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As I See It

In Defense of Christmas Letters

By Johanna R. Garfield

"Don't you just hate those form letters people send at Christmas?" said my friend Betty, a woman I've long admired for her wit and intelligence. "All that self-congratulatory stuff about them and their families. Ugh!"

I blushed. We were with a large group of friends, and clearly Betty had forgotten that I was annually guilty of just such a letter — though, I like to think, not a self-congratulatory one. More like a brief chronicle of where the five of us are and what we're doing.

I'd heard snide remarks about Christmas letters and "Christmas card friendships" before, but coming from Betty, the remark cut deep. The more I thought about it, the more I concluded that Betty and other Scrooges of the Xmas letter are dead wrong.

For how else could we inform the far-flung relatives and many friends we've made in 25 years together, to say nothing of the ones met separately both before and after?

Some we write or speak to more often, of course. But for many others (the couple we met on our trip to England with the kids, my best friend from high school who now lives in Paris) the end-of-year letter is a highly defensible — though hardly the only — good way to keep in touch with over 100 people.

"Over 100?" say my scoffing critics, as though there was something almost indecent, or at the very least socially promiscuous, about that number. "If you don't communicate with some of them from from one Christmas to the next, how important can they be to you?"

My answer is: important enough. Often, I think people let friendships fade because of the fatal combination of distance plus the busyness of all our lives, not because there is any fatal flaw in the relationship. The Christmas letter is a way of keeping the pathways open, and often the result is a chance to renew the friendship when paths do cross again, or an inspiration to make them cross again.

If it is true that people are basically alike, then I have to guess that my curiosity about how my friends' kids have grown is paralleled by their interest in me and mine.

It used to be that my Christmas letters went only to those far away. But then, having a few left over one December, I sent them to friends and relatives nearby, with "You probably know all this already, but . . ." scrawled on top of the page. I found, to my surprise, that they loved getting them.

"I didn't know Jed was graduating from college next year. How come you didn't tell me before?" said a friend I speak to with some regularity.

So I began enclosing the letters routinely with all my cards. Now if I don't, I find people ask for them.

"Why don't you write in June or September? Why do you have to wait for Christmas?" say some critics of what I not so laughingly refer to as my Annual Report. A perfectly fair comment, and I daresay, in an age of greater leisure and no job, I might have taken quill in hand and bade fair to become the Mme. de Stael of year-round correspondence.

But I don't. In fact, to be honest, not only do I not write during the year, I frequently forget the birthdays and anniversaries.

As to why I wait for such a corny — to say nothing of busy — time of year? There's absolutely no reason, except that I'm a complete sucker for the big holiday.

A final criticism, and one that perhaps has more validity than the others, is that the Christmas letter is impersonal. This could be true, and in fact would be, except that at the end of each I add a personal note — an effort I probably would have neither the time nor energy to make if I was on my umpteenth individual hand-written or hand-typed letter repeating how Cory had changed schools this year, and Clare was switching careers.

Nor am I above enclosing with said letter a photo of our kids, of us, of our house or whatever. (This year I'm considering the cat).

So let's hear the bells chime for the Christmas letter, and for all of us who send them. God bless us, every one, and "Bah" and "Humbug" to our detractors!

Johanna R. Garfield lives in Manhattan. Her first book, "The Life of a Real Girl," will soon be published by St. Martin's.