

THANK YOU, MR. U

A BELATED THANKSGIVING

Is it ever too late to say thank you? Yes, and no.

Last month the news in Farmington, Maine was all about a first-class postcard recently delivered to Ruth McGary, an 83-year old retired public health worker, now living in Manchester. The postmark on the card with a 1-cent postage stamp revealed it was mailed 64 years ago, in 1946.

At the time, Ruth was a student at the University of Maine. It was sent to her by a couple named Charlie and Gert. She vaguely recalled Charlie was the manager of a little department store in Augusta, where Ruth had worked the summer before, earning wages sufficient to pay for her first semester's tuition. She'd also played trombone in an amateur swing band the couple had put together, performing at local social halls. Apparently, she'd written Charlie and Gert a thank you note, telling them all about her new college adventures. In return, they'd sent her this thank you postcard.

On the front of the card was a drawing of the Catholic church in Winthrop. On the other side was the note, carefully written and addressed in ink pen to a dorm room in Purington Hall that no longer exists, at what was then Farmington State Teachers College (now part of UMW). In part, it read:

Dear Ruth,

Thank you for your card and for remembering us. Glad to hear you're playing again and hope the swing band gets together - let us hear about it. Hope the homework won't interfere. I've been glad to be home and get some work done - there's plenty to do. Glad to hear the food is good. Keep well and regards to your folks. Drive over sometime.

*Sincerely,
Gert & Charlie*

How the postcard remained lost all these years at the local post office remains a mystery. But when the person who now works in the University's mailroom took one look at the historic mail piece that appeared to be in perfect condition, she checked the postmark, then immediately set about tracking down the intended recipient through the alumnae office.

By the time the postcard was finally hand-delivered to her, Ruth said she couldn't recall sending a letter; but she was happy to have finally received the thank-you reply. Now a senior citizen herself, she realizes it's a little too late to send Charlie and Gert a note in return. Her only regret is that the senders never knew if she'd gotten their expression of thanks.

I suppose one could glance at this little human interest story and simply conclude, well, that's the post office for 'ya. But it got me thinking about people in my life for whom a thank you -- however belated -- would be a great thing to do this time of year.

The Thanksgiving holiday is the time of year everyone typically pauses to remember and take inventory of the abundance of blessings, people and things in our lives for which we are grateful. As ironic as it may seem, the less we have, the easier it is to take stock of what remains. Maybe it's that *process-of-elimination* thing? Or, maybe it's a matter of looking beyond what is most obvious and immediate.

This year, when we gather around our Thanksgiving table, I'll invite everyone to remember and offer at least one thing for which they are grateful, as always. But specifically, this time I'll suggest we each recall someone from our past who we have only subsequently come to realize was influential, helpful, formative, and important; and for whom a belated expression of thanks might be appropriate.

After reading the little story about Ruth, Charlie and Gert last month, I got an early start on this idea. I thought of teachers who'd made a positive impression on me, at a time in my young life when it never occurred to me to express any appreciation to those who usually just piled on the homework assignments and demanded excellence. For me, I can still easily remember some pros like Arthur Lessing, Tom Trotter, Jack Coogan, John Cobb and Hans Dieter-Betz. And in high school, there was also Robert Usellis.

When I was in boarding school, it was long enough ago that our teachers were still called Masters, and we were still required to wear a jacket and tie to class. In my junior year I took an American history course with Mr. Usellis.

When it came time for the midterm essay exam, the question was all about early 20th century immigration policies, and their effects on our progress as a country, and the national character. How totally useless and irrelevant could you get, I thought? I'd studied little and knew even less. My essay consisted of one short paragraph containing about three sentences that said next to nothing.

The next day a fuming Master Usellis stormed into the classroom, throwing down the stack of graded exams, yelling at the top of his lungs, "What a bunch of crap!" I can still picture the scene as if it was yesterday. Obviously, its left a vivid impression to remember these many decades later.

Then he randomly picked out just one of those little blue books and read aloud in it's entirety my own very brief answer to the essay question. Thankfully he spared me the embarrassment of disclosing the author's name. Head down, I sank as low in my desk as possible. My face felt flushed.

"Buckle down!" he bellowed. Then class continued, but the day's lesson for me was already completed. I buckled down, and by the time I submitted my final term paper weeks later, my chosen topic was all about the history of immigration reform in America.

At the end of the semester I was summoned to Mr. Usellis' dormitory apartment one evening after supper. With trepidation, I knocked on his door and was ushered in. Standing there, facing him man to man, he shoved my exam book forward in my shaking hands. On the cover I immediately saw the circled "A-" and realized I would pass the course.

He then went on a bit, muttering a few follow-up words of advice about more books and periodicals on the subject which he thought I might find interesting, etc. To be honest, I've never been much of a history buff, or looking back over the well-worn trodden paths of others. But history wasn't the lesson to be learned, of course.

Only afterward did I look again and read the note Mr. Usellis had bothered to write beneath the grade. "Congratulations, John. You are like the prodigal, and I rejoice over your return."

Over the years, it's obvious I can clearly remember that incident that happened so long ago. More than once, I've wondered what ever happened to Mr. U. Someday I really should get around to expressing my appreciation to him for what he did, I've thought. As I've grown older myself, I've come to realize how much it's meant to me when I've received similar gestures from a handful of folks I've been privileged to help in some small and extraordinary way.

So, the story of Ruth, Charlie and Gert got me thinking again about Mr. U, and the belated thank-you I still wanted to send him. I contacted my old school's alumnae office, inquiring if they had any information on a former instructor from 1965! They had nothing.

On my own I then discovered there was someone by the name of Robert Usellis who'd served as the first headmaster of a private high school located on the other side of the country, that started up in the mid-sixties. It was about the time my former history teacher had left Cranbrook. As it turns out – and to my surprise – it turns out the Athenian School is located about ten miles from where I've lived the last 30 years! But alas, they have no record of their Mr. U's whereabouts at this point either.

I searched title records of property owners in the

local bay area counties, to see if I could find anyone with that name, but to no avail. At this point, the trail has gone cold.

Of course, I realize, given the number of years that have elapsed, I have no idea if Mr. Usellis is "grass or sod," as my paternal grandmother liked to say. Though I remember him as a younger teacher in my adolescence, he may well no longer reside at a deliverable address.

Nonetheless, I've decided my efforts have not been for naught. I realize it doesn't matter, and in observance of my Thanksgiving holiday this year, I've gone ahead and written Mr. Usellis my belated Thank You note:

Dear Mr. Usellis,

Thank you for your American history class in 1965. More importantly, thank you for your fury and disappointment; for your hope and high expectations; but mostly, thank you for your eager readiness to rejoice and welcome a prodigal's return. It has served me well, and I am grateful for the brief time you were a part of a young man's journey; and subsequently in my lengthening of days.

Gratefully, and with my best wishes,

*John Bennison,
Cranbrook Class of '66*

I've dropped my note to Mr. U. in the mailbox using the following address: "Address Unknown." I figure it has nearly as good a chance getting delivered as Charlie and Gert's postcard.

In the end, it doesn't matter anyway. The season perennially reminds us, it's better to give than receive. As meaningful as it is to receive an expression of appreciation, it's even more important and meaningful to say thank you. However belated it may be, or whether it ever reaches its intended recipient, it can never be a misdirected gesture.

And among the Thanksgiving leftovers:

In the mid-sixties, at my old boarding school, there could often be heard the sounds of a new British rock group's records blaring from our dorm rooms; just down the hall from Mr. U's apartment.

*There are places I remember
All my life though some have changed
Some forever not for better
Some have gone and some remain
All these places had their moments
With lovers and friends I still can recall
Some are dead and some are living
In my life I've loved them all.*

In My Life, by John Lennon & Paul McCartney

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