Writing by Hand

I am sure that among the holiday greetings that came to your house are cards with printed names, some with paste-on computer printed address labels, and a few of those long family news-letters that read like a press release sent out by a public relations firm.

Then there were those which were handwritten—some even in a hardly legible Plymouth Rock scratch. Legible or illegible, those are the most valued, for they came from the hand of the one sending the greeting.

Handwriting, even of the most practiced scribe, has individual characteristics. Students of ancient manuscripts look for and note those particular characteristics when trying to date an ancient manuscript. Even manuscripts written the same way at the same time from the same scriptorium have individual characteristics. No matter how similar the letters, there are always subtle differences in how they are formed and strung together.

How we write is so personal that forgery is almost always detectable. There are strong differences even among those taught to write by the same method.

The individual characteristics of our writing comes from how we are made—physically: our muscles and bones. When skilled cursive handwriting is produced, the differences are registered in what happens in the bones, in the muscles, and in the central nervous system. And to attempt to duplicate that is folly—to the dismay of many convicted felons.

As a student of ancient manuscripts, I was always interested in exactly how a scribe sat when he went about his task, and, in particular, how he held his pen.

In the Louvre is a statue of an Egyptian scribe from about 2400 B. C. The life-like figure is sitting with his legs crossed with a clean sheet of papyrus on his lap. His right hand once held the pen. The hole between his thumb and forefinger is empty now, but once it held a reed pen awaiting the word to write.

I got as close as I dared so as to examine carefully the position of his fingers. Although the reed pen had long since disappeared, there was an opening between his thumb and forefingers where it had been.

It sat lightly on the first joint of the second finger, gently held in place by his thumb and forefinger. His third finger was slightly curved under the first three, and his little finger and the side of his hand rested lightly on the writing material. That, I thought, should be simple enough to imitate. But I couldn't. My fingers were shorter than his. It was physically impossible for me to imitate the manner in which he held his pen.

Even if I could hold the pen exactly as he did, I still could not duplicate his writing, no matter how hard I may try. It would take too many years.

But neither could he imitate my writing—nor I, yours. Rather, our writing, like his, has developed with practice a kind of rhythm. So that when we write, we are not imitating writing. Our muscles do it for us automatically.

We know that some individuals are born with a natural talent for athletics or music for example. But a good back hand, a slam-dunk, or a well-articulated cadenza comes only from practice, so much so that those who are good at it, make it appear easy. Deceptively so.

If we don't know how to do something, we look, think, and then do it—clumsily. But if we are good at it, we just do it, without thinking.

And with writing it is no different. Writing is a very fine, quickly performed activity; it is an automatic gesture which each of us has developed individually through years of practice. It's impossible to imitate. And it is your own.