

Reflections on seasons of Christmas cards

For me, the joy of the Christmas Season is reaching out to friends with a card and Christmas letter I send each year to some friends known for decades, and others I've been lucky to meet more recently.

Each year, their cards hang in lines of coloured ribbon down the walls, along with stockings I embroidered for the family hanging from the window ledge.

Copies of these letters go back to 1982. I wish I'd kept them before that, in the age before computers.

The earliest friendship made with the senders was when I was 10 and met Tony, age 14, and studying ballet. I remember sitting at the head of his tiny bed while he put his cardboard theatre at the bottom end and gave me a complete performance of *Arsenic & Old Lace* with puppets he had made, complete with costumes, wigs and jewellery. He has sent me hand-coloured drawings of ballets he has danced in over the years.

I first met Ida when her son, Guy Paul Morin, was wrongfully convicted and sent to prison for many years. Ida, now 90 and still active, and I have kept in touch ever since. After his release, he married and had two sons and has continued to live a very positive life with his family and friends, partly as a piano tuner. How he dealt with this negative experience reminds me of accounts of Nelson Mandela.

Within the last few months, Ashley Tao made contact with me. [My husband David] and I were part of a group who sponsored parents, a 'Boat Family' from Vietnam in the late 1970s. She's now doing a PhD in medical physics, she plays piccolo in one band and a flute in another. Recently, she has been learning trapeze skills in her spare time and each letter is welcome.

I met Stephen Hill, curator of the Haliburton Museum when talking a writing course at a local college. The museum was always closed by the time I walked past. Once I slipped in and asked if I could take a quick look around. There was a display of a historic old shop with the tins and jars of ancient cash register that reminded me of my Grandma's shop on a London main road.

I asked if I could snap him behind the counter and in the photo he looked authentic 1800s and his Christmas letter is always interesting and treasured.

This week, my cousin Martyn sent a card, plus a letter he'd found among his father's papers. Uncle Bob had written to ask for details of his brother Ted's death during the Second World War. He had died when I was three and my mother would never talk about him, leaving me with a deep longing to know him. The reply, handwritten, stated:

B company, which he was commanding at the time, were given the very difficult task of capturing a hill (S. Lucia) which was strongly held by the enemy. They put up a magnificent show, captured their objective and several prisoners. Your brother, at the head of his men, was directing his company from the centre of the spearhead. He was severely wounded in the head and killed instantly.

Ted had only been with us for a few weeks, but during that time he had made many friends. He was very popular with 'B' company. We all miss him and shall remember him for his cool courage and unfailing cheerfulness. He could always smile even in the face of danger.

He gave details with a hand-drawn tiny map of the grave's location in an olive grove in Italy. 'Sorry, I'm not an artist,' he said. The description of my father's personality endorsed what I knew of him when Uncle Bob decades ago sent me seven letters from the three youngest boys to their mother during the First World War and revealed my father's affection for his brothers and sister, his great love for his mother and when his sister caught German measles he said, 'very unpatriotic!'

That humour, a strong link that binds me to someone, dearly missed but imagined richly.

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