



# VERY TRULY YOURS?

When "Love" doesn't feel right  
and "Sincerely" sounds awfully stiff,  
what's the good word?

**BY ROBERT L. COHEN**

Of all the worn, smudged, dog's-eared words in our vocabulary," wrote Aldous Huxley, "'love' is surely the grubbiest, smelliest, slimmest. . . . Lasciviously crooned through hundreds of millions of loud-speakers, it has become an outrage to good taste and decent feeling."

Well, all right, Aldous. But if we are, out of good taste and decent feeling, to steer clear of the overworked *love*, just how are we to end our letters?

I'm not talking about *real* love letters, mind you, or thank-you letters to aunts. These we sign "Love" either because we mean it or because the recipient will be hurt if we don't. Most business letters are equally unproblematic: one sticks to the usual "Sincerely" or even the stilted "Very truly yours" precisely because the *unusual* seems gratuitously risky.

I'm thinking, though, of those communications that are neither drily professional nor conventionally affectionate: a thank-you note for a gift from a would-be lover whose passion we do not quite reciprocate; contrariwise, a birthday card to an object of passion for whom "Love," though sincerely and indeed devoutly meant, might be off-putting; or a vacation postcard to an acquaintance whom we've promised to remember. When "Love" doesn't feel right and "Sincerely" sounds awfully stiff, what's the good word?

Styles in writing change, so correspondents of earlier eras are not of much help. Dickens's Micawber ended his letters with characteristically florid touches. "This is the last communication you will ever receive from the Beggared Outcast" is surely too melodramatic a conclusion, however, for most correspondence.

In other cases, our abandonment of earlier modes of salutation may reflect our egalitarianism. In a letter to Groucho Marx, Bergen Evans, the renowned expert of English usage, describes the phrase "I beg to remain" as "a piece of detritus from the days when a merchant was expected to show his inferiority to his customers." Still, remarks Evans, "I suppose it was an improvement on 'Your humble and obedient servant.' " True to form, Groucho closed his next letter to Evans, "I beg to remain your humble servant."

Our century favors clear, simple lines,



whether in furniture or in prose. In his characteristically limpid, understated style, the essayist E. B. White generally signed his letters with "Yours" or "Yrs," sometimes modified to "Yrs frantically" or "Yrs gratefully."

Variations on this subscription seem to have been favored by many of the world's most notable correspondents. Robert Browning appears to have had at his disposal an unending series of elegant embellishments: "Yours faithfully, Yours ever faithfully, Yours affectionately, Yours most truly and obliged," and so on. George Eliot strikes a simpler, more tender tone with "Ever your affectionate" and "Ever your faithful." Virginia Woolf pares it down to an even more winsome "Yr V.W." or just "Yr V."

My contemporaries in this not very literary age seem, not surprisingly, more at a loss for words. An old girlfriend, asked how she handles the not quite "Love" but more than "Sincerely" situation, replied, "I don't write letters. I call." My sister gets out of the problem with somewhat more integrity. She writes numerous letters but generally avoids *any* formal close, specializing instead in the closing phrase: "See you soon, Enjoy the summer, Gotta run—the baby's crying." And another former flame rather chastened me by reading aloud some of *my* old letters to her, signed, with class and style, "See ya."

For those not wishing—or not clever enough—to evade the issue, the trick is to strike the right tone, and to do so gracefully, unself-consciously. "Warmly" and "Fondly" are warm and fond enough, but they *proclaim* the sentiment in what feels to me a stiff and awkward way. A friend of mine used to sign his letters, "Your friend, Eric," which was straightforward but seemed wooden and artless. John Keats, with the addition of a simple adjective, turned this greeting into something graceful—"Your affectionate friend"—though probably too earnest in style for our cynical times.

We could use more of Keats's earnestness today, for it's hard for men to acknowledge affection for other men, even in writing. Sometimes it's probably better to leave well enough alone. I once foolishly reproached my good friend Ralph, who was sending me regular dispatches from overseas, for signing his letters with "Sincerely," which I thought appropriate only in business letters. Not about to cringe under this rebuke, Ralph applied his impish sense of humor to the problem

at hand, and I was treated, over the next two years, to a score of surreal adverbial closings: "Incongruously, Uncompromisingly, Quixotically," and, of course, "Insincerely." But perhaps Ralph's truest salutation, late in the series, was "Evanescently"; he's no longer in touch.

Political activism sometimes gives rise to distinctive salutations. In the sixties, "Peace" became an all-purpose signature, instantly proclaiming a solidarity in politics and lifestyle between sender and recipient. (Indeed, "In solidarity" is still used by a few of my more political friends—sometimes only half-seriously.) The Fellowship of Reconciliation, a very proper religious group that I used to work for, introduced me to the very proper phrase "In fellowship"; while another activist organization, more casual in style, was partial to "Fraternally," a closing I still use and esteem highly.

And I learned from a female friend who wanted to convey closeness and affection without implying romantic feeling the beautiful Hebrew word *Beeyididut* (pronounced with the accent on the last syllable), which derives from a root that connotes both "friend" and "beloved" and thus means something like "In loving friendship." I think it's a majestic closing and use it only for those I care for and, on some level, cherish.

Perhaps we should feel freer to acknowledge that which we *do* cherish in all our correspondents. I'm not saying that we don't need to suit the word to the person—or, rather, to the relationship; as Peg Bracken reminds us, "Send out a *lovingly* and get back a *sincerely*, and you have a small wound to lick." But expressions of fellowship (or fraternity, or what have you) are surely not overused in the eighties: "Peace, brother" may be passé as a greeting, but both words still reflect admirable sentiments.

Aldous Huxley certainly knew that. For having railed that *love* was "an obscenity which one hesitates to pronounce," Huxley concluded that it yet has to be pronounced, "for, after all, Love is the last word." □

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