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Connecting with the Christmas Card
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Have you ever wondered why we send Christmas cards? In the midst of our frantic Christmas preparations -- decorating the tree, buying presents, planning Christmas dinner, and traveling -- we try to find time to send cards to people we don't correspond with all year. And if we don't receive cards from other people, we feel let down. We do this not just this year, but every year. Why? What's the point? What meaning do Christmas cards convey?

In Religious Studies, we call this repetitive kind of activity a ritual. Rituals are activities, often religious, repeated on a regular basis and which often are so familiar that we do them without thinking. While some rituals are quite complex, most of them share one purpose. That purpose is to affirm the connection, the relationship, between the performer and the target recipient.

Think about the ritual of the Eucharist or Communion. The object of the ritual, in part, is to renew a connection between the worshipper and God. Another example is prayer, which links an individual to God. Or take the weekly ritual of "Sharing the Peace." This activity literally connects people through touch, usually by a handshake.

The basic form of a Christmas card is a card with a signature. Upon receipt, it conveys nothing more than the connection between the sender and the receiver. It says to the sender, "I remember our relationship," or perhaps a bit more, "I remember our relationship, do you?" It asks the receiver, in the present, to recall the events that formed the basis of the relationship in the past. The card indicates nothing about the future and only one thing about the present, namely, that the sender remembers the past when the relationship was established.

These days, nearly all of us receive cards with a photocopied "Christmas letter" inside, and many of us have sent them. Despite its commonness, the Christmas letter is often viewed with disdain and even dislike. At first thought, there seems to be no reason for this. After all, the letter "improves" the

card. It provides information about what the senders (and usually their families) did during the previous year. It updates the recipient on the sender's well-being. Rather than simply indicating the remembrance of the relationship's past events, the letter aims to bring the recipient up to the present. In this way, the sender indicates that the relationship is not simply in the past, but continues to this moment.

So why is the Christmas letter so often disparaged? One reason is that its general character makes it impersonal. It is written for all the recipients as a group, and not for individual receivers. Thus, rather than an intimate note of connection, the letter sends the message of "I'm too busy to write personally to you, so here's a copy of what I sent to everyone." It updates the connection, but it does so by refusing the intimacy upon which the relationship was established.

This message is then reinforced by the letter's content, which typically concerns the senders and their relationships with other people. Only rarely is the recipient mentioned in the letter, and even when this happens, the recipient is described in the third person, rather than the second person. Thus the recipients receive letters in which their connection with the sender is discussed as if they are not in the conversation.

Finally, the letter's information gets in the way of the card's message of connection and recollection of the relationship. Like the static that interferes with hearing a radio station, the letter generates noise that interferes with the recipients understanding they are still liked or loved by the senders who still enjoy recalling the events of the relationship.

So should people stop sending me Christmas letters? No. I enjoy learning what my friends and family have been doing. I just have to work a bit not to let the letter's format get in the way of my hearing the meaning of connection intended by the sender.