

Letter bombs

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [May 17, 2000](#) issue

Several years ago Carly Simon recorded a CD titled “Letters Never Sent.” The songs reflect a collection of letters she wrote over the years but never sent to the intended recipients. In an interview, Simon said that she keeps a shoebox on a closet shelf to hold these letters. She finds writing them therapeutic, a way to keep frustrations from bottling up inside her. Yet she has also discovered that while these letters are important to write, they are better left unsent.

Even letters sent in the most righteous spirit of indignation can do more harm than good. We know, from our experiences of speaking in anger or frustration, that we sometimes wish we could retract the words as soon as they are out of our mouths. Letters give us an opportunity to cool down and think through what is better left unsaid. Writing a letter without sending it allows us to “say” what we want or need to say and “get it out of our system” without communicating it to the other.

When do you decide not to send a letter? Perhaps in the process of finding an envelope, addressing it and putting a stamp on it. Or perhaps in the time between writing the letter and actually putting it in the mailbox. Perhaps after a good night’s sleep. A wise friend once advised me never to send a difficult letter on the same day I write it.

Yet in an age of e-mail, we find it all too easy to send the messages we have written—including those written in a fit of frustration. The reply and send buttons on the computer are all too available. E-mail resembles the volatility of oral communication more than the thoughtful process of letter writing.

Recent studies have suggested that one effect of e-mail correspondence is a coarsening of communication. We tend to respond more quickly, more bluntly and with less concern for the formality and nuance that soften even the most pointed letter. I know of several e-mail messages that would have been better off left in the “never sent” category. Letter writing is more conducive to practicing the virtue of patience.

On the other hand, there are many letters that I have been meaning to send for a long time, but have never found time to write. They are letters of gratitude, of love, of appreciation to people who have touched my life in significant ways. Somehow the writing of these letters is continually deferred by the press of other duties, by the passionate investments in current issues, conflicts and relationships.

I recently received a letter from a reader in response to my “Faith matters” column about “one good teacher.” He wrote to say that a few years earlier, at Thanksgiving, he had written to thank a beloved college professor for her patient insistence that he become a better writer. She sent him back a card thanking him for his thoughtfulness, and indicated that it was the first such letter she had received in over 40 years of teaching.

The reader’s letter reminded me of how much my father treasured such letters of appreciation. After he died I was given the responsibility of sorting through his papers and files. In a prominent yet private place, I found a file folder marked “Letters for When I Feel Low.” Inside the folder was a collection of letters of friendship, gratitude and affection he had received through the years from a variety of people. Some of the letters were handwritten, others typed. Some were relatively short, others were more like essays. Some were from former parishioners and students, others from current colleagues. Some were from people he had known a short time, and others from lifelong friends. What they had in common was that they touched my father, and collectively they provided a reservoir of testimonies to which he turned when he felt discouraged.

We do not need to send only letters of praise and encouragement. Important letters may also involve constructive criticism, or ongoing discernment about difficult decisions that may, at least initially, be difficult to receive. But the act of writing and receiving letters allows us to express our considered judgments and reactions in ways that build community, giving grace to others rather than merely venting frustration or fomenting evil (see Eph. 4:29; James 3). The stakes are high in written correspondence, for letters leave a potentially permanent legacy of expressed judgments, feelings and reactions.

Christians are blessed to have a range of written correspondence to draw from in the New Testament, each letter useful in its own way for building up the body of Christ. I can imagine the church folks in Philippi putting Paul’s letter to them in a “letters for when we feel low” file. On the other hand, the letter to the Galatians offers the kind

of constructive criticism and discernment that would no doubt have been difficult to receive. And, judging from some of the comments Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 7, there is some correspondence he might have been better off not sending.

I am not suggesting that we return to only writing and receiving letters. I am an advocate of e-mail and other technologically advanced means of communication—they foster more efficient interaction in many circumstances. But I hope never to lose sight of the power of writing thoughtful and discerning letters. I'll write some letters that I won't send, and some that I'll put in the mail today.