One Day I'll Be a Man of Whole Words

by Erik_Deckers

I want to be a man of letters.Being a man of letters is a distinction of prestige and learning. It conveys the image of the book-filled study, picture of one's self with historic and notable figures, and one's own letterhead.To be a man of letters, one must have achieved a certain level of fame and notoriety with the written word. Plus, one must refer to himself in the third person.I figure that with my very small level of fame and notoriety, I'm at best a man of grunts and vague gestures.And before you ask, no, a woman cannot be a man of letters. She is a woman of letters. Both are equally cool. Also, there is no such thing as a "person of letters." Don't subject the title to political correctness.I was recently having coffee with fellow humor writer Dick Wolfsie (man of pictographs). He told me a story about how he met humor patriarch Art Buchwald when he (Dick) was in college. He finagled an invitation to Art's office to share some of his own work, and showed up with anarmload of columns.Unfortunately, another meeting interrupted Dick's, so he had to leave after just a few short minutes. Before Dick left, however, Art called, "Hey kid, wait a minute!" and threw Dick his football jersey. Sorry, that's the Mean Joe Greene Coke commercial from the 1970s.What actually happened is that Art grabbed one of Dick's columns and wrote on it, "Wolfsie, stay out of my racket-Art Buchwald." The memory of those few fleeting moments has stayed with Dick ever since.Recently, when Dick learned that his hero was dying of kidney failure, he wrote a column about this meeting, and sent a couple copies to Art.A few weeks later, Dick was surprised to receive the columns back, both with clever messages on them. One said "Anyone who writes a column about me can't be all bad." The other, "Thanks for the column. Now I can die happy."Art also included a typed note on his own letterhead that said "To Dick Wolfsie: I'm glad you went straight. I figured you'd be sticking up 7-11s.-Art Buchwald."When Dick told me this story, I had two thoughts. First, "Wow, Art Buchwald has his own letterhead!" Second, "I can't believe Big-Time Columnist Dick Wolfsie made me buy my own coffee." Then I remembered I showed up early and bought it before he got there, so I can't reallycomplain.After my own meeting with Dick, which I had also finagled an invitation to, I began thinking about what it means to be a man of letters.For one thing, it means you get your own letterhead, because you're a respected institution. A veritable literary force who should no longer burden himself with the mundanity of retyping his return address at the top of every letter, note, and missive he fires off. No, a true man ofletters pays someone else to print that return address up there for him.Another perk of being a man of letters is that he has the privilege, nay the responsibility, of writing humorous, pithy notes to politicians, VIPs, and fellow writers. Every note he writes is expected to be funny just by virtue of the sender. People wonder if they have somehowoffended the man of letters if has not rewarded them with a joke or two in a hand-scribbled note.Unfortunately, most of us writers haven't earned that reputation. We still have to put ;-) in our emails to show when we've made a joke, and even then, the other person still won't get it.Meanwhile, someone like Art Buchwald can type out a clever 16-word note and its rumblings are felt throughout the humor world. Let's face it, Dick's story wouldn't be nearly as cool if he had just written "Thanks, that was very kind" on a plain piece of paper.But most of all, being a man of letters means you're so well-respected that you're still hearing about the impact you've had on other people's lives, even if it was only a very brief encounter 40 years later. It means people come to you for advice, feedback, and just maybe, a small sign of approval from the old master to his eager young apprentice.If nothing else, stories like this add to Art Buchwald's reputation as our modern-day man of letters, because it reminds us of what a treasure we'll miss one day. I know it certainly made an impression on me, and it leads me to one inescapable conclusion.I'll bet Art Buchwald bought coffee for his fellow writers.

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