



Birthday Cards

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

I've never sent birthday cards—none, not ever. The practice is no more than a card industry ploy to get people to purchase expensive pieces of paper. At least that's part of my rationale. But then I never made cupcakes or birthday cakes either. In fact, son Carlton has threatened to write a tell-all book titled "Growing up Without Cupcakes."

Back to birthday cards. This morning, however, I read in the Sunday paper a heart-warming story about a woman who sends out more than five thousand hand-made birthday cards each year, the vast majority to entire strangers. Beth Catlin, age 59, resides in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. For thirty-eight years she has worked full-time for Wilson Pollock where she does piece work, most recently placing labels on rakes. "Beth is a very conscientious worker," according to a supervisor. "She likes to see [her hard work] reflected in the numbers on her weekly paycheck."

When I think of assembly-line piece work, I'm reminded of the old "I Love Lucy" TV show. Lucy and Ethel are working on a fast conveyor belt in a chocolate factory. To keep up, they end up eating half the product. That's the funny side of piece work. Too often, however, women and children are forced to work long hours with few breaks just to keep up with those unforgiving numbers—numbers that show their measly earnings.

For Beth, however, the job is perfect. Numbers mean everything. Barely a toddler, she was discovered to be developmentally disabled. Her condition is similar to what Dustin Hoffman profoundly portrayed in "Rain Man." She is a "numbers" savant, a form of autism.

She began making and sending cards when she was twelve and has never looked back. When she was recently visited by Ronnie Palaneczky, a reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer, the encounter was interesting. "Hi Beth," he said shaking her hand. "I'm Ronnie.

It's wonderful to finally meet you." The response: "Ronnie, July 3."

I ask myself: If I were only 59 and I had put enough energy into it, might I have been able to memorize 5,000 names and birthdays? Not a chance. But that's not all. Beth has memorized all the addresses as well.

We might imagine Beth was excited to meet Ronnie and talk about her astonishing memory. But personal interaction with others is simply not part of Beth's emotional make-up. Palaneczky makes that clear:

Beth's gift has come at a cost. She has never mastered simple tasks such as grocery shopping, household chores or social relationships, and she

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hasn't the capacity to be reasoned with about some simple things, such as where to put a dish towel when she's finished using it.

Beth lives moment to moment, moving through life without any apparent emotional connection to any of the things, past or present, that give life obvious meaning to many of us.

But Beth does have her own pleasures—pleasures entirely related to numbers. When her own birthday arrives on September 22, the mailbox is overflowing with cards, some no doubt having arrived early, others belated. It makes no difference. It's the date and the number of cards that counts. So many arrive every September, her mother tells, that her face "glows with excitement."

Despite her disabilities, she has found her own comfortable abode in an incomprehensible world by sending birthday cards. In some instances, her card is the only one people get on their special day—often anticipated days ahead.

Tender mercies for all who receive her cards, but mostly tender mercies for Beth who dutifully tallies and files all cards sent and received in that orderly cabinet of her seriously disordered mind. □

—Ruth Tucker