

Life is like a box of chocolates – you never know what you're gonna get

By Sabine Townshend

This phrase from Forrest Gump comes to my mind when I think of my penpalship with Peter.

Before taking up a penpalship I had started to read the book “Welcome to Hell – Letters and Writings from Death Row”. I was deeply touched and impressed by the depth of feelings and thoughts conveyed by men who were known to come from the bottom of society, were often poorly educated and still: some had obtained a state of mind while being on Death Row that deserves to be called “enlightened”.

So with this concept in mind I set out on my adventure of writing to a Death Row Inmate.

The piece of chocolate that I got from the box was rather different.

Peter's writing is very simple, his sentences are short, his vocabulary is limited. He uses no punctuation marks whatsoever, which made it initially very hard for me to follow his meaning. I found that I can manage when I imagine him to speak rather than write. So far he has related very little about how he feels or what he thinks and though I had not yet asked, he made it clear in his second letter that he did not want to talk about his crime, because “it brings back the nightmares”. He confessed to watching TV incessantly all day long from the moment he wakes up until he tries to go to sleep at night – a habit numbing mind and emotions I should think. He has been on DR in Florida for over 25 years and was locked up 24/7 in solitary confinement.

The first and last paragraph of his letters are always identical and over the months this ritual reminded me of a prayer. Like the Lord's Prayer, which has been repeated over the centuries word by word so many times by so many mouths and yet each time you can put your heart into it.

As for me, writing to Peter has become an important part of my life. This might not be expected, given how I have described his writing. But I look forward to his letters very much, reread them many times and always reply to them within a few days if not right away. His writing may be simple, but parts of it are very touching, all the more because of their simplicity. I am moved by his attentive references to my letters, I perceive it as holding on to the life that is reaching him as ink on paper through our exchange.

To achieve adjusting to someone so different and finding a way of communicating with each other is a task I find very gratifying. I admire his strength of heart to survive in such circumstances. Thinking of his ordeal puts even my graver problems and dealing with them into perspective. Also, I have never appreciated before now how full of liberties and small pleasures even a working day is. To reach out to him, to offer and find friendship and comfort has enriched my life and widened my world.

So with my chocolate I have discovered an unexpected taste, but one that I have become very fond of.

(Peter is a fictitious name chosen to protect the privacy of my penpal)