

February 10, 2017
(December Letter)

Dear Samantha,

Fran just spent time picking up some appropriate Valentines Cards, selecting photos to go with them, printing the photos, searching for just the right type of stickers for each of our grandkids, writing messages, then decorating the envelopes before sending them off. Along the way, she commented about how much time she spends on the process – and wondering whether the recipients even notice.

It got me thinking about all the time and effort that we have put into figuring out ways to keep in touch with kids and grandkids from across the country for so many years. Fortunately, we have done so in the age of the internet so that the options of phone calls, letters, and visits were drastically expanded.

When you were an infant, we relied on occasional visits, letters, or phone calls to get caught up about your accomplishments and activities. These were very difficult, especially to be included in the many little things that show your progress and make young life so impressive (and warm our hearts so much). These methods were expensive, or relied on your very busy parents, or were heavily filtered by what they remembered, however. Other than being there, we missed the little, but significant things, like the first time you rolled over, sat up, stood up, said someone's name, or took a step.

Even when you got a bit older and could manage to make noises on the phone, this was not something you sought out on your own, so it meant that we might get a grunt or even a “hello” under duress from your parents, but I'm sure it meant little to you – and it didn't give us much of a sense about what you found interesting, challenging, or satisfying.

We were left with a wonderful legacy of those days, however. One day we came home from work and noticed a voice mail had been left for us. It was from you.

“Hi, it's Samantha, I love you” the tiny voice said. Then there was a long pause before you repeated “I love you.” Another pause, and we heard you say to your mother “Where's Fran and Bill?” – before Daegan finally intervenes to explain that the call was from you.

You were clearly unfamiliar with the intricacies of recordings, messages, and voice mail. We were so delighted with the call that I digitized it. If you wish to listen to you, you can do so via:
<http://billreimer.ca/personal/videos/SamOnAnsweringMachine200009.wav>.

In those days, we discovered that the early versions of Microsoft Messenger had a games option that allowed two users to jointly write on a whiteboard, so this opened up a whole new set of options for us. I could use it to start drawing a picture and you or your brothers would then add to it from your end of the conversation. This soon turned into a joint game of Tic-Tac-Toe as you became more proficient in the complexities of the technology and the game. This was a very exciting development to us because the software allowed us to speak with you while the game was under way. This provided an attractive activity for you and an opportunity to chat for us.

Quite soon after that, we graduated to the game of Battleship provided by MSN and when they got it set up for audio and video (which came a bit later) we were able to have a rough form of a Skype-like call on the side. It wasn't like being there, and the quality of the transmissions was not the greatest, but it was a wonderful gift to your grandparents who were desperate for ways to interact with you!

You were a bit older when Skype came along – and no longer interested in playing Battleship with your grandparents – but you were beginning to find the occasional conversation with us to be of interest. As a result, we would periodically hear the Skype signal on our computers when we were working away in our office – at home or at the university. It was always a thrill since it meant that we could find out how you were doing and maybe a bit about how your life was going and how you felt about it.

One of my most memorable encounters of this type occurred during an afternoon when I was working on my own at home. The Skype sound signaled your call and I turned from my work to see what you were up to. It was an afternoon when you were home alone reading a book and had no-one nearby to answer the many questions that always seemed to occur to you.

“What does bewildered mean?” you asked.

“Give me a bit of the context.” I responded as I tried to figure out something to say that would make sense to a 12-year old girl (I think you were about that age).

You spent some time explaining how you were reading a book about the sinking of the Titanic. The ship was going down and the main characters (a young girl and a steward who worked on the ship) were saying goodbye. Just before the girl headed to the lifeboats while the steward turned to his tasks, he leaned down and gave her a kiss – leaving her “bewildered”.

“It means that she didn’t know how to interpret the kiss”, I replied, “She was probably surprised, perhaps pleased, sad at their parting, but generally confused about what it meant about their relationship.”

“Oh”, you replied, and went back to your reading as I went back to my work. For some reason, we both felt comfortable leaving the Skype call open in the background.

About 4 or 5 minutes later, I heard your voice again from across the country. “You know”, you said, “If I could go back in time, I would go to the captain of the ship and tell him to slow down and watch out for icebergs.”

“That would be a great idea” I replied, “You would probably save a lot of lives.” Then turned once again to my work.

A few minutes later, I heard your comment from across your room when you added “And when the ship arrived safely in New York, the captain would probably ask ‘Who was that young girl who warned us about icebergs?’ He would think it strange, because I was wearing pants and young girls didn’t wear pants in those days.”

By that time, it was starting to dawn on me what a wonderful thing this new technology had provided. Here I was in Montréal working in my home-office – and there you were in Victoria curled up on a chair reading a book, and we were able to communicate as if we were across the room. It was a perfect situation for a grandfather since it meant that I could be part of your life as it was unfolding and not hearing about it in an abridged form. In fact, I expect you wouldn’t even have thought about asking me about “bewildered” or telling me the story since it was such a “insignificant” thing from your point of view, but so significant to me!

It was only one of a number of times when we shared such encounters. Most often they were more directed to specific issues that needed information – like plans, phone numbers, and accomplishments – but occasionally they became the hanging-out together type of encounter that gave me so much pleasure.

Thank you, Skype for making it possible!

Love,
Bill