

Everyday notes: The familiar essay

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

A few years ago I was given a book of Anne Fadiman's essays, *Ex Libris*, and was smitten. Last year, while I was recuperating from hip surgery, a friend gave me another of her collections, *At Large and At Small*. Her essays are so interesting, amusing and wise that I find reading one of them a perfect way to begin the day.

Fadiman practices a literary genre known as the familiar essay—a short reflection that is equal parts brain and heart. It's a combination that makes me think of John Calvin's characterization of Reformed faith as a function of intellect and emotion. One of the Reformed tradition's most enduring gifts is its emphasis on expressing the gospel in a mode that is intellectually challenging, academically viable and emotionally engaging. I can't help noting the similarity between what Fadiman does in this regard and what the preacher attempts to do every week.

I savored these essays—smiling in recognition, laughing out loud and learning things. In her essay on ice cream, for example, Fadiman reports that ancient Greeks and Romans borrowed a trick from the Middle East and chilled drinks with ice and snow; that Catherine de Medici brought sherbet recipes from Italy to France; that George Washington owned two pewter ice cream pots; and that Thomas Jefferson was so taken by the frozen confection that he (characteristically) developed his own 18-step recipe.

In Fadiman's piece on the emergence of the modern postal system I learned that in 1680 London had mail service almost every hour and that postage was based on how far the letter traveled—and was paid by the recipient. In 1837 Rowland Hill came up with the idea of standardized postal rates that shifted the cost to the sender.

In a moving essay, "A Piece of Cotton," Fadiman describes raising the U.S. flag for the first time in her life a few days after 9/11 and having it fly at half-mast. "The flag in our yard meant we are sad. And we're sorry we've never done this before."

Reading these familiar essays alerts me to the significance of the everyday and leads me to look and listen more carefully to what is going on around me. At the

moment a blessed bouquet of granddaughters (five between the ages of three and seven) are clamoring to be taken for ice cream. I will do it happily, in the spirit of Anne Fadiman, who, after pointing out that Americans eat more ice cream per capita than the people of any other nation, says that from an early age she has worked hard to do her part for her country.