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Through Letters, a Family History Unveiled

A reporter's seven-year correspondence with his 93-year-old cousin, illustrator Sam Fink, reveals a family's past and the beauty in old-fashioned letter writing

By Bob Davis

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Shortly before Christmas 2002, I received my first letter from Sam Fink. On the envelope, he had drawn an elephant and colored it with orange, yellow, brown and blue crayons. "Good to remember. Happy New Year," he wrote above the address.

The letter was equally charming. He wrote about his son, David, who lived in Israel with a brood of grandchildren and great grandchildren. "When I visit my family in Jerusalem twice a year for a two-week stay, instead of asking about their lives, I share mine," Sam wrote. "In most instances, young people do not know how to share with old people." He signed it, "Your cousin, somehow, once removed, second, or whatever the term...Sam Fink."

That letter marked the start of a seven-year correspondence I have had with Sam, who is a family success story -- a noted illustrator who has drawn popular books about the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. He was my father's first cousin, and though I hadn't seen him more than a dozen times in my life, a family photo my wife had mailed as a holiday card caught his interest and prompted him to write me.

Sam is 93 years old, 35 years older than me, and he has become my tutor. That was his goal in first writing me, I now realize. He wanted me to understand his craft and his family, and to understand mine. I was a willing partner -- a reporter who lives by words and who is full of questions about a family that was once large and close, but has whittled down over time.

The correspondence between Sam and me was typical of one between an elderly man and a younger one: I'd write a two- or three-page letter, he'd answer almost immediately at the same length. Then I'd dawdle for months, until I found time to write again, apologizing for the delay.



Sam holds up one of his drawings.

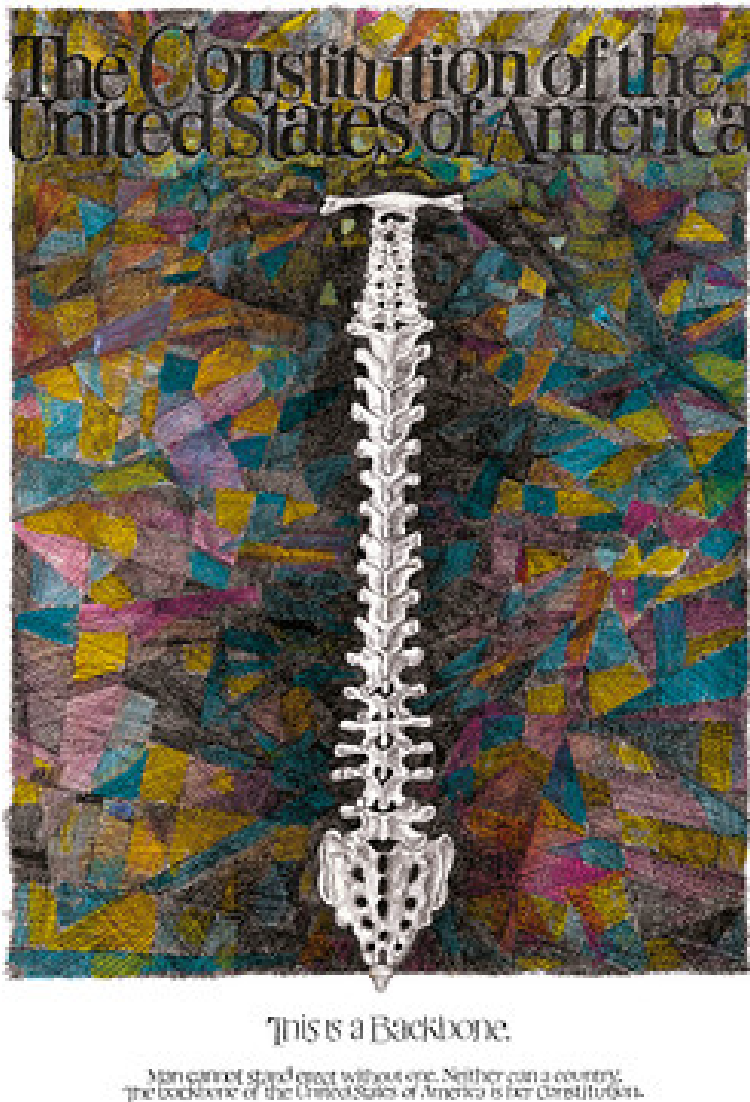
Family was a regular theme in our letters. How did my parents meet, I asked him. Sam's brother and his girlfriend, it turns out, arranged a double date. My father "must have been head over heels" to be willing to commute regularly from the Bronx, where he lived, to my mother's apartment down in Brooklyn, Sam wrote. That was the early-1940s version of a long-distance relationship. Another time, Sam advised me to give my son, who teaches English in China, freedom to wander. He had done the same with his own son, who ended up a scholar of Jewish law in Jerusalem, despite being raised in a secular Long Island home.

A slight man with a memorable nose, Sam wears suspenders to keep his corduroys from slipping down. He lives in a two-bedroom stucco bungalow in a New York suburb known for mansions. Other than cable television and a portable telephone, there's no mark of the electronics revolution in his home. He doesn't have a CD player, DVD player, iPod or computer. His publisher gave him a cellphone, but he leaves it untouched in its charger. He bangs out letters on a 45-year-old Olivetti Lettera 25 manual typewriter that he somehow finds new ribbons for.

This isn't old-fogeyism, but a simplicity that Thoreau might have admired. "There's little grace in email," Sam tells me when I stop by to visit in November. "Part of grace occurs when a letter drops through the slot in the door and you decide how to open it." He says he plans what he'll write in his letters when he goes to bed, then starts typing in the morning. "I love the sound of the clackety clack of a typewriter."

Sam corresponds regularly with about 10 people, including Avin Sharma, a 31-year-old San Francisco lawyer, who started writing regularly to Sam when he was eight years old. Sam had spoken at his elementary school. Mr. Sharma, who hasn't seen him since, says Sam's letters of encouragement are so important to him that he has placed Sam's photo next to ones of his parents and sister.

The envelopes of Sam's letters to me are a gallery of imagination, each one hand-decorated with a martini-swilling parakeet (to toast an article of mine he admired), a turkey made from matzah (to celebrate the coming Passover holiday), a duck with a horn for a bill (to announce the New Year) or a bird flying upside down (for the hell of it).



From "The Constitution of the United States," inscribed and illustrated by Sam Fink. COPYRIGHT © 2006 BY WELCOME ENTERPRISES, INC.

A sense of playfulness and sensuality -- how things feel and sound and look -- infuse his work. Sam sees things others don't. He says it started when he was a child -- he'd imagine that shapes in the corners were dangerous men -- and continues 90 years later. Sitting in a living room chair, he stares at a clump of pillows in his bedroom. From the shape, he picks out a forlorn orangutan who had offered bananas to a lover only to be rejected. "That's why his lips are jutting out," he says. Last month, the pillows looked to him like a fish with two mouths.

But there is also calculation to him. He spent 22 years as an art director at the advertising firm Young & Rubicam before leaving in 1969 to do freelance

design work for Lands' End, among other clients, while he worked on illustrations. Random House published pen-drawn versions of the Constitution and Gettysburg Address he had done in the mid-1980s. In 2002, Scholastic Inc. published a color version of the Declaration of Independence.

It worked in 2005 on Lena Tabori, publisher of Welcome Books in New York, which specializes in illustrated volumes. While Ms. Tabori wasn't interested in an illustrated alphabet he had been pushing, she looked over Sam's other works and says she was knocked out by his earlier volume on the Constitution. She wanted to republish it, this time richly colored. The assignment, at age 89, led to a remarkable burst of creativity, in which Sam published four illustrated books over the following three years on the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, Exodus and a passage from an Annie Dillard book.

"The Constitution of the United States of America" features a whimsical sketch of a human spine to represent the country's backbone. To tie the Gettysburg Address to the aspirations of the founders, he drew tiny figures of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence and had them stand on a quill held by Lincoln. He says the famous documents embody freedom to him, the kind of freedom that let his illiterate grandmother immigrate to the U.S., and helped his family prosper.

Sam wanted me to know about our family. His mother Tillie, who died in 1989 at age 97, was one of six siblings born before 1900. In his retelling, the clan became fantastical characters. Tillie was so determined to keep her ailing mother Betsey from committing suicide that she'd tie a string around her and her mother's arms when they went to bed, so Tillie would know if the old woman stirred. Two of Tillie's brothers were so clueless about their tea-totaling mother's anguish that they'd bring her brandy, which she'd rub into her knees to try to relieve arthritic pain.

I wanted to know about my immediate family, including my grandmother Fannie, Sam's aunt, who died when I was a young child and who I remember most for the lemon meringue pies she fed me. He called her "the prettiest" of

three sisters, who was so fastidious that she was scrubbing the floor of her Bronx apartment when she had a fatal heart attack.



Sam's hand-drawn letters to me.

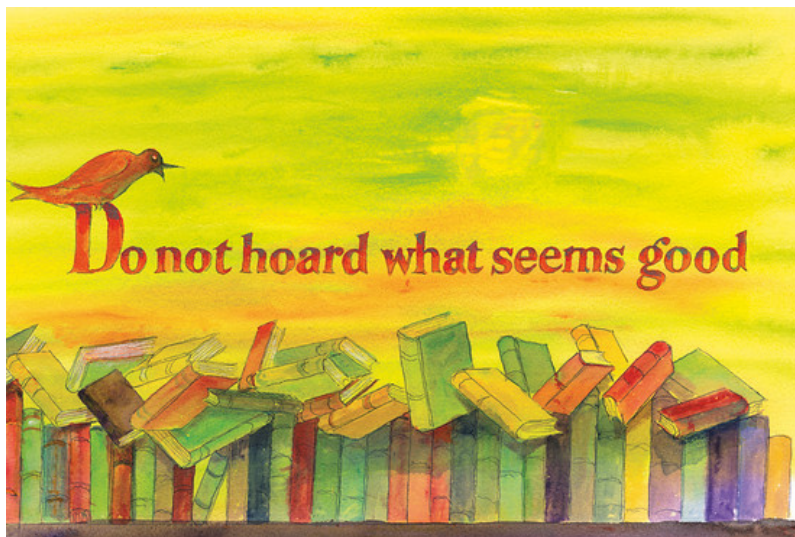
My grandfather, Sam's Uncle Jack, who I remember as a kind-hearted raconteur, was in Sam's memory a rakish asbestos-siding salesman, who headed to the track at midday after making a few sales. Sam's disapproval of my grandfather increased when Jack proposed to Sam's mother, Tillie, after my grandmother Fannie died, even though the two women had been sisters. My grandfather wound up marrying another woman, a rich widow, whose family paid for a handsome apartment in midtown Manhattan.

I also hoped Sam could clear up the mystery of my father, who died in 1998, a man who was both kind and cruel. But on this one, Sam couldn't help. My father reveled in being the neighborhood character with bucks to spare – tossing keys to his Lincoln to my awestruck friends when he couldn't be bothered to park the car. But he also prowled Manhattan after dark, leaving my mother to cover up for him when he didn't come home.

Sam worked in advertising during the "Mad Men" era of hard drinking and groping hands, but it was my father who better fit those times, as Sam knew. My dad owned a small luggage company in Brooklyn and was driven until his death to make a bigger mark. In our letters, Sam described one of my father's ventures to manufacture luxury golf bags. Its failure helped bankrupt him at around age 50 and forced him to leave New York for a job in New Castle, Penn., which he considered to be exile. Sam knew my father the way I did, and we were both mystified by my dad's drive and self-destruction.

"I admired your father's adventurous spirit," he wrote. But ultimately, Sam said, he was a man "who escaped my understanding."

The only relative off limits for discussion was one of Sam's two sons. I had been told years ago that Sam had a son who died young, but I knew little more than that. When I wrote him in 2006 and asked him for details, Sam, who usually answered within a week, stopped writing. For months, I checked news services to see if Sam, then 90, had died. When I eventually telephoned to ask if everything was all right, he thanked me for the call and started writing again. But he never answered my question and I never asked again.



From "Give It All Give It Now," text by Annie Dillard, inscribed and illustrated by Sam Fink. COPYRIGHT © 2007 BY WELCOME ENTERPRISES, INC.

When I finally came up from Washington, D.C., last week to visit Sam, it was as a journalist intent on telling his story. It was the first time we were together since my father's burial in Long Island 11 years earlier. During the seven years of our correspondence, I had called only that one time to see if he was still alive.

Why hadn't I visited during those years? I had moved from New York in the mid 1970s, and during rushed visits back to Long Island, I didn't have much time to carve out a stop at Sam's house. But more than that, I wanted to keep our relationship letters-only. Communicating by mail had a timelessness that appealed to me. I liked the old-fashioned quality of it and didn't want the modern world to intrude. There was a certain excitement to unexpectedly seeing one of his colorful envelopes in my mailbox, and then getting to sit down, letter in hand -- and knowing it had been in his, too -- and enter Sam's mind.

Sam's small home unraveled the mystery of his late son. It is rich in detail about Mace, who had Sam's artistic flair and outgoing personality. On one wall is a detailed mosaic Mace did for Mother's Day many years ago. (Sam was married to his wife, Adelle, who was as down-to-earth as he was fanciful, for 44 years before she died in 1985.) On a shelf are trophies Mace won for swimming and baseball. In person, Sam had no reticence in telling me that Mace had fallen ill while hitchhiking through Mexico and died in 1962, at age 20. Sam was at his bedside. "The wound never heals," Sam said.

As he looks ahead, at 93, Sam tells me he isn't sure what to do next. His most recent book, published in 2008, illustrates a paragraph in Annie Dillard's book "The Writing Life," which exhorts would-be writers not to hold back: "Give it all. Give it now," a phrase that could be Sam's motto. But the book is bittersweet for him. It has the playfulness of earlier works -- he uses illustrations of pencils as trees, fish gills, lances and bridges. But it lacks finely detailed imagery, a concession to the shakiness of Sam's hand which he can't control as he once could.

Sam is far from quitting, though. His eighth great-grandchild, Mordechai, was born recently and Sam has promised to hand-letter a birth certificate,

which he plans to turn into a story of the child's birth. He still heads to his brightly-lit basement to stare at an old head of garlic that he keeps on his artist's table. When he holds up the garlic, and turns it around, he says he can see a bird's shape sprouting from the cloves. He's made some early sketches in his journal. More drawings may be on the way.

As I get ready to leave, Sam hands me a striking illustration he had done of a pen, the symbol of writing, which binds us together. I tell him I hope we'll keep writing letters to each other. "I am pretty sure we will," he says. There are many other stories to tell.

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