

Opinion: Holiday cards don't have to be impersonal

By Eric Hoover

Call me Grinch, call me Scrooge. Call me Lord Voldemort of the Yuletide. None could be worse than sending me a holiday card with glossy photographs of your lovely, smiling family.

My wife, Emily, and I place your cards like trophies on our shelves, continuing an old-school practice that began about 175 years ago as a way of maintaining relationships as families and friends moved far and wide. Today's cards may appear more personalized – with photos of spouses, kids and pets, and distribution lists much smaller than a sprawling collection of Facebook friends. But when I flip over the photo cards, as if they were postcards bearing a greeting, I usually find no trace of ink, no original message.

Now that our lives involve sharing an abundance of pictures we once kept to ourselves – snapshots of parties we attended, sunsets watched, meals devoured – it makes sense that photos dominate the paper cards in our mailboxes. But these prefabricated greetings seem as empty as a stocking someone forgot to stuff. Are they meant as warm wishes or self-advertisements?

Six or seven years ago, almost every holiday card Emily and I received included a short handwritten note. Last year, half didn't have a signature. On many, we don't even find our own names. These mass mailings typically don't lend themselves to personalized messages. Everyone gets the same greeting: usually just "Happy holidays," but often accompanied by imperatives such as "dream," "smile" and "laugh out loud." Can't we wish each other well without giving orders?

At the very least, made-to-order card services offer

convenience. "We'll stuff, seal, address and mail your cards for you," the Tiny Prints catalog says. Sorry folks, your sweet cousin might not have even touched the card she sent you.

Remember your uncle's obnoxious Christmas letter in which he bragged about his family's accomplishments? Now this preening happens without a word. Here's our family at the beach in Maui! Oh, and here we are on the slopes at Aspen! Such prosperity.

The purpose of greeting cards has always been ambiguous. Part gift, part commodity is how a 1999 article in the Journal of Material Culture describes them. As Barry Shank explains in the book "A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture," the nation needed a way to keep people close – but not too close. The greeting-card industry flourished, he writes, "in the hothouse atmosphere of a status competition."

Just look at the gorgeous card we got last year: a professional photograph of a couple and their three young children, dressed to the nines. It's affixed to a thick piece of paper with a gold border. Even the font seems smug.

Each year another couple sends us a refrigerator magnet with a picture of their son on it. Were I this youngster's doting uncle, maybe I'd want to see his mischievous face on my freezer each day. Which makes me wonder: Can licking too many envelopes make you delusional?

Two Christmases ago, some old friends took the child-as-holiday-card theme to a new frontier. The back of their homemade card included – surprise! – a sonogram, their first child's first glamour shot. Yes, this glimpse inside our friend's uterus made me feel closer to her. Much too close.

Of course, she was just doing what most of us do online, where a warped intimacy reigns. "Look at me" is the law, and people

post photographs to everyone and nobody in particular. But at least you find evidence of reality on social networks, including pictures of crying, frowning and snot-covered toddlers amid the posed selfies and group shots.

Emily and I aren't blameless in this holiday ritual. Each year we pay an artist a modest fee to draw an image for our holiday cards, based on a scene we dream up. Last year, it was a snowman wearing a Washington Nationals cap. The previous year, it was a sketch of us curled up with our beloved cat while reading a newspaper together. (We're both journalists, you see.) And similar to our friends advertising their beautiful families, we're highlighting how clever and creative we think we are.

Still, for us it's more than that. Emily and I sit down night after night with our pens and blank cards, writing a few messages at a time to the 60-some folks on our mailing list. We don't say anything profound, but we try to convey our affection for friends and relatives, as if we're talking to them and nobody else. Perhaps the key to this ritual isn't what one writes so much as deciding to spend a moment writing anything at all.

We don't have children, so we have free time that others don't. Yet even some of the most harried parents we know manage to spend several hours a week on Facebook, usually posting updates about their kids. Why not log off and spend a few minutes writing something personal?

As a writer, I may attach more importance than most to the act of choosing words for someone else to read. I've got boxes of old cards and letters from family and friends. One especially moving note, written by a dean at my alma mater, was just two sentences.

It might be naive to think it matters whether a card arrives with or without a greeting. But I know how I feel – good and

downright human – when I read someone else’s handwritten words, like the warm note our neighbor Dana sent last Christmas, describing his wish for us to spend more time together in 2013. And you know what? We did.

This season’s cards are starting to trickle in, and most are holding true to form, including one from a family we’ve long known – let’s call them the Davidsons. They placed five photographs of their offspring on a blue background, and the flip side has a dozen three-word commands, including “Thank your mother” and “Try something new.” My favorite: “Write a letter.”

That’s a great idea. I’m going to write a long letter back to them. I’ll include some advice of my own, such as “Drink more eggnog.” Also, “Bring me some figgy pudding.”

I promise to put a picture of myself eating it on next year’s card.

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