

# A Letter

by Colin J.S. Thomas, Jr.

Our world has changed. We communicate by e-mail. We seldom write real letters. It is sad. Instead of writing less we should be writing more. Ask the recipient of your letter if they think it was worth your time.

Over the years I have saved letters that meant much. My system of filing is erratic. I constantly find wonderful things while looking for something else.

I recently came across a letter that stirred memories, required reflection. It was a letter to me from my grandson's Head of School. I remembered saving it. I re-read it. I am glad I saved it.

Marshall, my only grandson, had gone off to boarding school thanks to an old man, a retired Virginia lawyer. The old man and my son had met. They fished together. Age had not been a barrier. They had become friends in the true meaning of that word. The boarding school was the old man's boarding school.

The opportunity for that sort of thing was unexpected. We knew only that a scholarship had become available. My grandson was invited to apply. He was accepted. I asked if I might take him there. It was all fine until I had to leave. That was hard. I hoped that he would do well. He was just a boy.

The letter came at the end of Marshall's senior year. At the beginning of his senior year he had been installed as the chair of the school's honor committee. It was a school event. Not something attended by outsiders. But the old man was there. He was there to see the boy installed as he had been installed over fifty years before.

I had, after leaving my grandson off that first time, written a letter to the Head of

School. I explained that Marshall's parents might not always be able to afford things that he needed. I offered to help. I tried to explain that the boy might be inclined to do without rather than to ask. I recall a short note in response, which I discarded.

As I read and re-read the letter I come to appreciate how much it says about a boy becoming a man. With no apology for the personal pride I feel, I publish the letter in part.

"Marshall was not my choice for chair of the honor committee. I did not believe he was the best candidate because he was so very quiet. In the end I bowed to the overwhelming request of the senior class. They chose well.

"Marshall is more than a quiet leader. He is the best chair of the honor committee that I have dealt with in all my years at the school.

"I deal with the chair of the honor committee on a frequent basis. I have come to know Marshall. He is fortunate. You have been a factor in his life. He loves you very much, and from you he has obviously received a wonderful legacy. I feel I must also mention the old man. I know that is how you and Marshall refer to him. The old man was my close friend. We served in the Navy together. To me he was the epitome of life's best and most important values. Integrity, honesty, duty, honor, faith. I was proud to be his pallbearer. That your grandson should also have been a pallbearer says far more than I can say.

"The old man's career as a student at this school is legend. When I first came, there were many of the older teachers who had known the old man as a student. He was superior both as an athlete and in his aca-

demics. But most of those old faculty members talked about his leadership and how he had somehow been able to claim the absolute trust of the faculty as well as the students.

"I write to tell you that the present faculty will remember your grandson. When they are old, they will still speak of the quiet boy who somehow claimed the trust of both faculty and students alike. You and I heard it said at the old man's funeral. The lion is dead—long live the lion. And it is so.

"Marshall in his capacity as chair of the honor committee has just participated in making a very difficult decision regarding honor and the future of a student. His committee was sharply divided. There were very strong feelings. Marshall talked to them. Not so much about the alleged offense, but about values. He talked about both you and the old man. He did not tell them what to do. Theirs was a unanimous decision.

"I have a faculty committee which oversees all honor committee decisions. This particular decision concerned them. It concerned me. We invited the chair to speak. When Marshall was through there were no questions. My committee by unanimous vote concurred with the decision of the honor committee. Had I voted it would still have been unanimous.

"Your grandson is a fine boy, now nearly a man. For a part of his life he had two wonderful mentors. Only one remains. Marshall is not quite a man. I hope you will continue to be a part of his life."

I have tried. ♡