

## **Barbara Shelly: Texting away our best manners and memories**

*By Barbara Shelly*

Just for fun, let's speculate on what college basketball coach Frank Haith may have said when he notified his boss by text message that he was quitting his job at the University of Missouri for a presumably better assignment.

Taking job at Tulsa. Check out my news conference coming up in a few.

Or this,

Headed for Tulsa. C U next year in Final Four.  
LOL!

We should accept Haith's word that he tried to contact MU athletic director Mike Alden by telephone the night before to break the news. But even so, a text message is a strange and regrettable way to end a high-profile assignment. It leaves no opportunity to learn or grow, to make amends or even issue recriminations.

It is a clipped, inadequate form of communication, an all-too-common cop-out. I was horrified a few years ago when a friend revealed that a long-distance boyfriend broke up with her via email. Nowadays, the guy may have done the deed by text.

Best we go separate ways. Have a great life.  
Pls mail sweater I left at your place last weekend.

Pithiness is an admirable trait – an art form, even. The wit and creativity that people pack into 140-character Twitter messages is nothing short of inspirational.

But texts, Twitter, Facebook and other popular communication modes are the electronic equivalents of speaking at one another. To speak to another person about something of significance really requires at the very least a telephone call and ideally a face-to-face meeting.

But the phone seems to be going the way of the aerogram. Remember those? Younger people don't even check voice mail. It's best to follow up unanswered telephone calls with – what else? – a text message.

Need to talk to you. Please call ASAP.

With electronic messages, we avoid the burden of looking another person in the eye and receiving a spontaneous response. But those interactions are also opportunities. And they take practice. The ability to fire off a tweet that perfectly captures the moment does not automatically translate into being witty, persuasive or empathetic in a face-to-face encounter.

By communicating in bursts of abbreviated words, absent punctuation and snarky comments, we also put memories at risk.

There was a day, back when long-distance phone calls cost by the minute and email hadn't come along yet, when people actually sat down and put pen to paper. My mother, bless her heart, saved every letter I wrote home, beginning with summer camp at about age 10 and continuing through college and different places where I lived and traveled in my 20s and 30s.

I go through the box every so often. Honestly, I have no recollection of some of the events chronicled in the letters. But they're in my handwriting so I suppose they actually happened.

I was especially prolific the summer when I worked as a server at Nick's Restaurant in Virginia Beach, Va. Two of my fellow waitresses became lifelong friends. Lately we've taken to getting together every summer. After dinner and some wine, I break out my letters. Every year, we find them sidesplitting.

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(continued)*

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What will frame our recollections 30 years from now? A chronicle of links and photos that we posted on Facebook, perhaps. But those tend to be impersonal and often insincere notations, written with the knowledge that all 1,000 of our closest “friends” will have an opportunity to see them. They are not the same as a letter.

As for old text messages, I’m sure our wireless companies and the NSA can unearth them if need be, but for most of us they are fleeting thoughts, hardly a record.

Perhaps we should resolve to practice the arts of conversation and long-form communication, if only for a few minutes each day or week, lest we lose them forever.

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**ABOUT THE WRITER**

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