

BUSINESS

Danger of e-mail: There's no way to get it back

The subject line of an e-mail message I received today reads as follows, and I quote: "You Are a Worthless Piece of %!@#"

On the first day of school in ninth grade, I started going steady with a boy named Jim Selbach. He was tall, blond, and skinny, with a bowl haircut and eyeteeth that were slightly crooked. He was perfect.

Gwen Schertel

Guest columnist

He was also soon-to-be famous, for he was the first freshman in the history of Deerfield Beach High School to make the varsity basketball team.

He was everything a high-school freshman girl could possibly want in a boyfriend. Everything, that is, until basketball season officially started and he rose from ninth-grade oblivion into the consciousness (and car) of one Kathy Herrera, junior cheerleader extraordinaire.

I was terribly hurt for exactly two days. On Day Three I got angry, pulled out my purple pen, and wrote the nastiest letter I could muster. Jim Selbach was now a scrawny, egotistical, buck-toothed Little Dutch Boy, and he was going to know about it. I stuffed my letter into an envelope, slapped on a stamp, and marched myself the two blocks to the near-

est mailbox.

I can still remember the feeling of satisfaction I experienced when I flung my letter inside and heard it drop to the bottom of the box. On the way home, however, I began to feel guilty. Maybe I had gone a little overboard. After all, he did wait until the day after Christmas to dump me. By the time I made it home, I had that sick feeling in my stomach that you get when you know you've stooped to a level that you're not proud of. So back to the mailbox I went and waited until the mailman arrived to empty the box at 1:37 p.m.

"It's a federal offense," he explained, "to give you mail out of the box once it's dropped."

"Oh, mister," I said in my best ninth-grade drama club voice, "haven't you ever wished you could take something back right after you did it?"

Thanks to second thoughts and a compassionate mailman, Jim Selbach never did get that letter. But what if I was in the ninth grade today, and it was Day Three? Forget the purple pen, the envelope, and the stamp! I would have marched myself to my computer, logged online, and composed the nastiest e-mail I could muster. And quite possibly the subject line would have been, "You Are a Worthless Piece of %!@#."

And then with the same feeling

of satisfaction, I'd have taken my mouse, pointed to the "Send" button, and with a single click, shot that literary masterpiece right on over to Jim Selbach's house.

But wait. Herein lies the major difference between my mode of correspondence in 1975 and that of today. Once I send that e-mail, there's no turning back. There's no room for second thoughts, no chance of a compassionate e-mailman arriving at his appointed time to help me take it back. With that thought in mind, I opened the e-mail with the nasty subject line.

I would surely like to share the content of this message, but there are not enough symbols on the keyboard to stand for the expletives that followed. However, I was able to glean that this e-mail was the (very) angry response of a (I use this term loosely) gentleman who was fed up with receiving junk e-mail from a certain company whose e-mail address was remarkably similar to mine.

I decided to reply to his message, taking the high road. "Mike: Since my company has never engaged in the practice of sending junk e-mail, I assume that in your haste to let your feelings be known, you typed in an incorrect address."

In less than one minute, I received the following response: "Please forgive my inappropriate tone and foul language. I have been

inundated with junk mail and was completely fed up when I sent that e-mail. I regretted it the minute I sent it. I am so sorry."

Without telling him about Jim Selbach, I sent the following reply: "I understand."

And I do. Who among us does not understand the desire to lash out when hurt, angry, or betrayed? But the finality of that "Send" button makes lashing out by e-mail a dangerous proposition. Sure, there are a few seconds after sending an e-mail that the "Cancel" button can be clicked. But that's it — only a few seconds. After that critical moment, there is no way to undo what has been done.

To prevent this scenario from happening to our clients, we make sure to point out that there is a "Send Later" option on most, if not all, e-mail programs. But I have a much healthier suggestion. The next time you get ready to send a really nasty letter, pull out your favorite pen, let 'er rip on paper, stuff it in an envelope, slap on a stamp, and walk to a mailbox at least two blocks away. And then if you still need to, hope for a compassionate mailman.

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