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Making Connections the Write Way

Calligraphy and pen palling offer people of all ages opportunities for authentic human connection. Three people from three different generations, backgrounds, and cultures share their stories and love for calligraphy.

Surrounded by stickers, colorful washi tape, brush pens, and mountains of construction paper, Melody Xu concentrates as she carefully places the finishing touches on her envelope addressed to Israel. A stack of letters waiting to be shipped sits on the corner of her desk, each envelope designed with a different theme, color scheme and painstakingly lettered name.

When the Coronavirus pandemic hit in March of 2020, the way we interacted with one another changed drastically overnight. This was certainly the case for Xu, a Palo Alto High sophomore and now passionate pen paller.

After schools were forced to close and life turned virtual, Xu soon came to realize that she was losing touch with some of her friends and acquaintances she had enjoyed interacting with at school. One of these friends was Jia Hiremath, who lived in the same neighborhood, but she never saw or talked to anymore. When Hiremath's birthday was coming up and she was in Arizona, Xu decided to write her a birthday letter. That letter is what inspired a genuine friendship that has grown stronger with each envelope stuffed with letters, playlists, bracelets, and stationery products that they send to each other. Xu says spending so much time writing letters to each other is what brought them closer together. "When you are reading or writing pages and pages about your life and your interests, that is when you really get to know someone

when you have an outlet to go in depth about yourself,” she shared. Not only does Xu feel like she can express herself through her words, but also with the decorations and art that surround the card and envelope. She elaborated, “There is also the art aspect. Someone spent an hour making that for you. Having that, I think, is priceless.” Through this experience, both Xu and Hiremath fell in love with pen palling and began searching online for more opportunities to do just that (Huch). They encouraged each other to dive into pen palling fully and shared tips and experiences.

Once Xu started her personal mail account on Instagram (@mailbymel), she was impressed with how quickly she was able to form genuine connections with people not only who lived in her neighborhood, but from all over the world. With pen pals in Israel, Hungary, and New Zealand, she was able to connect over something that everyone was going through: the Coronavirus pandemic. Through discussing this shared experience, she formed a bond with each person as she was able to explore their similarities and differences in culture and day-to-day life. Grateful for the opportunities pen palling has given her, Xu explained, “It really is cool because I wouldn’t have made those connections otherwise, like at all. I wouldn’t meet these people or become their friend if it wasn’t for us becoming pen pals.”

Now more than ever, especially with the Pandemic raging on, calligraphy is making an ultimate comeback (“Snail Mail”). Calligraphy, which literally means “beautiful writing” in Greek, has been around for millennia (“Calligraphy Means”). Chinese calligraphy was found inscribed on turtle shells and animal bones a staggering 3,000 years ago (Lachman). Indian calligraphy was often scratched into stone, palm leaves, or bark. In Greece, calligraphers used clay, wood, or wax tablets (White). Even though these mediums are largely outdated, the art still remains. This is not surprising, considering that calligraphy and writing letters is proven to boost

happiness and ease stress, in addition to harboring deeper personal connections (Williams). More than half of the respondents in a USPS survey found that communication via snail mail fostered a “more meaningful connection to those they sent mail to” (Field). Even though this study took place in the United States, people from all over the world, like Zhiyong Zeng, a Chinese entrepreneur, feel strong connections through calligraphy.

Zeng moved from China to the United States five years ago and travels frequently back and forth for his business. One way that he stays connected to his culture is through calligraphy—something that he has been working diligently on since he was a small child. He pinpoints a defining moment to the time he visited a calligraphy wall when he was little. There, on the wall, famous calligraphers had engraved their work, which he said inspired him greatly. Growing up, he did not have enough money to regularly buy calligraphy paper, so he practiced on newspaper and saved up to buy the real paper for special characters that he was able to write the best. Zeng made ink the traditional way by mixing water and small amounts of a brick-like substance. His motivations for wanting to refine his calligraphy came not only from himself, but also from his parents, peers, and teachers. His dad stressed the importance of good handwriting from a young age, telling him that, “There is a saying in Chinese that before a person knows you as a person, the first thing they will see is your handwriting, and if your handwriting is neat, they will know you are a good person” (Zeng).

Zeng was also motivated by a teacher and mentor with whom he developed a strong, almost parent-child relationship, through calligraphy. Even though this teacher has since passed, one of his childhood friends continues to stay connected with him because of calligraphy. He, too, had the same teacher and deeply appreciated the art of calligraphy, which allowed them to

connect as children. Even now, when they are together, they discuss the art of calligraphy. Being apart, however, does not stop them from connecting in the same way. While traveling, they send each other photos of impressive calligraphy that they find around the world. Zeng recounted, “Sometimes these inspirations come while we travel around the world, and it is always really fascinating to talk about calligraphy and share our views on the great works and improve ourselves, too.”

Graphic Designer Patricia Sullivan, is also passionate about handwriting. Before she could even talk, she was writing small patterns and shapes in countless notebooks. She had no idea that she had done this until her mother showed her the notebooks many years later. As a Stanford University graduate who grew up in a small town in Montana, her childhood was filled with hours of handwriting practice. “It’s probably hard to even understand the importance of handwriting,” she smiled, a flood of memories surfacing. “We corresponded with our friends and passed notes in class. Our handwriting was part of being cool” (Sullivan). Being the cheerleading captain and school president gave Sullivan many opportunities to use her handwriting to create banners and signs to hang around school, but most importantly, she used her handwriting as a way to connect with her family, especially her mother. For as long as she can remember, Sullivan’s mother, Royette Macki, used her skills and generous heart to bless her family of eight. “She made such a loving home for us. [...] She used her artistic talents to create a life of beauty for us,” she recalled, her eyes brimming with tears. “So in the simple gesture of her making a little note in my lunchbox, it was painstakingly created, and all of that has inspired me” (Sullivan). These gestures paved the way for Sullivan’s passion for art and her willingness to take time to appreciate the beauty and art around her. This background is what led her to major in graphic design. Although she has designed countless logos, magazine spreads, and different

works of art, one of the most important of her works still remains the poem she crafted for her mother as a young girl. She describes how she went through a phase of making homemade framed poems for her family, and how she had meticulously made a very special one for her mom, complete with hand-drawn graphics surrounding her thoughtful words. Her mother hung that poem in her room until eight years ago, when she was suffering with cancer and knew she would inevitably die soon. Right before she passed away, she asked Sullivan to take the poem to the church and read it aloud and then display it at her funeral. This was a heartwarming moment for Sullivan, and she points back to the importance of handwriting through this experience.

Not only can letters, calligraphy, and writing facilitate connections to the past and meaningful moments in the present, but they can also be wonderful keepsakes for the future. Sullivan holds onto clothes her mom sewed and cards they made for each other. Zeng treasures bookmarks his friend made with calligraphic stamps. Xu keeps a box of letters with a stack for each of her pen pals and friends. These letters, she explains, are so important because they are tangible records of what she talked about with her pen pals and what their friendships looked like, “whereas texts, and emails, and calls, and even face-to-face interactions kind of fade away” (Xu). Xu wants everyone to feel this way. With a smile she urged, “Everyone should pen pal! Everyone should send letters to people. I think that even though everything is moving online at a rapid pace, making handmade letters and cards is still a meaningful thing to do” (Xu).

These connections to the past, present, future, and even themselves are unimaginably important to each of them. And these connections aren’t going anywhere. Referring to his friend, Zeng smiles, “this is definitely a friendship that will last a lifetime.”

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