

The power of the pen: Tom Palaima

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The Common Core States Standards Initiative in U.S. education, now being implemented across the country, does not require the teaching of handwriting. Many states have passed measures expressly eliminating the teaching of the skill of cursive writing.

The general reasoning is that other subjects are more important, and people in the future will communicate via key boards and screens. In addition to the unacknowledged socioeconomic problems of reaching this imagined future when everyone has ready access to electronic communication, learning cursive is important for developing an individual identity, artistic hand-motor skills and the analytical processing required to identify standard forms from a range of personal variants.

More than that, this educational reform will make the primary handwritten documents of history inaccessible to all but specialists and will strip us of a key facet of our individuality. Perhaps you think that the reform will not make an iota's difference. I ask you to consider your own lives and what personal handwriting has meant, and still means, to you.

One of my earliest memories -- given credibility by a black-and-white photograph that shows me as a toddler pointing in wonder at the blank, round screen of my parents' first television set, a solid piece of polished, brown wooden furniture much bigger than I was in 1954 -- is of watching "the Captain Penny show. Captain Penny was offering young boys and girls our very own railroad engineer's hat if we would send our names and addresses into the address for WJW Channel 8 shown on the screen.

As in old movies from the 1930s well into the '50s, anything that viewers had to read was kept on the screen for what now seems a very long time. Immigrant Americans and the general population, for whom a high school education was still an achievement no one took for granted, needed ample time to read even simple messages. Nonetheless, for me the time was too short. I had not yet learned to write. I sat with a pencil and pad each day copying the shapes of the next few letters or numbers without knowing what they meant. Whether I eventually got the whole address or my hat as a member of Captain Penny's funny-fun-fun train I do not remember. But I was introduced to the magic of writing by hand and to the importance of knowing how to read, write and use words and numbers.

I hope I am not alone in my fascination. Think of how we value anything written by people to whom we attach importance. Think of what their writing styles tell us about them. Among my memorabilia are autographs from musicians such as Johnny Winter, Pinetop Perkins, Albert Collins, Robert "Junior" Lockwood, Willie Nelson, Richard Jessee, Jimmy LaFave, Mike Flanigin and even a \$20 bill signed by the late, great Clifford Antone, a fond memory of our first lunch together.

Books on my shelves are signed by Tobias Wolff, Charles Neider, Wallace Terry, Joe Paterno, Joe Nick Patoski, Bill Broyles, Chuck Patterson and Paul Woodruff. Their signatures convey strong memories of who they are or were as human beings, and what the books say about their hearts and minds. In Paterno's case, I remember us talking about a mutual friend who was an inspirational high school teacher of JoePa's and later a Jesuit colleague of mine at Fordham University: the Rev. Tom Bermingham, S.J., a truly saintly man, worldly wise. Holding that book in my hands at the height of the Penn State University/Jerry Sandusky scandal that led to Paterno's firing, well . . .

Deeper memories are evoked by my mother's First Communion prayer book from 1928, with a holy card praising her signed by a nun who taught her; by letters from my Uncle Joey written to my mother not long after he fought with the U.S. Marines in the Battle of Iwo Jima; love letters my dad, in the 1st Cavalry, sent to my mom from other areas in the Pacific; and the first Golden Book of Walt Disney's cartoon chipmunks, Chip and Dale. On the inside cover, my name is written in blue ink in my mother's beautiful, looping cursive script. She signed the Golden Book for me about the time I was pointing at our family's first TV set.

Still not convinced that handwriting is a big deal? Imagine a world in which a future Jim Brown or Rocky Colavito cannot sign a football or baseball.

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