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Criticism, contention, and conversation about books that matter.

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July 5, 2012

In Defense of Cursive

Posted by Judith Thurman
As of Independence Day, 2012, forty-five of the fifty United States have adopted the Common Core curriculum in their public elementary schools. Those states are now in the process of phasing out the teaching of cursive writing, which, apparently, does not accord with the mission statement of the curriculum’s framers: to impart skills that are “robust and relevant” to the modern world.

I grew up in the nineteen-fifties, when the art of penmanship was taught to every schoolchild in America, and prized as a sign of cultivation. I loved ruling the blank pages of my copybook, then filling the spaces between the lines with shapely letters—“M” and “W” were my favorite capitals; “j” and “y” my favorite minuscules. If I had not learned to write cursive, I probably never would have learned to read it, and my archival work as a biographer—deciphering the handwritten letters of men and women born in the nineteenth century, or the early decades of the twentieth—would have been extremely arduous, if not impossible. A knowledge of cursive may not be “relevant” to the modern world, but it is essential to a visceral sense of the past, and an ability to examine the literature, correspondence, and history contained in original documents.

I have always admired a beautiful “hand,” and I was reflecting on this catastrophic impending loss to our culture yesterday morning. Every year on the Fourth of July, the Times reprints the Declaration of Independence. This year, it presented a new, high-resolution image of the document taken from an engraving from 1823. I decided to read the original, rather than the accompanying typescript, and it made me curious about the Declaration’s “engrosser,” as such copyists were called in the eighteenth century.

He was, apparently, Timothy Matlack, a New Jersey-born Quaker who moved to Pennsylvania at the age of fourteen, in 1744. Little is known of his education, though he was no humble Bartleby the Scrivener. He became a respected merchant, surveyor, and architect in Philadelphia. He was also a fiery patriot of the radical Whig persuasion; an ardent abolitionist; a delegate to Pennsylvania’s constitutional convention; and a colonel in that commonwealth’s militia, who fought in the battles of Trenton and Princeton. After the Revolution, Matlack was named a trustee of the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the American Philosophical Society. With Benjamin Franklin and others, he founded the Free Quaker Meeting House, in whose graveyard he is buried. (He was also a star prosecution witness at the trial of Benedict Arnold, in 1779, testifying that Arnold had imposed “menial offices” on the “sons of freemen,” including his own son William.)

It is not known how, or definitively even if, Matlack was selected to “engross” the Declaration, though most histories credit him with the job. Using a feather-quill pen with a sharp-pointed nib dipped in iron-gall ink (the same ink that Leonardo had used some four hundred years earlier), Matlack copied the words onto a piece of vellum (fine parchment, i.e. calfskin, prepared for inscription by scraping, wetting, drying, bleaching, stretching, and liming). It is equivalent in size to a double folio page, thirty inches wide by twenty-four inches high—about the same dimensions as a two-page spread of the Gutenberg Bible—and roomy...
enough to accommodate fifty-six signatures and one thousand three hundred and thirty-seven words, just a little longer than this blog post.

Matlack’s elegantly florid penmanship was, ironically, in a patrician style called English round hand. It was also known as Copperpoint; the precision of its lines lent itself to engraving. Several pleasantly archaic-looking modern fonts, including “Declaration Script,” have been inspired by it.

As an English teacher’s daughter who started her career at The New Yorker when the formidable Miss Eleanor Gould was the chief copy editor, I always read with a red pen. Matlack misspelled the word “Brittish” [sic], and he spells the name of his home state with one “n” or with two in different instances, but “Pensylvania” [sic] is, to be fair, the alternate spelling that was used on the Liberty Bell.

The most prominent tic of Matlack’s style, at least to a modern eye, is the ubiquity of capitalized nouns, and not just those alluding to a deity (“God,” “Creator,” “Supreme Judge,” “Providence,” of which there are only four mentions); solemn abstractions (Laws of Nature, sacred Honor, Life, Liberty, Happiness); honorifics (Governor, King, Prince, Citizens); institutions (Military, Government, Legislature) but a passel of common names as well: Facts, Object, Lands, Foreigners, Murders, Laws, Coasts, Boundaries, Records, Cruelty, Object, Savages (as in “merciless Indian Savages”) and many others. And why, in the first sentence—“When in the Course of human events…”—should “course,” (a matter-of-course word if there ever was one) be given this distinction?

Some commentators claim, unpersuasively, that the capitals were, like italics or bold face, there for emphasis. But the most lucid explanation that I could find comes from an article at Slate, by Jon Lackman, published two years ago, which notes the propensity of contemporary Tea Partiers to use anachronistic capitalization as a way of asserting their kinship with the founding fathers. (O.K., Founding Fathers.)

“What the capital-ist Tea Partiers fail to realize,” he points out, is that the actual author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson (who wrote it with the help of John Adams, Roger Sherman, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and James Madison) was extremely frugal with caps when composing his own draft of the document: “life,” “liberty,” “happiness,” and even “god” are lowercase. (Jefferson, one should recall, was a passionate champion of the separation of church and state. He was raised as an Anglican, the established church of colonial Virginia, but he was deeply influenced by Deist philosophy and Unitarianism. When he ran for President, in 1800, he was attacked as a “howling atheist” and an “infidel.” He considered much of the Bible (the bible?) to be “so much untruth, charlatanism, and imposture.” “Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burned, tortured, fined and imprisoned,” he wrote in 1787. “What has been the effect of this coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites; to support roguery and error all over the earth…”)

Lackman is not sure why, exactly, Matlack was so liberal with caps, though he quotes Benjamin Franklin’s hypothesis that scribes like Matlack, who learned to write English prior to 1765, “imitated our Mother Tongue, the German.” It is also possible, he suggests, that weighty majuscules “lent an appearance of power, the patina of age, and the ornamentation due to a grand gesture.” A grand heretical gesture, one could add. And in that spirit of independence from the tyranny of “relevance,” let’s preserve cursive.

*Image from the National Archives and Records Administration.*

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Anyone who loves cursive (or any kind of beautiful, historic, legible handwriting -- Italic is the best) might like to check out my book SCRIPT AND SCRIBBLE: THE RISE AND FALL OF HANDWRITING (2009). I really tried to give the pros and cons equal weight, but ended up coming out strongly on the side of legible handwriting for all -- for more reasons than I have time or space to go into here. It's not that we don't need keyboards. Everybody should be a fast touch-typist too! But the importance of readable handwriting and a distinctive signature should not be minimized.

Posted 7/6/2012, 5:36:42pm by KBFlorey
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45/ states don't teach cursive? I take it the alternative is block letters, the result being blockhead writers? Strange, here in Vancouver BC Canada the teacher of my 7yo just recommended cursive to help him get control of his hand and master the art of writing. Thinking in straight lines, well, the be-boppers like Dizzy Gillespie thought that the concept was just for squares.

Posted 7/6/2012, 4:05:52pm by LaurenceSvirchev
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I will be teaching my children many things they might not get in school... trusting the school system to do all the work would not be wise in this age. I personally practice English Round Hand (now known in this century as Copperplate) Using a copperplate for printing is the only means to mass produce this style of writing. Somehow the name stuck even though it is a hand written script.

Posted 7/6/2012, 3:24:11pm by MrWhales
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From Judith Thurman:

Interesting, lively comments, including the critical ones. Thank you.

A few notes regarding the comparison of cursive to Latin. Latin was a required subject in European and American schools, especially the better ones, millennia after it had ceased to be a spoken language. It was still required in a tough Boston high school, in the nineteen-thirties, where my mother taught it. It was an elective in my vast Queens public high school, thirty years later. I took it for two years, and it really helped with the other romance languages that I learned later. (Typing, by then, was a required course in middle school--for girls only. Boys, it was presumed, would have wives or secretaries to do their typing.)

Even centuries ago, few people outside the Catholic priesthood had use for Latin in their daily lives. But mastering it was a discipline that fostered clear thought and expression; memory; and a knowledge of the nuts and bolts of grammar that carried over into the study of living languages, including English. In 2012, it is certainly vital to teach computer skills and languages
(although by the age of five, most kids I know seem to be more with-it technologically than their college educated parents). But the demand that a subject have an immediate practical application in, say, the job market, suggests a certain myopia towards the ideals of a liberal education. Is comparative literature necessary for most people? Is anthropology? How about poetry? Yet shouldn't students be exposed to them? Many "impractical" subjects help to open and challenge minds, and to endow a young person with the tools necessary for critical, i.e. non-conformist, thinking.

That said, learning cursive at a young age has other immediate and perhaps vital neurological benefits. Early-education specialists understand the crucial importance of eye-hand coordination in forging neural pathways, and for other mind/body functions of a high order. Some anthropologists believe that we evolved as homo sapiens because our ancestors cultivated their manual dexterity when they started making tools, and that the hand literally spoke to, and helped to nurture the brain, not only vice versa. Learning to write mechanically does not give you that benefit. We won't know what we have lost in ceasing to teach cursive until we have lost it--irreparably.

Posted 7/6/2012, 2:57:37pm by NewYorkerWebEdit
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This is hardly a defense of cursive. Ms Thurman does not attempt to build a defense; she chose to obnubilate by going off on an entirely different track to ask about the capitals. It should be noted that Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft of the Declaration and gave to James Adams and Ben Franklin who made revisions. Also, the writing style used in the Declaration is Copperplate; Copperpoint is a style of drawing which uses a stylus with a copper point. I have not used cursive since the 9th grade and my signature is perfectly valid on every contract or legal document I sign.

Posted 7/6/2012, 2:36:15pm by Argol
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This year I transferred from teaching high school English to elementary school gifted education. We wrote letters to Olympic athletes, learned the format of a typed letter, mailed them off, and hoped for return mail (maybe even autographs). I ran into a major issue when it was time to sign their letters. The students did not know how to sign their names! Millions of people have 'made their mark' on history and left their autographs to prove it. Having a signature rather than the 'X' of one who's illiterate seems both robust and relevant! Look out autograph collectors . . . your industry will likely either boom or bust very soon. Our future celebrities will not know how to sign their names, and if they do learn (by having some aged sage teach them) the masses will not know how to read it.

Posted 7/6/2012, 1:51:39pm by MStornello
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Just an historic note: James Madison did not assist in writing the Declaration. He was not a part of the Second Continental Congress, only the Constitutional Convention.

Posted 7/6/2012, 12:04:04pm by declaringindependence
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There is yet another reason to regret the loss of cursive writing in the curriculum. The fluid motions of cursive -- properly taught -- are smoother and less tiring than printing. As a retired special ed teacher, I can vouch for how liberating cursive writing can be for many children with language learning disabilities. There's far less danger of muddling b's and d's and p's and q's as well. Chopping cursive writing is rather like eliminating art and music from the curriculum. The streamlined curriculum may seem more efficient, but the trade-off is a net loss, not a win-win.

Posted 7/6/2012, 11:26:35am by Espla
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Recently I came upon some letters writtn by my Mother - in flowing cursive, written in 1935 - when she was 32 Seeing her
handwriting was (is) moving, as she died ten years later, when I was 12. None were written to me or my brother, then only 6. Our Father died in 1941 - and left no handwritten communications. As much as Mother's cursive hand moves me I come to wonder what evidence of Father's handwriting would reveal. Oddly, we have a record of his voice, from a film - but none of Mother's. Nonetheless, it strikes me that her carefully written cursive script conveys more of her personality than his voice.

**Posted 7/6/2012, 9:43:38am by billshaw**

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Do you suppose the Declaration of Independence would have been hand written if a typewriter was available?

**Posted 7/6/2012, 8:46:40am by gggwww**

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