



## The Palmer Method: Penmanship and the Tenor of Our Time

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The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

—*The Rubaiyat*, Omar Khayyam

Drunk on too much data, dizzied by a blizzard of numbers and acronyms and made-up techno-words I don't understand and don't even want to know, that's what I was recently—down in the trenches, in a guerilla shopping war on the Internet, searching for a new laptop computer. Choose: 40 vs. 80 gigabyte hard drive. Choose: 2.8 vs. 3.02 megahertz processor. Choose: Pentium vs. Celeron chip; 14- vs. 15-inch screen; 5.5 vs. 6.3 pounds. I'm a writer and I need good tools. I do my homework. But this was tough going. As I scribbled comparative notes, pretending all the while that my sophistication was growing, my roller ball pen ran out of ammunition, and I plunged into the dark chaos of my desk drawer to find another *instrument de guerre*. I came up instead with treasure.

In the drawer's far recesses, I discovered a sheet metal pencil box crafted—with a lot of guidance—in my seventh grade “shop” class at Public School #66, on the north edge of Buffalo, New York, circa 1958. In those days, every boy took “shop” (wood and sheet metal) as a way for the student and the school to figure out if you were meant for vocational high school or the college entrance track. From mechanical drawings we made ourselves—on graph paper, with a ruler, a translucent plastic right angle triangle, a #1.5 pencil, and a soft green eraser—we had scored, snipped, folded, and soldered the sheet metal to the exact dimensions of a miniature shoebox, providing even for a sliding top fitted neatly into a grooved slot. At home, I had lined the noisy pencil box with red corduroy, cut from outgrown trousers, no doubt.

In the pencil box, I rediscovered my late grandfather's dime store fountain pen (refillable by a suction tube, not by cartridges), the same pen he used to write his gardening notebooks in the 1940s and '50s. Twenty years ago, I used his inherited pen to write poetry and to make gardening notes of my own. I found also a defunct Mont Blanc fountain pen—the Jaguar of writing instruments—given to me in 1982 by the husband of a deceased writing student who finished her memoir under my direction and then left us for that “undiscovered country.” An image of a Mont Blanc pen has graced my business card ever since. And, I turned up two “straight pens,” which some people call “steel pens” (to indicate the material used for their nibs). These straight pens are older even than the pencil box itself, leftovers from my *third grade* class with the dreaded but revered Mrs. Goldfus at ps #66.

The steel or straight pen may never have disappeared altogether from fine stationery shops, but it certainly went into a long decline and has only in recent years made something of a comeback, perhaps a conservative reaction in the face of ephemeral email and its ugly, rushed, anti-whole-word script. A nineteenth century invention, the steel pen nonetheless wasn't the beginning of writing, that's for sure. Quills from birds ruled the ink wells for centuries before industrial metallurgy allowed the straight pen to achieve perfection. When it did, all manner of variations evolved, including nibs of steel, gold, horn, tortoiseshell, or metal tipped with pieces of diamond or ruby. Joe Nickell's marvelously illustrated *Pen, Ink and Evidence: A Study of Writing and Writing Materials for the Penman, Collector, and Document Detective* displays scores of elaborately crafted writing instruments, all a far cry from a fifty-cent Bic ballpoint. Fine steel pens required pen holders to keep the inked pen off the page or table when at rest, and these holders, too, were commonly adorned with something precious—variously silver, gold, ivory, mother of pearl, or ebony.

Pen design evolved slowly, and each step reflected a concern for both style and ease of use. In the nineteenth century, designers added the “ferule,” a band of metal at the pen's lower end, textured to ensure a firmer grip. Rubber and cork ferules appeared as well. There were pen nib protectors and covers in all sorts of materials, including porcelain. Ferule adaptations eventually reflected a detailed study of the

mechanics of the human hand, with shaped handles conforming to the index finger and thumb's natural soft spots.

Writing with wet ink requires frequent blotting, a step we have forgotten about entirely with contemporary ballpoint and felt tip pens, and like everything else in the pen business, blotting papers, cloths, and tools took on the design characteristics of their respective societies and historical periods. Nickell tells us that needlework blotters in the eighteenth century were replaced, in the early twentieth century, by the more familiar and economical felt wiper-blotters some of us remember from the Esterbrook Company. Nowadays, in the penmanship revival of the early twenty-first century, you can once again buy a bristle brush and blotting powder, in an ink stand set, with an ink well: the full quiver, as it were, of writing tools. That is, if you also go for the pen trays or pen racks. The Levenger Company, a mail-order house specializing in everything elegant but unnecessary for the office or home study, offers all this pen paraphernalia, in designs brought forward from eras past and in designs retooled to please a contemporary eye. Victorian or Danish modern in sensibility? You can still write in high style.

The steel pen gave way, for most people, to the fountain pen, known to the penmanship historians as the reservoir pen. It was invented to solve the problem of having to dip the steel pen too often in the ink well to replenish the supply of ink held by the nib, a problem since ancient times. As ink ran out, characters and words became faint and possibly illegible. Nickell tells us that reservoir pens were known as early as 975 bc in Islamic culture, and the great British literary diarist Samuel Pepys had one in 1663. But only in the eighteenth century did they become common, and, by the early nineteenth century, patents for reservoir pens were numerous, with Lewis Waterman and then George Parker emerging by century's end as the leading companies. Waterman, a New York insurance agent who, presumably, had a lot of paperwork to contend with, gets credit for figuring out, in 1884, how to make a fountain pen with its own ink reservoir, a pen capable of feeding ink to the pen point by capillary action, ensuring an even flow while writing. The Waterman and Parker names survive to the present as symbols of fine writing instruments. In 1907, W. A. Shaeffer invented the mechanism that squeezes air out of a bladder inside the pen (which then fills with ink rising up from the bottle).

These are the mechanics inside my grandfather's fountain pen. Shaeffer's method has hardly been improved upon since, except for the cartridge pen of the mid-twentieth century.

By the 1940s, for most people in working offices or middle-class homes, the ballpoint pen had taken over, but its hegemony did not come quickly. Pen historian Nickell notes that John Lord of Weymouth, Massachusetts had pioneered the ballpoint way back in 1888. Two Czechoslovakians—Klimes and Elsner—perfected it in 1935. The Japanese got into the act in the 1960s by refining and mass marketing the porous tip pen, better known today as a felt tip pen or marker. In this one, ink moves downward toward the point by a “capillary attraction,” according to Nickell, but I say it's magic, for where *is* that seemingly endless supply of ink in the first place?

The advent of cheap ballpoints and porous tip pens brought something else with it too, something unthinkable in my 1958, third grade classroom: The notion of the disposable pen. If Marshall McLuhan was right (“the medium is the message”), then the birth of the disposable writing instrument may have signaled the death knell of handwriting worth doing carefully enough to be worth saving. To be sure, quills eventually would wear out, as would the nibs of steel pens, but the latter lasted a very long time, and the handles that held them lasted indefinitely. Witness my own discovery in the pencil box. Durability and constancy of service were admirable qualities inherent in a good writing instrument. There must have been a symbiotic relationship between the perceived staying power of words on paper and the longevity of the pen that put them there.

In our age, where most of the words we “write” are not written at all but are, rather, typed into a computer that displays them in intangible pixels on a flickering screen, then stores them not at all as themselves but deconstructed and reformulated in binary code and even fragmented further into noncontiguous sectors on a hard disk hidden inside an impenetrable box—under these high-tech circumstances, our words are divorced from our muscles if not also from our minds and, at the end of each working session, are swept off the actual desktop like so much unwanted dust. What we have traded for the ease of editing through word processing is our visceral connection to the emerging and then finished product—inked words on a piece of paper, put there by the sweat of our brow and the motions

of our fingers, and in a script no one else can write, for it bears our personal, inimitable imprint.

In my third grade class, we stuck to the basics. Each wooden desk in Mrs. Goldfus's classroom had a built-in ink well whose supply of non-watersoluble ink mysteriously replenished itself over night. Many were the ineradicable spots on white blouses and shirts washed and ironed at home by our long-suffering mothers—some spots the inadvertent by-products of our scholarly labors, but just as many were the results of carefully aimed flicks of our purposely overloaded straight pens at annoying and unsuspecting neighbors as many as three rows away.

We had no idea what made our ink “ink.” All we knew was that it was dangerous. The word “indelible” hadn't worked its way into our childish vocabularies, nor had the chemistry of water soluble inks made its way into the marketplace. An ink spot was an ink spot that even the most diligent mother, scrubbing by hand on a washboard at the kitchen sink, would have trouble removing. Lady Macbeth with her “Out, out, damn spot!” would have done no better. Such indelibility had been the goal of ink makers for centuries. The earliest inks, in China, Europe, and the Islamic world, were all carbon based, but these were non-saturating inks that dried on top of the page and were easily worn off. The search for solutions to this problem led in strange directions.

The ancient Greeks, for instance, in the second century, produced an “iron-gall” ink. Nickell calls it “an aqueous decoction of tannin and iron.” What was the “gall”? The female gall wasp deposits her eggs on a certain species of oaks known for excrescences called “gall nuts.” These contain tannic acid and gallic acid which can be leached out as a clear, colorless solution. If iron-salt is added, a purplish-black compound that grows blacker with age results. Mix in a little gum Arabic, as a binder, from the sap of the acacia tree, and voilà: a durable ink. The recipe was used for centuries. Kudos to the Greek research and development team.

In that Buffalo public school classroom, we were not concerned with gall wasps. The formulae we studied were not chemical but graphic. Aa Bb Cc Dd. Dip the pen in the ink well, scratch out the letters on lined practice sheets, keeping an eye on the Bible of cursive

writing, *The Palmer Method of Penmanship*, spread out before us on the desk, and another eye turned toward Mrs. Goldfus at the blackboard where, between permanently painted white lines, she showed us the proper strokes to achieve handwriting perfection. And it was nothing less than perfection that was her true aim.

Dip into the well to load the nib with ink, touch the rim of the inkwell to drain off any surplus that might ruin your first letter and your entire page with an unsightly blotch, then scratch and practice, riding the waves of ascenders like the upward stroke of the “d” and the downward stroke of descenders like the “g,” trying your best to link letters together convincingly as if joined by synapses over which the meanings of our words would, in some distant but as yet unforeseeable way, surely pass. But these were not meaningful synapses, these cursive liaisons, not just yet. Mrs. Goldfus was a Platonist, at least in the cursive writing department. We abutted letters you will never or very rarely find side by side in a real English word: “g’s” next to “t’s,” “x’s” next to “z’s.” And we wrote vowels an absolutely uncountable number of times, both upper and lower case, of course.

Mrs. Goldfus cared little for words as such, little, too, for sentences, and not at all for the stories we itched to tell by writing them down. For her, the *Ding-an-Sich*, the thing in itself, was the holy letter, meticulously formed. That is to say, exactly as it looked in our Bible, *The Palmer Method of Penmanship*. It did not matter if we had nothing new to say, for we always had something old to write: the alphabet, the numbers, even the punctuation marks that had their own prescribed forms in the gospel according to Palmer. Deep within the cryptic mind of Mrs. Goldfus, pure form had long ago triumphed definitively over unruly content. Aa, Bb, Cc, Dd. Repeat, *ad delirium*.

At first glance one might take the teaching or learning of cursive writing for granted, as a given: Just do it! But like everything else in the curriculum, writing pedagogy has been a battleground. In Colonial America, from 1620 to about 1700, not surprisingly the conventional writing style closely imitated that of the mother country. This “Mayflower Century Style,” says Nickell, was built on a heavy use of italic and was a complicated script, not easily learned. One suspects there was more than aesthetics at play here. In the theocratic New England Colonies, power centered in a handful of

literate church leaders. A chief tool of social control was the restriction of literacy to their own class.

However, as the Colonies evolved into the States, as theocracy gave way to secular government, and, in the nineteenth century when public education emerged, new systems for writing in cursive and for teaching cursive writing emerged too. From about 1700 to 1840 the “American round hand system” held sway—rounded letters, with flourishes, hairline upward strokes, shaded downward strokes. Between 1840 and the Civil War the “modified round” system came in and so did the opportunistic publishers who saw money to be made in producing copy books for handwriting students, giving model letter forms and ruled spaces in which to practice inscribing them. Among these entrepreneurs was Platt Rogers Spencer.

The Spencerian system of cursive writing dominated the American market for nearly the next half century. Its letters were flowing, decorative, dramatic . . . and not the kind of thing you could dash off in a hurried note or memo. It was a slower time than our own, but as the business of America became, increasingly, *business*, a need for a less embellished, more efficient writing style came with it. “Modern vertical” was an experiment with block lettering, in lieu of cursive writing, in vogue briefly in the 1890s, but still too slow for doing business. By the 1910s and ’20s, Austin Norman Palmer (1859–1927), chief among other handwriting innovators, emerged as a leader in systematizing a new way to form letters and to teach this skill to a rapidly expanding audience. Away with the shading of down strokes in the Spencerian system. Away with the flourishes of *all* previous systems. Here, in “The Palmer Method of Penmanship,” was a style for a new age where speed, efficiency, and ease of reading counted for everything.

Palmer and other contemporary competitors pioneered writing based on a free movement of the arm; hence the moniker, “American arm movement writing.” Nickell says Palmer’s revolutionary approach “employed muscles of the forearm in producing a simple rotary style.” Copy books for grade-school students—still lingering in the curriculum decades later when I was a kid—and Palmer Method teachers’ manuals were the basis of his empire. He created textbooks such as the ubiquitous *Palmer Method of Business Writing*, and he edited and published a periodical, *The American Penman*. Leaving

no marketing stone unturned, Palmer manufactured and distributed thousands of “Palmer Method” buttons and certificates of proficiency to enlist the hordes in identifying their scholastic success with *his* method of penmanship. The Palmer buttons and certificates always showed a hand, holding exactly what I found in my long lost pencil box: a steel nibbed straight pen.

As with so many other curricular revolutions, this one brought along its own ideology. Palmer wasn't interested exclusively in teaching the formation of legible letters. Tamara Thornton, in her superbly researched *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History*, shows us a Palmer who is a man with a manly agenda. He wants to re-masculinize handwriting, to save it from its errantly feminine ways acquired under the Spencerian system in Victorian times. When women came into the workplace in huge numbers, as they did for the first time during the Industrial Revolution, handwriting evolved to meet their assumed stylistic needs. But Palmer, a quintessentially twentieth century business hustler if ever there was one, would have none of that.

Thornton argues that embedded in a society's handwriting pedagogy are some of its core values. In the American case, she sees a contest between, on the one hand, individuality and self-expression and, on the other, conformity and obedience. By the 1960s, and certainly with the rise of the anti-establishment counter culture in the late '60s and 1970s, as social permissiveness increased, the teaching of writing as a disciplined, standardized skill declined rapidly. Now, content triumphed over form as people, even little people in third grade, did their own things with whatever writing implements they could find.

Nonetheless, just a few years before, in the mid-1950s at my grammar school in Buffalo, a city once on the edge of the nineteenth century frontier but by mid-twentieth century perhaps already a reactionary backwater, we had a writing teacher whose own sensibility had been formed in the 1930s or even the 1920s (Mrs. Goldfus seemed prehistoric to most of us), the very period when Palmer reigned supreme. Mrs. Goldfus provided a straight pen for every student. What we didn't have were ballpoint pens, instruments of decadence defined for us in no uncertain terms as “absolutely forbidden from even entering the room.” Although Palmer's method was designed, initially, to foster freer movement and a release from the strictures

of Victorian cursive writing styles, his method had become, ironically, by the 1950s, a dinosaur in itself, conservative and restrictive in the extreme.

Thornton notes that writing done with the Palmer method, looked at from today's curricular vantage point, evokes "the discipline and certainty of a bygone era." In the early twentieth century, when Palmer achieved hegemony in the writing business, penmanship pedagogues had fallen in line with other progressive educators in believing a simple formula: Discipline in education leads to discipline in the mind and leads, further, to discipline in the social order. Regimentation is healthy. The mind, especially the young mind, left to its own devices, is errant and unpredictable; the body, well, indeed, even worse! With behavioral psychology gurus such as William James to back them up (his master work *The Principles of Psychology*, appeared in 1890 and, a decade or so later, its main ideas were trickling down to influence the public mindset), pedagogues put the emphasis not on the development of individual consciousness ("Do your own thing!") but on mental adaptability and training ("Get in line and march!").

A. N. Palmer read his William James carefully and quoted him in his journal *The American Penman*. Palmer liked the Jamesian phrase "the effortless custody of automatism," evidently not worrying over what would scare any educator today: that anyone good at automatism would also make a good automaton. Without such worries, Palmer could then take the ideological leap from his limited sphere of notions about how to teach cursive writing to grand concepts for the reformation of society as a whole. Elitists, like Palmer, always suspect that society is somehow going to the dogs. Thornton claims Palmer believed that good penmanship "would reform delinquents, assimilate foreigners, and shape a work force." Was our Mrs. Goldfus such an elitist ideologue, working on the sociological front battle lines in our third grade classroom? I'll never know, but she did keep our noses to the proverbial grindstone, and there were no rewards for innovation. The straight pen, the steel pen drew a rigidly defined path for us, with no detours allowed.

In the Victorian era, Thornton tells us, the physical regimen of handwriting was meant "to produce individuals who could control their 'lower' impulses through acts of will. These people would make

good producers.” By the early twentieth century—Palmer’s heyday—the education theorists had put a finer point on it in believing that “penmanship pedagogy aimed to make good workers . . . by neutralizing the will and transforming the body into a machine.” It’s probably no accident, then, that the same era that produced A. N. Palmer, the penmanship drill sergeant, also produced Henry Ford, the master of automaton-like, factory-based mass production and, of course, the great satirist poking disturbing fun at all of this, Charlie Chaplin in his film *Modern Times*.

Bundled on the hard drive of my new laptop when it arrived from Staples—an office supply mega-store stocking every conceivable office product *except* a book about cursive writing—were the several software programs of Microsoft Office, of which Word is both king and queen. In the beginning was the Word, but not this Word. It used to be that if you wanted to write something, you learned cursive, and if you wanted to print your work, you or your printer hand set the type through laborious eye-straining hours, in a font determined as much by your own aesthetic sense as by the limitations of your printer’s type font library. And this isn’t ancient history I’m talking about either. In college, in the mid-1960s, we were still hand setting the headlines in the campus newspaper. Nowadays, in Word, a mouse click gives you a bewildering array of choices among fonts you know, if only instinctively by the memory traces they leave on the mind’s eye, and fonts you have never heard of and will never use. In some versions of Word, there is a font called “Cursive,” but it’s not what Mrs. Goldfus taught us, not at all what *The Palmer Method of Penmanship* aspires to.

A case could be advanced that Word makes it all too easy. There ought to be dues to pay first, before you can claim the right to “write” this fluidly with Word, in so many and in such varied fonts. Dues something like learning to write correctly in “longhand,” that resonant synonym for “cursive.” If I were king, instead of Bill Gates, to qualify to use Word in the first place you would have to take the handwriting test in the presence of a notary public or some other *petit bureaucrat* who would confirm your cursive skill by impressing his stamp in your stationery (Remember stationery?). You would then mail your letter (In an envelope, with a stamp: Remember those?)

to The Palmer Penmanship Company where another *petit bureaucrat* would assign and mail back to you a code, written in cursive, of course. With this code you would then unlock the font library in Word. It would be like earning admission to a craft guild after a long apprenticeship under a mentor, your own Mrs. Goldfus. This fool-proof method of separating the mere scribblers from the real hand writers would restore some justice to an unruly world.

Fonts, of course, are collections of letters—alphabets—in a consistent design style. Letters came to us slowly. The Egyptian hieroglyphs were a pictographic form of writing. By 2400 bc, in the land of the Pharaohs, cursive began to appear, in a form known as “hieratic,” meaning in a sociologically telling way, “priestly.” By the seventh century bc, a form of writing now called “demotic,” signifying “of the people,” had emerged. Still, these were *syllabic* systems. Only later did true alphabets, that is, systems of characters representing *sounds*, appear. We may have the Phoenicians to thank for that conceptual leap, and we preserve this historical likelihood in our word “phonetic.” The wily Greeks took over the Phoenician alphabet, dispensing with extra consonants that somehow were born again as vowels. The Phoenician “aleph” became “alpha” in Greek, and the second letter, “beth,” became “beta.” From the two came our word “alphabet.” Mrs. Goldfus never told us the amusing bits like this.

The Romans, of course, would never settle, whole hog, for a Greek system. By 700 bc, Roman literati had added and subtracted letters to suit their empire-building needs, and hundreds of years later, in the early stages of modern Europe, other new letters—such as U, W, and J—were still joining the ever-evolving alphabet.

What have we added to the alphabet in the last few hundred years? The inelegant “@” symbol in email addresses is the only thing that comes to mind, except for “emoticons,” those smiley faces and other signals composed entirely of punctuation marks, used by hurried people to sign off in emails with barely a hint of what they might really be feeling, as in “I’m smiling” or “I’m frowning.” Are emoticons a giant leap backwards to hieroglyphics, with substantive depersonalization included at no extra charge? Where did writing and words go, all of a sudden? All I know is that if a woman wants to send me the equivalent of an engaging smile, I’d rather have a few precise, evocative words, characterizing *this* smile, the one meant for *me*,

now, rather than the emoticon “:)”. Or, if it’s time for a little flirtation, then let’s really flirt; I don’t want just an emoticon wink, “;)”. And if things have gone sour, or I need to rebuff someone, I’d prefer real sour-power—real written words—over the emoticon’s anemic tongue sticking out, “:b”.

If you’re so rushed for time that all you can manage is a semicolon and half a parenthesis, there’s not much chance the recipient of your email will ever experience, with you anyway, an artful complimentary closing written in legible cursive. This is a situation to which you may want to reply, in cursive or not, “:-(”, which would be, of course, a “frowning smiley,” in emoticon, that is.

It’s hard to conceive of, but before the 7th century ad, wordseparation was largely unheard of. In this period, also, majuscules (CAPITALS) and minuscules (lower case letters) were differentiated, and punctuation began to emerge as a means to effect more subtly meaningful syntax. Systematization was the obvious route to follow to get everyone communicating smoothly throughout the realm, but it took a leader no less charismatic than Charlemagne to establish order, at least in the handwriting department. In 789, as Holy Roman Emperor, he issued an edict that everything must be written in a standard hand, at least in his Gallic empire, a hand now known as Carolingian or Caroline minuscule. This style reached its full flowering in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. And so it went, century after century, with alphabets and writing styles evolving to suit the needs and tastes of the times.

I am indebted to Joe Nickell for this overview of the evolution of writing, but I am even more indebted to Mrs. Goldfus for having drilled me in the uplifting ways of A. N. Palmer and his character-forming habits. Yes, here “character” is a pun. Mrs. Goldfus made us practice our letters (“characters”) and, simultaneously, she taught us discipline or at least patience, a reasonable contribution to our character formation. We are all seriously indebted, of course, to the great typographers who have crafted for us the fonts we so casually take for granted whenever we boot up and open Microsoft Word. Everybody with a computer knows who Bill Gates is, but not one in a hundred thousand, or more, I’d wager, could identify Hermann Zapf (the German who designed the popular fonts Optima and Palatino, the latter named for a sixteenth century writing master, one of Palmer’s

antecedents). Nor can many people hold forth on the importance of Giambattista Bodoni, William Caslon, or Frederic William Goudy, all of whom have widely used fonts named after them.

It is a bitter truth to swallow for those of us who suffered obediently with our straight pens under the watchful eye of Mrs. Goldfus, but writing by hand, in whatever style we have learned, has become a skill to which most people today attach no particular importance at all. Handwriting today is a skill “more honored in the breach than in the observance” as Shakespeare put it, in another context, while writing, of course, with a quill pen. In the film *Shakespeare in Love*, one can hardly forget the unwrapping of young Will’s girlfriend, played by the fetching Gwyneth Paltrow, but just as memorable are the film’s opening minutes when we see the playwright at work, scribbling feverishly, wrestling with blots and cross outs and revisions or deletions, to produce more lines for a play already in rehearsal if not running away from him in performance. As the ink flows onto the page, something almost palpable in Shakespeare’s own vigor flows with it. He *makes* these letters, these words; they are his. Watch the same words being typed on a computer and the irreducible energy of that moment of literary inspiration is, somehow, vastly diminished.

To recollect the Palmer Method brings back, as Tamara Thornton rightly judges, “bittersweet memories of a past when moral certainty still seemed possible.” There have been countless penmanship jeremiads in recent decades, lamenting the loss of fine handwriting. This essay, almost against its own better judgment, has become one of them. Thornton says most historians agree that the 1930s were the last high watermark of clear, legible writing. In the capitalist countries, the Depression took its toll on all aspects of the curriculum. Penmanship teachers were laid off as a cost saving measure and then were not rehired after World War II. By the time I was ready for penmanship instruction in 1953, it came to me as part of the English curriculum, taught by a cursive martinet, to be sure, but not by a professional handwriting teacher who did nothing all day but tout the virtues of the Palmer Method.

Ironically, notes Thornton, the Cold War brought a momentary revival of concern for the social values allegedly rooted in good penmanship. It may be a stretch, this argument, but it’s an interesting one. The thesis, among education critics, went as follows. Cold War

planners were obsessed about national defense, about competing with the Soviets on every level, not just in the nuclear missile silos. Thornton alludes to social critics who saw weaknesses in national defense spending as being linked to deficiencies in penmanship. American businesses lost seventy million dollars a year, around 1955, to the demon called “illegibility.” And the big fear in the penmanship arena was that national security itself might be threatened by mistranslated, miscopied documents—absolutely not acceptable in the world of nuclear weapons development or espionage.

Was that an “e” or an “a” or an “o”? A “7” or a “1”? In an era when schoolchildren, like me, were regularly drilled in the self-evidently ludicrous practice of diving under the classroom desk to seek shelter from an imminent nuclear attack, getting your letters and numbers right could be made to seem a matter of someone’s life and death. This is how, I suspect, teaching cursive in third grade in 1953 became, under the strict control of Mrs. Goldfus, a moral crusade equivalent to the wartime admonition, “Loose lips sink ships.” Come to think of it, I’ll bet that was one of the sentences we wrote again and again to get our “l’s” and “s’s” flowing properly. The Cold War ideological overlay was a bonus.

And now, in the last fifteen years or so, a sense of urgency about the cultural importance of handwriting is experiencing a small renaissance for good, bad, and bizarre reasons. *Pen World Magazine*, a publication for pen collectors, runs a World Handwriting Contest. Although the prize money is small, participation comes from around the globe. Contest director Kate Gladstone notes that the better submissions come from outside the u.s.; she suspects Americans are generally still ambivalent about writing. Serious voices can be found, however, in the debate about handwriting in America, in oddly disparate places, according to the *New York Times* in a piece called “Scribblers’ World,” about a pen store.

Michael Sull, owner of an upscale studio specializing in ornamental penmanship and calligraphy, reflects the rekindled bourgeois interest in handwriting by noting, “Necessary in every age, handwriting remains just as vital to the enduring saga of civilization as our next breath.” Here and there, some schools that see their mission as upholding the good old standards also carry the banner for fine handwriting. Samuel Freedman, writing in *The New York Times*

("Back to the Basics of a Legible Hand") reported on one, Hartford Day School in Baltimore, where a retired English teacher, Nan Jay Barchowsky, has been called back to duty to re-teach eighth graders a skill that the school and society have allowed to atrophy since the kids first found it in third grade: how to make perfect letters. The old "use it or lose it" rule clearly applies to handwriting.

But why was handwriting allowed to atrophy in the first place? Freedman, the *New York Times* reporter, summarizes what he learned from various educators. There was no edict that pushed handwriting out of the curriculum; "indirect decisions and unexamined premises" conspired to shunt it to the distant sidelines. Some say an interest in standardized tests supplanted more skill-oriented instruction in the language arts classrooms. A reversal of this may be underway just now with the reintroduction on the Scholastic Aptitude Test of a twenty-five-minute handwritten essay. Illegible essays will be scored poorly. Others theorize that the "whole language" method of teaching literacy with its emphasis on creative expression and critical thinking overtook the old style instruction in phonics, spelling, and grammar, with handwriting as a subset of all these falling to the wayside.

And everyone agrees, says Freedman, that the computer has largely replaced the pen. A cascade of unintended consequences followed: Email (truncated sentences, un-capitalized, minimally punctuated, not proofread, i.e., spellchecked) replaced handwritten or typed memos and correspondence. Now sms messaging replaces even email, reducing communications to the level of intellectual complexity of semaphore and smoke signals. We're a long way from the straight pen and Mrs. Goldfus's classroom now. It's a pity, for as Freedman reports, a national research project on the status of handwriting among children found links between their difficulties with writing script and "weaknesses in the grammar and content of their composition."

Then there are matters of taste and civility related to the use or avoidance of handwriting. *The New Yorker* (in Tad Friend's "Talk of the Town" piece, "Gizmos: Two Pens") took apparent pleasure in reporting that the Bush administration suffered a sharp embarrassment the day it was revealed Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld had been using an Autopen to sign condolence letters to the families of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Novelist Margaret Atwood proposed—in jest, we hope but fear not—a new gizmo that would

allow a writer to stay at home rather than attend book signing events in bookstores and yet still—by two-way video hookup and a robotic pen—sign books for eager consumers.

Most egregious of all of the problems spinning off from our habit of bad handwriting is the fact that illegible script kills people and can change the outcome of an election. Overstatements? Not if you're in the doctoring business or in politics, says Claudia Rosenbaum, writing in the *Santa Barbara Times*. Physicians at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, in Santa Barbara, found they could not read one another's handwriting on prescriptions. Nurses and pharmacists were often stumped about how to follow the doctors' instructions. Was it "antibiotics" or "antidepressants" the doctor ordered? "Prilosec" (for ulcers) or "Prozac" (for depression)? They both come in twenty milligram tablets. A study at the Institute of Medicine found that ninety-eight thousand people a year die in the u.s. due to medical error. Put two and two together, and it's not hard to see how bad handwriting on prescriptions and patients' charts leads to some of these deaths and to how many (no one knows) ineffective or dangerous treatment regimens. A number of hospitals, including Cedar-Sinai, have introduced remedial handwriting programs for their doctors. The entire medical industry is shifting, however, toward computer-driven prescription programs that will eliminate handwriting altogether.

In the Washington State gubernatorial election of 2004, decided after various recounts and court challenges by fewer than 150 votes out of several million, there were more than enough absentee ballots rejected due to illegibility for either side to have won or lost. Was the same thing true in Florida in 2000 in Bush vs. Gore? Hanging chads aren't the only problem in the American voting system. Unreadable scribbling is another one.

Among the things I saved when my mother passed away in 1994 were her letters to me, decades of them. Those written in the winter months were filled with chit chat about social life at her condo complex in Florida, and sometimes she let slip in some harsh self-deprecation as she observed herself failing in her Herculean effort to rescue my brother from his slide down to Hades through alcoholism. These winter season letters from mother were neither fun nor informative, often scrawled on scrap paper with a Bic pen or a stubby

pencil. But, in the spring, she would retreat to our summer house on the shore of Lake Erie in Ontario, an hour west of Buffalo, to a cottage her father and uncle had built in the 1920s. This was her only real home.

Even today, mail between Canada and the u.s. is sluggish, but then what's the rush when you're calculating time in cursive speed? Mother's letters written in summertime Canada were models of The Palmer Method of Penmanship, which she, too, had learned, about thirty-five years before I did, from her own Mrs. Goldfus at another Buffalo public school. Her father's gardening notebooks, among my most precious inheritances, were another impeccable model she followed. Grandfather Johnston had made it only through eighth grade, in a tiny, one-room schoolhouse in Hespeler, Ontario (now swallowed up by metro-Toronto), but he wrote his letters, learned in the 1890s, with the precise, consistent care of a Renaissance calligrapher. Mother wrote her Ontario correspondence with a fountain pen in perfectly straight lines on unlined department store stationery that came in tablet form with a reusable sheet of dark lines you slipped under the page you were writing on, which was just translucent enough for the guidelines to show through. She chose paper with a high rag (cotton) content and a watermark you could see if you held a sheet of it up to the light.

From Canada, in cursive to die for, mother narrated for me the turbulent weather blowing in from across the twenty-five mile wide lake in front of our house. She told me about grey herons and screech owls and flying squirrels and fire flies that coasted right by her window. So many delicious words, so many exquisitely formed letters. I read, in her steady, always fully legible script, about the long awaited arrival of each summer's crops of Silver Queen sweet corn and Big Boy tomatoes; about the tradesmen (her charmingly antique term) we had known for decades who stopped by, unscheduled, to fix whatever needed fixing and never gave her a bill. There's no denying that a certain yearning abides in my heart for one more letter from her, postmarked *Lowbanks, Ontario, Canada*, because the quality of her handwriting, regardless of the banality of the news she passed on, confirmed in an instant that she still had her wits about her, that the effort required to add a touch of graciousness to life still seemed worth making.

I like to believe that still, somewhere, in that more gracious world, the ascenders rise in a handsome stretch skywards, the descenders dangle playfully like children's legs off a dock on a warm summer's day, the roundness of "a's" and of "q's" and the sensuous curves of "s's" and "r's" and the arresting angularity of "z's"—that all these scratches on the page still yield something beautiful, personal, and meaningful when strung together with patience and care. The clock moved glacially in Mrs. Goldfus's classroom in 1953, but not one of us was restive to leave our seats during the long penmanship exercises. Mastering the skill of writing in cursive with a straight pen was tantamount to learning to ride your bicycle with no hands—something every cool kid was determined to do.

Cursive power! Straight pen power! Viva Mrs. Goldfus! Viva the Palmer Method of Penmanship!