





# Words to the wise

As our connectivity with each other increasingly relies on impersonal digital technology, there are some among us who still treasure the intimate art of written conversation

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When Lisa Rushton sits down to hand write a letter to her friend, the first thing she does is pop the kettle on. The Hobart mum enjoys the ritual of making a nice pot of tea to savour during the writing process. It helps her eliminate distractions around her, she says, and to focus on the friend she's writing to. Rushton tends to favour long, conversational letters, similar to the snail mail her grandmother would have written and posted to friends and family back in the day.

She regularly writes to her friend Sonya who she's known for more than 20 years, and who moved to Adelaide last year to look after her father. Rushton writes about what's been happening in her life at home and at work, and asks Sonya questions about her own life. She might tell her about the book that she's reading or share a little poem that she's penned. "When I'm writing a letter I feel like I am in the company of the person I'm writing to," Rushton says. "I feel like I am sharing a special moment with them."

Being a mother of three, life for Rushton can often be a delicate balancing act, and adding a new job into the mix means things can get quite hectic. So on her evening walks she multi-tasks, sometimes reading and replying to texts — but usually phoning her friends.

She's just finished reading *Digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport. "He talks about connection versus conversation," Rushton says. "These days we are so connected all the time, but where's the conversation? We can like and comment on posts and tweet our thoughts, upload an Insta pic, bang out a quick text, and scroll through feeds to see what friends have been doing. But conversations are completely different things to that kind of connection. Letters are so much more conversational."

Letter writing is becoming a lost art, says UTAS history professor Stefan Petrow. He is concerned about the historical implications of that reality. He is currently writing a series of books based on the letters Tasmanian soldiers scrawled while in the trenches in Europe during World War I. He spends his days engrossed in these letters to loved ones back home, and the neatly written replies that were posted back to them.

"Letters are a rich kind of historical record," Petrow says. "These letters give an indication of what these young men were thinking and feeling, and details their hopes and fears. The information in these letters humanise what was happening in the war in a way official records simply can't. They are full of lovely details that you can't find anywhere else. They bring intimacy and freshness to the historical records, and help you better understand the individual."

But historians of the future will have to rely on blogs, emails, texts and twitter, Petrow says. All are about immediate exchanges of thought. Petrow says hand writing a letter stimulates the brain in ways typing simply does not. "Letter writing forces you to slow down and think about what you want to say," Petrow says. "Just like the slow food movement, we need to slow down in life and think about things more deeply — and express those thoughts in letters."

**Slowing down is something Rushton hopes** to help other parents do in her role as southern regional coordinator at Child Health Association Tasmania. The association just launched a new program run through The Haven, a family drop-in space which is run in partnership with neighbouring St David's Cathedral, in Macquarie St, Hobart. The Snail Mail workshop encourages parents with young children to take a moment out of their busy day to write to someone they care about. All the stationery



ABOVE: Child Health Association Tasmania coordinator Lisa Rushton, centre, and a parent with some young children, at one of the Snail Mail writing workshops at the Haven. LEFT: Rushton likens a handwritten letter to a good pot of tea.

and pens are supplied, and Rushton even offers to post their letters for them. It's a rare opportunity, she says, for busy parents to start and finish a meaningful and creative activity in one sitting. "Life can be hectic," she says. "A lot of our communication is on the go now, like a rapid fire back and forth — the 'ping ping' of an email or text. Letter writing can be therapeutic as we slow down and start to reflect."

And, despite the hectic nature of her own life, juggling work and wrangling three kids, Lisa says she also works really hard at not falling into the trap of being "busy".

"I'm really intentional about not using the word 'busy', not projecting 'busy' with my kids, or with anyone really. I rarely ever feel busy, because we have been really intentional in our family about the pace of our lives, and our family values keep us feeling unbusy most of the time. Hosting a slow communication event at The Haven stems from this desire to be mindful in slowing down, even for people to feel that quietness for just a few moments."

She's also conscious of setting an example to her sons, because she says if she cannot demonstrate different ways to slow down, then how can she expect her kids to do it. They have nights at home where screens are put away and they light lots of candles around the house, sit on the lounge, and read together. Just like that activity, she says letter writing is much more likely to bring people together.

"Letter writing is such a great thing to have in our repertoire of slowing down," Rushton says. Her own stationery stash is stored in a lovely, vintage tin she picked up on shopping. It includes vintage papers and notebooks she's collected over the years as well as a date stamp and decorative tape. She always carries postage stamps in her handbag for impromptu letter writing. This, she says, can be as simple as a brief note to let someone know she's thinking of them and wishing them well.

"I think we still revert back to handwriting when we know it's something important like a wedding or a birthday, but it's the incidental letters about our life in general that perhaps we don't do. Everyone has something in their home that was handwritten by someone they love. Handwritten letters and notes can become treasures that help us feel connected to the person who penned it — even when they are gone."

**Rushton writes more letters** than she receives, and says it's the surprise element of letter writing that she loves. When she's walking home with her five-year-old son Tobias after posting a letter to a friend, she says she feels happy because she knows the joy her letter will bring that person. She knows because she experiences the same feeling when she walks out to the letterbox and sees a handwritten envelope waiting for her. "Because we don't get many pleasant surprises in the mailbox these days, we are not expecting anything special to be waiting for us. So it's such a lovely surprise when we see someone's handwriting that we love on an envelope that's laying there waiting to be read."

Walking inside she'll more often than not make her way to the kitchen and the kettle that's waiting to warm up. She says reading a handwritten letter is as heartwarming as a good pot of tea. "It's like when you make a pot of tea — it's just very different to making a cup of tea with a tea bag. I feel like it's a bit similar with a text message versus a handwritten letter. A tea bag cup of tea is still yummy, it's still good — but it's not the same as choosing the tea, scooping up the leaves, tipping them into the pot, waiting for it to steep, picking up the tea pot and pouring out the tea. It doesn't require a lot more effort, but it can bring real joy and it encourages you to sit for a bit and just stop." ●

The Haven will run a Snail Mail workshop on Thursday, May 23, at 10am