodles in the margin. Someone who gets a letter can cherish it,

re-read it, frame it or burn it. Options not available with a phone call.

As the art of letter writing fades, writing skills are degrading as well. Any writing instructor will say the best way to improve writing ability is to practice. Most Americans, however, have no opportunity to write anything longer than a yellow sticky note. Term papers are becoming shorter and less common, and high school students are balking at the new essay portion of the PSAT.

E-mail — often called a replacement for traditional mail — is usually sloppier than letters. Even professional e-mail tends to be riddled with typographical errors and poor grammar. The simplicity of the medium has allowed users to be less careful.

Few people quickly jot out a letter. Since it is a permanent document, writers try to weed out major mistakes and sometimes use ancient tools like "rough drafts" and "rewrites."

Phone calls carry the "sound of your voice" miles away, but a well written letter carries a much more personal message. Handwriting quickly conveys the writer's mood: harsh bold strokes show anger, flowers dotting the i's show happiness. Letters can be sweetly scented, smudged or sealed with a kiss.

With just a little more effort than a phone call or e-mail, letters convey a much more sincere and unique message. Thousands of subtleties work to communicate the writer's heart.

Everyone has experienced the anticipation of watching the mailbox for an expected letter.

The cold fingers of technology can never produce the same enthusiasm.

The electronic packets of ones and zeros produced by e-mail are terribly sterile and impersonal. E-mail is more of a memo than personal communication. Often the only "signature" is a record of the computer that originated the message. It hardly conveys the same feel as a handwritten note.

College students have plenty of excuses to write letters. Aggies should take a moment while they are slouching in front of a television and write someone a note. Family members living in other counties, those favorite high school teachers, friends back home or younger siblings would love to get even a short letter. It costs only an envelope and a thirty-two cent stamp, but it will be around for a while.

Each generation has an assortment of letters from their college students. The themes are always the same ("send money," "we need to talk about my English class" and "I met this really great person"). Without letters, this generation will have a hard time documenting daily life for posterity.

Letters carry more of a person's essence with them. Crossed-out words, wrinkled pages or tear stains all show a real connection with life. For sentiment, sincerity, history and love, no form of expression will ever compare with a good ol' letter.

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sitioned just above the phrase, "Screw this bitch."

One participant's shirt reads, "F—k Mandy Cater" on the front and "She gives fellatio" on the back. Some of the tamer ones use sarcasm with phrases such as, "Build the hell outta PC Bonfire."

With its horn blaring the intro to Hullabaloo, the truck arrives and positions itself while the halls, Corps units and other groups crowd up alongside it. The same Jerp who remarked about coming up with a grode story runs along the wall of people waiting for the truck to be unloaded and screams, "Alright! Who had their pots in The Batt today?"

"He did!"
 "Yeah, that was mine."
 "Great work. Good F—king s—t."
 As the truck is being unloaded, a letter and petition form circulate. After references to Martin Luther King, Jr. and sociological principles, the letter declares that "foul language goes with Bonfire like dirt, it just kinda happens." Within a few minutes, a rank odor fills the air. I see a Red Pot delightfully using a chain to drag through the grass the carcass of a road-killed dog.

All of this retort from the same group that was all smiles after The Batt's coverage of first cut, in which record high numbers were proudly boasted.

It seems then, that if The Battalion (or the University for that matter) is not scratching Bonfire's back, then it must be sticking a knife in it. In this particular instance, The Battalion's articles and

the admonition from the University simply have been the bearers of bad news. They have held up a mirror to the Bonfire crews; the pictures and articles have forced them to see themselves as others do. And judging from their reaction, I don't think they like what they have seen.

Rather than accept the fact that they may be responsible for their own actions and the effects of those actions, they have chosen instead to slay the messenger.

Reacting like a spoiled child, Bonfire has lashed out against the authority figure for even suggesting that it may not be allowed to act without restraint. I suggest that what restrain the University places on Bonfire is much less restrictive than that placed on any other University activity, and all too infrequent.

We would not tolerate this kind of behavior from our other organizations or offices, and we should not tolerate it from Bonfire. By its actions, Bonfire seems to insist that it is somehow above the expectations applied to the rest of the University.

Bonfire's status as one of the University's longest-standing traditions does not grant it immunity against poor judgment and crudeness. If the Aggie Muster committee ever attempted to display profanity at any of its meetings or functions, it would not be permitted for one day, let alone the years that it has for Bonfire.

This community has been scratching Bonfire's back for too long. Those who participate in

Bonfire are being given the privilege of being a part of something larger than themselves.

Bonfire existed well before they arrived, and with good stewardship, it will survive long after they join the ranks of former students. So Bonfire can kill the messenger, and the next and the next. But there will always be another person to deliver the bad news, another person to hold up the mirror of truth.

How Bonfire chooses to deal with this mirror will be the harbinger of its fate. It can either use the opportunity for self analysis to adapt to reality and survive, or it can shatter the mirror and thus face extinction in the vacuum of decadent denial.

Adam Collett
graduate student
Cincinnati, OH

People who are offended by a little profanity or sexual phrases on Bonfire pots really need to get thicker skin. The phrases claimed to denote sexual harassment do not seem to bother the women who work to build Bonfire.

In fact, the only people it really bothers are those who saw coverage through The Batt and allowed it to offend their Puritanical sensibilities. If you do not like it, do not go out there. Those at Bonfire are mature enough to handle a few off-color phrases. They also have the taste not to publish it and make a big issue out of nothing.

There is no accounting for taste. But it is also a helluva lot of fun. It is a chance for the school-wearyed

students to get out, put in some hard work and build a giant monument to their tremendous amount of school spirit.

People are dirty, smelly and a little politically incorrect. So what? When has Bonfire ever been about decorum? It is a big, muddy construction site, manned by 18 to 22-year-olds dedicated to producing a giant, burning phallus.

And last time I checked, sex was common among college students. Putting creative phrases on a pot is not doing any harm. Besides, it is insulting to our intelligence to imply that a little writing on a pot is going to change the way we view sexuality.

What harm do these words imply? "Will work for fellatio?" What is wrong with that? He is willing to work for it, after all. "Don't want no short dick man." She knows what she wants and it is her right to have her opinion and be able to vocalize it.

And saying that the University sanctions this behavior is as ridiculous as allowing Southerland and Bowen to be sued for hazing. I also have severe doubts that having the word "dick" on a helmet is going to affect our status as a "world-class" university.

And as far as offending the alumni, Bonfire receives a great deal of support from Old Ags, many of who can tell you stories that would dwarf anything that goes on in the litigious, PC 90s.

Loosen up some. If you let this bother you, then you do not have enough to worry about in your life. The only thing separating holy

words from complete bulls— is your perspective. There is nothing wrong with a culture where everyone has a different opinion on what is humorous. I do not ever want to live in a banal, defanged Quaker land where freedom of speech is usurped in order to avoid offending anyone.

And The Battalion is guilty of making a sensational mountain out of a molehill. Seriously, who cares? I think the staff just wanted an excuse to put the word "cunt" not once, but twice in their pages.

I, like most Ags, will be out there to watch it burn, and I do not care that the hard hats the builders wore had profanity on them.

Travis Stiba
Class of '97

accompanied by 12 signatures

In response to the Oct. 17 Bonfire columns:

While I appreciate the sensibilities of the writers, it is obvious that they never participated in Bonfire.

Cater is right in stating that "people's right to express themselves should be preserved." Both the participants and the observers of Bonfire are adults with freedom of expression.

The pots that they wear are private, not university property, and any sentiments put on them are solely expressions of that individual. Phrases like "68-I owe you one" are meant to be amusing, not offensive, and certainly do not fall under the legal definitions of either profanity or harassment.

PLEASE SEE MAIL CALL ON PAGE 10.



MAIL CALL

Bonfire coverage sparks responses

"And the King, so displeased with the news of the peasants' un-... executed the faithful messenger... ere the entire report had esp-... ed his lips."

It is Friday, Oct. 17. As I arrive the Polo Fields, there already is a palpable buzz, as the Bonfire faithful express their reactions to the publicity. A junior Red Pot approaches the group that just argued and chats for a few minutes. He leaves, he shouts out, "Excuse my points for anyone who comes up with a good grode yell grode story about Mandy Cater."

"Who's Mandy Cater?"
 "That bitch who wrote the column."

The trunk hasn't arrived yet, so talk around some more. Nervous pots read, "F—k the Batt," or "kick my dick, Batt." One is even plastered with clippings from the paper's edition: pictures of the controversial pots, the "Bonfire of the Danities" column heading and a picture of Mandy Cater, po-

Institution of teaching should be upheld by students, professors

Recently the political environment here at Texas A&M has become more and more heated. This tone has become one of contention at other schools as well and the incident and uproar surrounding Professor Graglia's remarks at UT's Law school only go to prove the point.



LEN CALLAWAY
columnist

nine their views might be and it seems a little ridiculous that a professor might be. No one had complained that he was a poor professor, no one had claimed that he did not do his job. He just made some comments that upset a bunch of people in our overly sensitive political world.

It seems that of late the heated political environment around universities has shifted the classroom focus away from education and onto the political correctness of a particular subject matter. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was just added to the banned list because people lack the maturity needed to broach a certain subject matters in the classroom.

Students have demonstrated that they will not tolerate a professor voicing personal opinion on a global or national matter, but will tolerate professors who are more interested in tenure and research than they are in actually teaching.

As a pre-transfer student, I was warned of professors such as this, professors who made students' lives more difficult in order to be left alone to their research, etc. At the time, I was a little

reticent to believe that they existed to the degree that I had been warned, but they definitely do.

Professors owe it to themselves and their students to remain loyal to their profession, the subject that they teach and the students whose lives they affect. Professors who do not care about any of the three are really a blight on the entire educational system.

Recently, it came to this columnist's attention that a certain economics professor here at A&M announced to his class in the early stages of the semester that they should stop bothering him with questions, that no one ever makes above a C in his class and that this group of kids was certainly not in a position to challenge that precedent.

This professor is in good standing with our university and will probably receive tenure one day. Once that happens, his job is secure and semester after semester, classes of students will have to face him.

This professor deserves to be dragged out onto the grassy area beside Wehner

and beaten with a giant dry erase marker. Professors such as this have no business being in front of a class of students, much less be in the position to have control over their grades for the semester.

Why are some students so hell bent on making everyone see the political world as they see it, yet at the same time, place such a low level of importance on themselves that they will allow a professor to speak to them with such indignation. "Hey, talk to me any way that you want but don't you dare differ from me in the political arena."

No one had complained about Graglia's teaching methods, no one had said that he was incapable of challenging his students. No one even said that they didn't like the guy. Professors who behave such as our beloved economics professor are the ones who should be made to fear for their jobs, not good professors voicing their personal opinions — no matter how asinine the opinion or theory might be.

A professor who demonstrates animosity for his or her class and does not exhibit a willingness to insure learning

during the class should be trounced out of their position faster than a two-dollar prostitute from church.

As students, we have come to this university to enhance our lives through education. But after all, education isn't just books and reading — it is also life and trial and error.

Good professors understand the trial and error system and use it to their advantage. They have the ability to present material in such a way that the material comes alive and suddenly it all becomes more tangible. They will sponsor conversation and even debate about a particular topic in an effort to encourage students to become self thinkers.

Excellent professors are few and far in between, but they can truly be an invaluable asset for students. The ramifications that they can have on students can be more far reaching than the immediate future, and they should truly be appreciated for the job that they do.

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