

A SUMMER OF LETTERS

For a few months in the summer when we were sixteen, my best friend Clifford and I wrote letters to each other. I tried to find his letters in my loft yesterday, but since the correspondence was thirty four years ago, they've disappeared. My exercise-book journals from those years still lie in a drawer by my computer. In June 1973 I wrote: *'Finally we decided between ourselves to write letters to each other. It may sound silly, as we see each other almost every day; but we decided that talk is a bit inhibiting and we can say things we really mean in letters. I believe these letters will echo a new lease of life in our friendship.'*

Perhaps our friendship had reached an impasse, five years after we met on our first morning at grammar school. We were two arty schoolboys, from working-class single-parent families in East London. I feel sure that our rather intense friendship helped us to feel less alone, in what might have seemed a hostile environment for teenage boys with creative aspirations. Clifford was the artist and I was the writer. We bolstered each other's faith in our abilities, always showed interest in each other's work, never belittled each other's ambition.

At that stage our friendship held all the dramas of adolescence, as well as its crazy laughter. Clifford had a difficult few years of anxiety and depressive problems, and (while I did my best to help) in hindsight I was often crass and unsupportive in my responses. I think our letters were an attempt to bridge the gap between us, to work out through words (perhaps in a consciously 'literary' way) whether our differences meant a temporary cul-de-sac or a lasting break.

My journal charts the anticipation before each letter, both giving and receiving them. There were no lovers in our lives at that time. Part of this correspondence (of what must have been less than half a dozen letters each) seems to have replicated a romantic correspondence without the romance. About halfway through I apparently wrote *'it would be best if we 'split-up' because he can't be bothered to try and understand me and I feel resentful and crushed by him.'* According to my journal, Clifford was suitably stung and I responded by being suitably contrite.

By the end of that summer, we enjoyed our first holiday in Cornwall away from our mothers: a taste of freedom and adulthood in teenage clothes. One of my journal entries in late July 1973 is a draft of a letter to Clifford, with its shot at a mature conclusion: *'Remember though we are both adolescents...Adolescents tend to be so serious, because they are confused and don't know whether to stay a child or be brave enough to grow into an adult.'* The attempts of a sixteen-year-old philosopher make touching reading at this distance of thirty four years. Perhaps that summer of letters helped us

struggle through to a deeper understanding, helped us develop into the close adult friends we became, until I was with him when he died eighteen years later. If those overblown soul-searching letters helped us achieve that, I'm grateful to them, even though, like Clifford, their words are now part of the air.

An extract from this was originally published in *The Writer's Key: Introducing Creative Solutions for Life* by Gillie Bolton (Jessica Kingsley, London, 2014)

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