

Not Alone at Being Alone

WELCOME

OPENING WORDS

Message in a Bottle by Robert Fulghum

Have you ever put a message in a bottle and thrown it into the sea?

I have. Several times.

In the Gulf of Mexico when I was a teenager.

In the Pacific Ocean off California once in my thirties.

In the Sea of Japan – but I forget exactly when.

In the Colorado River twice in my forties.

And in the Mediterranean Sea when I was 50 years old.

Why? Because I am a romantic at heart and believe in serendipity.

There is a quality of enchantment in a message in a bottle.

Like being in league with magic in a small way.

And also a sign of my basic optimism, I suppose.

All the bottles contained my name and address, and a request that whoever found the message would contact me and tell me where the bottle was found. I even included poetry sometimes, and once, a cartoon.

I liked the idea that some part of me was reaching out to some unknown person walking a beach somewhere, like me – a gesture of “hello” cast into the mysterious possibilities of the human enterprise.

And though I am a serious beach comber, I’ve never found a bottle with a message in it, though I’ve looked, and hoped, and wished.

But, someday . . . somewhere, I will . . .

Alas, I’ve had no response to my own launches.

But I don’t despair – my bottles must still be out there floating around.

And someday . . .

There are records of bottles being found decades after they were launched – thousands of miles away in seas on the other side of the world from where they were launched.

And there are wonderfully romantic stories of couples actually meeting by way of a bottle message, falling in love, and living happily ever after.

It’s estimated that less than 3 per cent of bottles that are launched are ever found. This comes from scientific research into ocean currents studied by dropping various floating devices into the seas of the planet.

The return rate is very low.

Thus the odds of someone finding my messages is extremely small.

Still, the next time I am near the sea, I’ll put another bottle in the water.

CHALICE LIGHTING

As we kindle this flame,
May it spark in each of us
Connection and commitment
To this living tradition
And to each other.

PRELUDE

“All this Time”

READING

Hoping to Hear from a Former Friend

BY MARGARET HASSE

Is it you on the other end of the line
hesitant to speak to me, pausing for a moment
to register my hello so you know my number
stayed the same, my last name remains mine?
Though my voice isn't young as when we last spoke,
don't you hear a familiar timbre?
Still you hesitate so as not to startle me
after all this time. Dots string out like an ellipsis
in the endless sentence of your absence.
I hear static-filled ticking, then
a friendly stranger mispronounces my name.
Recognizing a pitch to sell something
and feeling foolish, I hang up quickly.
Won't you ever break your long silence?
Sorrow and anger keep my line open to you.

SONG

“Canary in a Coal Mine”

MEDITATION

Solitude

BY ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone;
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
But has trouble enough of its own.
Sing, and the hills will answer;

Sigh, it is lost on the air;
The echoes bound to a joyful sound,
But shrink from voicing care.

Rejoice, and men will seek you;
Grieve, and they turn and go;
They want full measure of all your pleasure,
But they do not need your woe.
Be glad, and your friends are many;
Be sad, and you lose them all,—
There are none to decline your nectared wine,
But alone you must drink life's gall.

Feast, and your halls are crowded;
Fast, and the world goes by.
Succeed and give, and it helps you live,
But no man can help you die.
There is room in the halls of pleasure
For a large and lordly train,
But one by one we must all file on
Through the narrow aisles of pain.

INTERLUDE

"When the World is Running Down"

READING

From *A Knack for Finding a Message in a Bottle* by Jason Kessler

Your chances of finding a message in a bottle are about the same as your chances of finding a golden ticket in a Wonka bar. Most people would be astounded to find just one. Clint Buffington has found 40.

The self-styled Message in a Bottle Hunter, Buffington chanced upon his first bottled message while hiking a beach in the Turks and Caicos in 2007. An "intense awareness that something very important was happening" seized him, then he saw an orange paper glinting inside a blue wine bottle.

Fresh off his fourth trip to the island chain, the teacher from Kentucky now has more whale mail than some have snail mail.

His oldest message was cast into the sea about a half-century ago. "Return it to 419 Ocean Boulevard (illegible) and resieve (sic) a reward of \$150 from Tina, owner of Beachcomber," reads the note from the late owner of the Beachcomber Motel in Hampton Beach, New Hampshire. The owner had died, but her daughter, Paula Pierce, was astonished by Buffington's find.

A number of the messages are love notes a la Nicholas Sparks. None is a Sting-style SOS. One, Buffington theorizes, originated in the Pacific and crossed the Panama Canal.

By Buffington's estimate, just one in 300,000 washed-up bottles contains a message. But more than luck led to his findings.

The Turks and Caicos islands are a "flotsam magnet," says Curtis Ebbesmeyer, an oceanographer who studies the movement patterns of ocean debris. "Many different (current) pathways lead there."

Skill played a part, too. Buffington credits his to years of foraging for mushrooms, which trained his eyes to pick up irregularities on the ground.

When Buffington's hunt for a message ends, his hunt for its sender begins. He has tracked down almost half the authors of the messages he's uncorked.

He and Janet Rockware made a pilgrimage to the bridge in New Hope, Pennsylvania, where she'd dropped a bottle into the Delaware River just after her wedding 27 years earlier. (That bottle's Pennsylvania-to-Caribbean journey is especially impressive: New Hope is 50 miles inland.) She'd written that she hoped to retrieve the bottle from the ocean on her honeymoon in Key Largo, Florida.

He traveled to Washington to meet Carol Meyers, who wrote that she was including some wedding cake along with a brief note tossed off North Carolina's Outer Banks in 1999. The "black, crumbly crust" Buffington found on the letter indeed appears to be cake remnants.

He also recently went to North Carolina to meet Phil Freeland, whose late father gave the waves a business card promising its finder \$1 sometime between 1977 and 1980. Buffington declined to collect the bounty, though he did accept a free lunch at a sports bar.

Some messages required a bit of "CSI work" to crack the writer's identity. One at first appeared only to say, "To." After studying it under direct, early morning sunlight, Buffington pieced together a much longer statement.

"To whom it may concern: (halt) I have been taken prisoner by a grumpy old man... Don't know if I can escape next port, please try to contact my mom," followed by an address in Baltimore.

That turned out to be the prank of a teenager on a trans-Atlantic boat trip with his father in the mid-1990s, the jokester's mother explained to Buffington by phone...

The chance to forge more connections with message senders, Buffington says, is the main reason he spends "whole days just walking with my eyes on the ground."

OFFERTORY

"Bring on the Night"

SERMON

Part of me, the ever-curious and inquisitive part, loves the idea of throwing a message-laden bottle into the sea. Will it ever be discovered? Where? Like Robert Fulghum, I love the romantic nature of the gesture—casting my communication into the waves and trusting Fate to deliver it to someone who cares enough to contact me.

The practical side of me thinks—"Just what the ocean needs—more garbage."

But here's the thing—I hate being alone. Some people might enjoy the solitude of the Robinson Crusoe life, but not me. Being marooned by myself sounds like hell. I'm easily bored, and my blindness wouldn't make it easy for me to sit alone on a small tropical island and enjoy the beauty of my surroundings. I'd go insane if my only companions were insects, birds, and the coconuts.

In the movie *Cast Away*, a marooned Tom Hanks invents a friend from a blood-smeared volleyball named Wilson in order to stave off despair. Were I a castaway, like Robinson Crusoe, or Tom Hanks, or Sting's speaker from the hit song "Message in a Bottle," I wouldn't hesitate to scribble a cry for help and hurl it into the sea. Then I'd create a few extra friends in case Wilson pissed me off.

Of course, you don't have to be stranded on a deserted island to be alone. Some of us—perhaps all of us—have at some moments been acutely alone in a group. We've sat by ourselves at parties or in restaurants or in church and seen everyone else smiling

and chatting and sharing news about their grandkids and we couldn't wait for a chance to leave quietly.

And some of us—perhaps all of us—have had moments where we were the smiling people at the party or the restaurant or church. Moments when we haven't noticed the wallflower seven feet away, her eyes scanning for an escape route. I would submit that this is a type of default setting, this inability to notice those around us. If we don't make an effort, these quiet folks will leave the room, and we will lose something. Those lonely people need a connection, the kind that we are enjoying as they sit nearby. They aren't just extras in the movie of our lives, but fully realized characters in their own right, with a story to tell and gifts to offer.

I bring up all of this not as an advertisement for radical hospitality at our coffee hour, though that's a good start. This goes beyond coffee and conversation.

Last fall, I stumbled across an article on the Huffington Post entitled “The Best Way to Save People from Suicide.” I clicked on the link, expecting to find information about anti-bullying initiatives or call centers or a new type of medication. Instead, I found a lengthy article, written by Jason Cherkis, detailing surprising research findings from the 1970s.

According to the article, Jerome Motto, coincidentally a Unitarian Universalist, was a San Francisco-based researcher. He had served in World War II. During his service, he corresponded with a woman named Marilyn Ryan. They had gone on a few dates during his training in Arkansas, but were not romantically serious. In fact, when her first letter arrived, he barely remembered her and wrote back just to keep up the correspondence. However, as the war dragged on—and particularly when Motto's unit was surrounded by Germans at the Battle of the Bulge, these friendly letters filled him with hope. They gave him a reason to keep going. After the war, he studied psychology and medicine, but he never saw Marilyn Ryan again.

During the early years of his medical career, Motto found himself drawn to patients who had attempted suicide. They were treated then—and far too often still are—as outcasts, moral failures, and cowards. They were made to feel alone. Motto remembered Marilyn Ryan and her letters. More importantly, he remembered how they made him feel connected to someone at a time when he had little other reason to hope.

So, the HuffPost article recounts, *in the late '60s, with a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, Motto devised a research project. He would track patients who had been discharged from one of San Francisco's nine psychiatric facilities following a suicide attempt or an extreme bout of suicidal thinking—and he would focus on the ones*

who refused further psychiatric treatment and therefore had no relationship with a doctor. These patients would be randomly divided into two groups. Both would be subject to a rigorous interview about their lives, but the control group would get no further communication after that. The other one—the “contact group”—would receive a series of form letters.

That’s right—form letters. Nothing personal. The first letter a subject received read *It has been some time since you were here at the hospital, and we hope things are going well for you. If you wish to drop us a note we would be glad to hear from you.*

The article continues:

The letters were to be mailed on a set schedule: once a month for the first four months; every two months for the next eight months; every three months for the next four years. In all, the correspondence would include 24 letters, sent over the course of five years, that would vary subtly. Some of the subsequent templates included:

“This is just a note to assure you of our continuing interest in how you are getting along.”

“Just a note to say that we hope things are going well, as we remain interested in your well being. Drop us a line anytime you like.”

“We realize that receiving a letter periodically expressing our interest in how things are going may seem a bit routine. However, we continue to be interested in you and how you are doing. We hope that our brief notes will be one way of expressing this.”

Each letter included a self-addressed envelope, although no stamps were provided. Motto felt that a stamp would feel like pressure, and he didn’t want to demand anything of his subjects.

Eventually, the researchers begin to receive replies. Some were “kiss off letters,” which were brief and usually said something like “I’m fine.” Others asked for prescriptions or assistance. One letter, written by a man who 18 months before had written a “kiss off” letter, began *“You are the most persistent son-of-a-bitch I’ve ever encountered, so you must really be sincere in your interest in me.”* This, Motto recalled later, was exactly the point.

His study found that over the first two years after initial hospitalization, the control group (those who received no letters) was nearly twice as likely to commit suicide as those

who received the letters. Over a 15 year period, even after the letters had decreased in frequency and stopped altogether, the contact group was still less likely to commit suicide.

Being offered a connection—via form letter—people who previously felt invisible could now feel seen. Maybe they weren't just extras. They were not alone at being alone.

Jerome Motto's study made letter recipients feel like someone cared. No one was shaming them or telling them what to do. They were simply being asked how they felt. That's a powerful and meaningful interaction, even on paper. Think about how much impact it can have face to face, especially repeated over time.

While I was reading over Sting's lyrics for this service, I noticed that his "Message in a Bottle" castaway steps outside in the third verse to find one hundred billion answers to his original note. At first, I thought, "Sting, you dumbass, when you wrote this song there were only about four billion people living on Earth." It took me weeks of stewing on this before I realized that if everyone on Earth in 1979 had sent 24 messages to the person in need as Jerome Motto and his team had, well, the math would be pretty close.

I urge you—and perhaps I'm the first person to say this to you—to be a persistent son-of-a-bitch in the pursuit of making the vulnerable feel seen and heard and understood and valued. For every cry of help, send back two dozen lifelines.

We all need someone in our lives to care about how we're feeling. We all need connection. No one wants to drink life's gall with only a half-deflated volleyball for company. Every person in this room, every person in this world, leads a complex life of beauty and pain, joy and sorrow. Comb life's beaches with your eyes open for signs of communication. Return those bottles. Offer connection. Listen. Care.

HYMN

"Message in a Bottle"

CLOSING WORDS

Jason Kessler writes:

Clint Buffington has no "magic advice" for newbie message-in-a-bottle hunters, but there are some general rules he follows.

Forget swimming; instead, find a debris-strewn stretch of beach. Walk slowly, look closely. Tune out the washed-up lightbulbs (they usually outnumber the bottles). Keep walking. And watch for plays of light on glass: Once in a great while, one of those glimmers will be a slip of paper.

