

Annual Cards and Letters

By Charlie McBriarty

Our holiday cards and letters chronicle the march of time

Choices abound for greeting cards: American Greetings, Hallmark Cards, Recycled Paper Greetings—and the list goes on. Although the cards are plentiful in early November, for some reason the urge to begin the search for just the right card with the best message to transmit to our friends and relatives doesn't emerge to a conscious level until the Thanksgiving turkey is but a memory. By then the hunt for Christmas greeting cards has morphed into a dreaded task. Eventually, after a multi-store shopping safari, a series of cards without value-laden messages are found. All of this is done so those who sent us some form of greeting the previous year can be assured that we still exist and think of them—at least during this time of year.

Whatever the message transmitted in our cards, the payoff is that the number received roughly equals the number we distribute. This annual ceremony has been begging for a cost-benefit analysis for some time. And since such an analysis is beyond my pay grade, what follows is a simple comparison of the cards received each year, highlighting changes occurring over the years.

Finding #1: The season's greetings we have received over the years have gradually changed in a variety of ways. First, there has been a steady decrease in the number of cards arriving in our mail box. This atrophy raises a series of questions about the causes of this phenomenon. Was it because something in our card and accompanying message was offensive enough to cause the recipients to cross us off their list? Did the intended recipients contract a physical or emotional issue that compelled them to discontinue this once-a-year exchange of greetings? Then, of course, there was the infinitesimal chance that one or two of these absences resulted from a deliberate choice to delete our address from their list of greeting card beneficiaries. Whatever the reasons, we have concluded that the answers are well beyond our control (or perhaps even our business).

Finding #2: There is an increase in the insertion of a printed or typed letter providing a chronological record of the senders' accomplishments during the year. Some of these epistles expose the exploits of precious children or beloved household pets. Others share the excitement of exotic travels to distant places such as Fargo or Erie. Most provide the reader with tidbits of information about what the authors wish to share about the happenings in their world. A few reek of self-importance and egocentricity. However, most are worth the time it takes to read. (In this era of full disclosure, we have added one of these letters to the cards we distribute to reduce scribbling the same messages on card after card.)

Finding #3: The handwritten messages appended to cards have nearly vanished. Remember receiving notes penned on any and all available blank space, which often spilled over to the back of the card? Perhaps the printed letter mentioned in Finding #2 may be perceived as a substitute.

Finding #4: This one is growing more quickly than my memory loss. More and more greeting cards have evolved into an envelope-sized photograph of the senders, their family, pet dogs and cats or something deemed appropriate to the season. (Is it possible the selfie craze may have accelerated this trend?) Some of the senders of these newer greetings assume you do (or should) know who is who and what is what and fail to identify those pictured. But most use the back of these photo cards to transmit ID information. However, sometimes it is hard to determine whether "Max" is the name of the newborn or the Rottweiler pictured. A few of the more chronologically gifted senders make an effort to write names, but that often makes

it hard to decipher the penmanship produced by a shaky hand.

Finding #5: There is a noticeable change in the tone and scope of received season's greetings. Throughout 50-plus years of card reception, the early cards and letters were typically upbeat and positive. They spoke of happy events such as the delight of being a part of a growing family, the mixed emotions experienced as children entered nursery school or kindergarten, the relief experienced at graduation parties when these children moved to the 1st grade. Through the years the messages have changed a bit to an unexpected trauma occasionally emerging in some of the annual greetings. Later there were additions of newspaper clippings of obituaries, or news of long-forgotten friends or neighbors. Often some neighborhood gossip is revealed.

Finding #6: The reality of electronics and social media unquestionably accounts for some of the shrinking in the number of season's greetings received. Email is a quick and easy method of electronically creating and transmitting a holiday greeting via a computer. On a personal note, the use and function of social media continues to be a mysterious swamp to me. But it is likely that as soon as the swamp has been cleared of alligators my attention will begin to focus on the swamp.

Finding #7: The batch of season's greeting cards and letters arriving in our mailbox these past two years has brought the reality of the march of time to center stage. Last year a colleague who is a bit younger reported on the challenges of his battle with cancer. In his letter he noted that he was focusing on the quality of life not the length of life. This year he continues to be upbeat as he fights his foe. There was the 2015 letter from a family who reported that a former colleague remained in a nursing facility trying to recover from a fall down a flight of stairs. This year she is bedridden in the facility and is reported to be doing her best to maintain her declining grip on what was once an active involved life.

Most of the holiday greetings received tend to be focused on the positive aspects of how time has treated the dispatcher. All things considered, an occasional report of difficulty should not diminish the fact that most of us are doing well. The occurring bumps along our trip can serve as a reminder to keep on keeping on and to do our best to make good use of our time as it marches to its own drummer.

Save the Date

Join us for

THIRD THURSDAY FORUM

To share in a round table discussion

"Aging in Pine Knoll Shores" What does it mean for you?

Bring your concerns, questions, expectations, hopes and needs

Joan Lamson, Facilitator

FEBRUARY 16, 3:30 P.M.

at

PINE KNOLL SHORES TOWN HALL

Free and Sponsored by the Age-Friendly Advisory Committee

NEXT THIRD THURSDAY FORUM:
MARCH 16

In Memoriam

Ross Earnest

Joan Hall