

A Letter-Writing Ministry

by Mariellen O. Gilpin

I have been writing letters to people in institutions for about 20 years. I began by writing to prisoners I met during my regular visits to Illinois prisons. A few years later I became mentally ill, and as part of my recovery I began writing cards and letters of support to mental patients in hospitals and nursing homes. Along the way I have written to a few people who were terminally ill. At times I have had a list of more than a dozen post card recipients, but currently I have four or five people to whom I regularly write letters. Over the years I have developed some guidelines that might be helpful to others engaged in this sort of ministry.

Matters of procedure

I make a regular time to write. I write on Sunday afternoons, while I'm still centered after meeting for worship.

I try to write only about current events in my life. This rule developed because my medications make it hard for me to remember when and what I've written to whom. I try hard not to repeat myself; if I write only about events of the last two days, and if I last wrote seven days ago, I am less likely to say the same thing twice.

Each Sunday, *I work out a basic strategy in one letter*, and then vary it appropriately for the others on my letter list. (It helps that the recipients usually don't know each other!) I vary each week who will receive the first-written letter.

I write every week, whether or not I get an answer. People in institutions need regular evidence that I care for them. When I get a letter back, that's wonderful, and it makes for easier letter writing. But I try to give regular, dependable evidence of my continued friendship.

At this time, my letters to people in institutions are all handwritten. I hope to acquire a word processor and printer soon. When I do, I'll

write one long letter, print it, remodel the text for the next person, print that, and so forth. This will be a great labor-saver and easier for people to read.

What to write about

I write about the real world. People who are institutionalized need to be reminded there is a world that is not punctuated by meals on trays, flying visits from doctors, and four concrete walls. Under the heading of "writing about the real world" come the following strategies.

I share my interest in nature. I often write my letters in the shade of my apple tree and comment on the passing scene: short observations about a bunny psyching out a dog on a leash, a squirrel teasing a cat, the state of the crops in my garden. I poke fun at my efforts to beat back the jungle in my back yard. I write about the sparrow trying to fly off with a cicada as big as itself. Institutionalized people often feel a deep hunger for contact with the natural world; many people I have written to have expressed appreciation for my

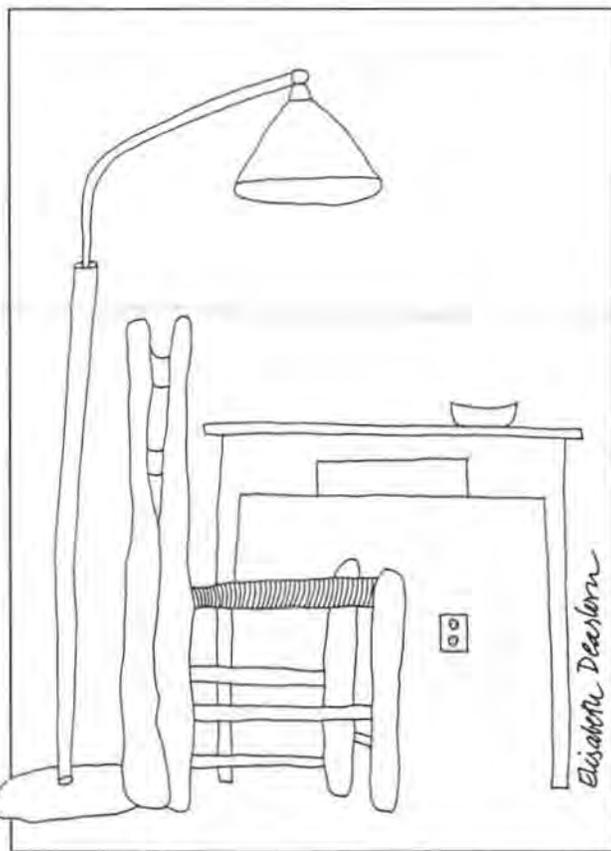
efforts to help them remember about sky, trees, the passing of the seasons.

I tell stories about doing my household tasks. I write about my adventures trying to get the laundry dried outside when rain is forecast. I celebrate when my husband takes the closet doors off so I can get full access to the contents. The process of canning applesauce when it's 94 degrees outside and steamy hot in the kitchen is good for a paragraph or two. I think it's probably letters on such subjects that caused my mother to write to my future in-laws, "Mariellen can make nothing at all sound so interesting."

I write about my own struggle. I am mentally ill; that can be a strength or a weakness as a letter writer. I try very hard not to dump my feelings on people who probably are depressed anyway. On the other hand, if I can write frankly about an issue I'm facing and share my current strategy for coping, perhaps mentioning something the receiver has said that has given me food for thought, I feel that sharing my brokenness can help both of us heal. I ask for support in a form the readers can give: advice from those strong enough to help, prayers from those who are spiritual people, kind thoughts from those who are not.

I share thoughts. I am particularly likely to do this right after meeting for worship. I try to record for the reader what the ministry was about that morning—who spoke, what their background is, what they said as nearly as I can remember, any thoughts I have after reflection on the ministry. I am particularly likely to share ministry if the reader is a Friend, but I think the special blend of the deeply personal experience with the objectivity that can come during Friends worship is a refreshing breeze in a depression-clouded mind. I'm not shy about sharing my own ministry, by the way, but I try hard to give other speakers an equal share of space. People have expressed appreciation, saying these letters left them in a thoughtful mood and better able to cope.

I write about my work. I happen



Mariellen Gilpin is a member of Urbana-Champaign (Ill.) Meeting. She works at the Division of Rehabilitation Education Services, University of Illinois.

to enjoy my work and my office mates. I share the clever repartee over the lunch table, the basic approach I'm using to write for a new grant, the issues I'm trying to address in my work. When I worked in computer-based education, I compared the prisons I visited to the community colleges to the inner-city schools. When I was looking for my new job, I got several good stories out of my various job interviews, one of which involved demonstrating to a roomful of people the proper installation and removal of a condom. Now that I've changed jobs, I write about the people, the new issues, and my efforts to learn a new field.

I tell other people's stories. My brother tells stories to community groups as a hobby. When he tells me his latest gems during a phone conversation, I repeat them line for line in my letters. My husband saves the human interest stories he hears on public radio, and those are good for a line or two.

I try to be personal. I use the reader's name in the body of the letter. I say what I think and ask what he thinks. I ask how things are going on some issue she brought up. I ask him to write and tell me how he is. I reflect back to her what she said and respond to her thoughts and feelings. I tell them I'm praying for them and ask them what they would like me to pray for.

I let people give to me. I tell people my issues and say, "I'd appreciate hearing your thoughts about how I should handle this." When I'm down, I ask for prayers. Even tough guys need to feel they have something to offer, and I have never failed to get some sort of support when I let someone know I am hurting. The point of this is not to look for competent help, although I have gotten very beautiful, caring responses. Partly what I'm doing when I ask for support is trying to bring more real communication into our letters by making the exchange genuinely two-way. People in institutions often need to know that they can still have normal conversations on real subjects with normal people—and even get appreciation for it. It's important to thank those who offer support and really ponder their responses.

I tell people what they need to hear about themselves. When a letter from a mental patient is more cogent and coherent than before, I tell the writer how much better the person seems; a word of encouragement helps people keep on keeping on. When a mental patient wants to take a course in hypnosis, I suggest that he wait a year or two until he's stronger before he learns something that he might

use to sabotage himself. When someone is down on herself, I tell her that God doesn't make junk. When he has just messed up his life royally, I tell him, "If God can forgive me, I know he will forgive you." And always, I tell them that I care for them.

What to do when I'm fresh out of ideas

I keep a collection of prize cartoons. When I am short of things to say, I photocopy a cartoon onto my letter paper. The reader has something to laugh at, and I have less space to try to fill up with words that week.

I haunt card shops. (Now that I'm only semi-employed, I can't afford to buy cards very often.) *Peanuts* cards are pretty reliably positive in tone without being sentimental or too personal. I like to buy cards with no message on the inside, cards with photographs of bunnies, kitties, puppies; once I even got a priceless one of a baby snake coming out of its egg. When I'm short of things to say, I take out a card from my collection, try to imagine what the animal on the cover is thinking, and write about that.

Cardinal rules

I never write while I'm depressed. I may say I have been depressed and what about, but I always say what I did about it.

I never, ever, make negative comments about anybody, whether the reader knows the person or not. If I say something negative about one person, the reader knows I might say something negative about them, too. There's enough negative thinking in institutions already.

When sex becomes an issue

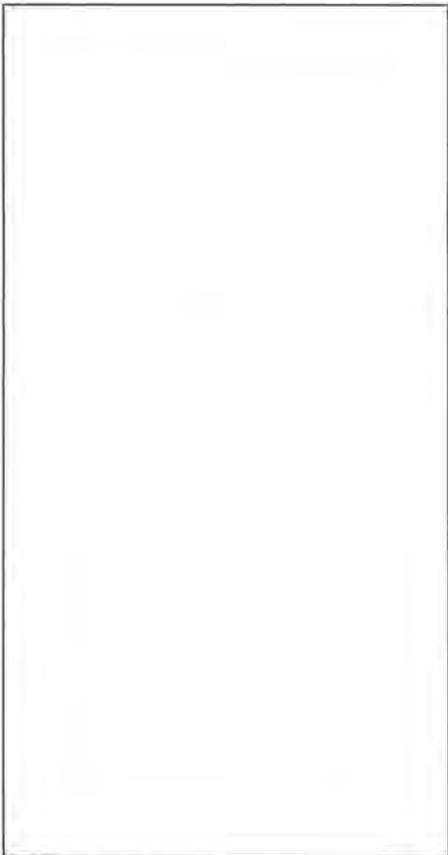
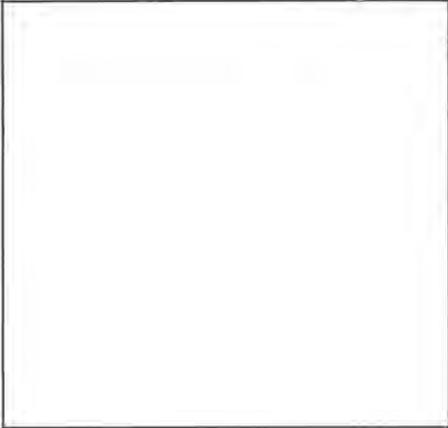
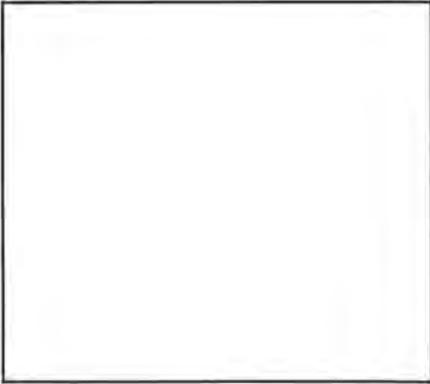
Four out of five prisoners are male, and I expect that four out of five people who write to prisoners are female. Problems arise on a regular basis. Now that I'm in my 50s, people seldom make advances to me. It may be one of the perks of growing older, but I doubt it. Back in the days when prisoners regularly thought they were in love with me, I reflected that people in institutions are lonely and starved for touching. It was often hard for them to tell the difference between my caring for them and my wanting to arouse them sexually. When I got a love letter, I tried to write back in a forthright but kind spirit: "I care. I care a whole lot. But I'm not in love with you. And I'm not up for a relationship just for sex." Then I went on writing to them just as before. Most of them became content just to be friends,

but one rather slimy fellow persisted in writing obscene letters. After many efforts to get the letters onto other subjects, I eventually broke off the correspondence. For other women choosing such a ministry, I have two bits of advice that may help.

I set and maintain the level of discussion. When I was a leader of a self-help group for mental patients, there was a period of about 18 months when everyone in the group was male but me. While I knew that my friends (who ranged from 20 to 65) approved of my sexuality, not one ever made advances, although I often met them one-on-one for coffee or lunch. I have reached this stage of being a human rather than a sex object through the usual process, that is to say, by many trials and errors. I took my responsibility to my friends seriously and never met one alone that I didn't remind myself firmly, "What this guy needs is a friend. He doesn't need me to feel romantic about him."

I'm not sure precisely what I mean by being a friend, although I'm told I send "I'm married" signals loud and clear. When I told them I cared for them, I always said it in a matter-of-fact voice. I didn't like all my men friends equally, but I genuinely liked each of them. I think my caring was a precious commodity they didn't want to tamper with. If someone said something a little suggestive, I'd grin and say, "I think I'll leave that one alone," and move the discussion firmly to my level. I have learned to be in charge of myself, and my men friends respect me. I'm sure my attitude toward sexuality, learned in my self-help group, saves me from having difficult letters to deal with nowadays.

Sexual innuendo can be a problem. Prisoners talk about playing mind games: they needle one another in order to get the mental stimulation their environment denies them. A few prisoners used sexual innuendo to play mind games with me. I first experienced this as a college student working in a men's prison. I was never physically threatened, but a prisoner would politely and consistently try to turn every conversation into a game of double entendre. The technique I developed for dealing with it was to politely, consistently, turn the conversation to the harmless literal meaning of the word in question, responding at length with a straight face. Some prisoners were quick enough to know they were being outfoxed, but each one eventually got frustrated enough to quit the game. I have had occasion in the years since to use the technique in



responding to letters from prisoners. I'm not sure the technique is truly Quakerly, that is to say gently straightforward, but it has worked for me.

When a prisoner gets out

I don't worry about being accosted in my home by a violent ex-felon. I've been told by several sources that the people prisoners write to while they are in prison are not the people they want to spend time with on the outside. Once people get out of an institution, they rapidly become too occupied to write. I offer a transitional support system in the form of continued letters as long as the person seems to want it. Usually within a year it's clear the

person no longer needs friendship in letter form. Shortly, someone tells me of someone else in need of supporting letters.

Basically, my strategy is to help the person in an institution to stay involved with life and with another human being. I try to share hope, my sense of his or her value as a human being, my continued caring for him or her as a person. It sometimes takes a great effort of will to pull myself back from the brink of insanity in order to write to my friend in need. But the process of trying to connect someone else with life has often helped me save myself from hallucinations. In helping someone else deal with their nightmare, I've helped myself conquer my own. □

