A Skill Worth Keeping

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN



For the last month or so I have been coming across signboards that advertise courses in, of all things, handwriting. In this age of digital technology who needs this archaic skill, one would think. But in a country like ours where many people have not even seen a computer face to face let alone have access to it, it is the good old pen and paper that rules.

Aside from calligraphy which is quite a popular art form, examinations are almost always handwritten. So are the little memos and notes on documents that go from desk to desk.

Personally, I am all for writing by hand. Like right now, I am writing in a notebook with a cheap ballpoint pen because the computer at home refuses to 'boot' and the laptop is full of viruses. But if I have to be totally honest with myself I must admit that I actually enjoy writing by hand, despite the bruise-like dent on my finger that I get every time I hold a pen to write. True, the computer allows me to write so much faster, it gives me suggestions when I make a typo or even tells me how I should frame an awkward sentence. I can gleefully add, brutally delete and wilfully cut and paste, making editing quite a breeze.

But that personal connection when you place the nib of your pen on paper and watch the white sheet get patterned by your scrawl - that is something no computer can give you.

Writing by hand used to be an art form. I remember those lovely Chinese Youth fountain pens that were part of every secondary school going kid's ensemble. We would compete with each other in trying to win the 'best handwriting contest', and impress our teachers with flawless pages of neat writing with elegant loops on the 'h's and smooth twirls on the 's's. The trick to perfect handwriting would be to find just the right angle of the nib on the paper and keep using that so that in a few weeks it would be so smooth you could write with your eyes closed. Ok that was a bit of an exaggeration, with your eyes *half-closed*. The funny thing was that after long use the nib would be moulded into that individual's secret angle so woe betide (look it up if you're too young to know what it means) if anyone other than the particular pen's owner tried to use the pen. The transgressor would find a most unresponsive, rough-nibbed instrument that would produce the most ungainly writing accompanied by a painful, scratchy sound.

Now when I look at my handwriting, it is appalling and looks like the disgruntled scribbles of a drunken physician (and you know how illegible even the sober kind's can be).

When I go through my old drawers I find stacks of old letters from friends and relatives I am barely in touch with, letters full of marvellous accounts of events in their lives, their thoughts and genuine warmth that would fill me with joy. They are letters pouring with emotion and show real efforts to connect. How thrilling it was when the postman would arrive with that thick envelope - a letter from a friend thousands of miles away. Now we exchange sporadic emails to exchange pleasantries, they stay in my inbox and I seldom go back to read them.

Our handwriting is as distinct as our signature and our fingerprints. Surely it deserves to be preserved by even us ordinary souls. Signed documents and handwritten letters or notes are always considered authentic compared to typewritten or computer-processed ones.

Fortunately, even these days one may come across handwriting that is a pleasure to look at. Like handwriting of English teachers and administrative officers or like a certain employer I know whose writing is almost microscopic but perfectly proportionate and strangely enough, legible.

Of course it is silly to think of abandoning the convenience of digital communication and start getting out our pen and paper. There is no denying that writing has become infinitely easier because of word processing and most writers would scoff and jeer at the idea of placing any importance to this ancient skill that appears to be becoming obsolete. Curiously I read in an article recently that the close-to redundancy of the handwritten word has made handwriting an exclusive affair. So much so that designer pens like Mont Blanc are becoming more popular along with exclusive blot-free paper, thus making handwriting confined to a few members of the elite.

Back here in the real world there is a lot of typing especially in offices, in fact, you may not even find a single pen or piece of paper!

Then again perhaps there is still hope for the cause of the hand-written word. There are still many scribes who stubbornly hold on to their pen and paper and we still get little yellow envelopes with handwritten letters. It means that in some parts of the world, this art of communication that began thousands of years ago, has survived in this impersonal, pixel-dominated world.

Three cheers for the courses in penmanship!