

JUST BECAUSE



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Pen and paper give weight to serious issues in society

BLESSED are the letter writers for they have made this world a better place.

In this age of Twitter, "sms-ing", Facebook and email, the humbled piece of parchment with an envelope wrapped around it and a little stamp lovingly licked onto the top corner is under threat — but like the book, it still has a power all of its own.

If a member of parliament gets ten letters on a subject they know that there is a live issue to which they must pay attention. It means there are hundreds who feel the same way but haven't been able to get pen to paper.

It still holds sway over the click of a mouse.

For a number of years I belonged to an extraordinary local Amnesty International letter-writing group.

This organisation drew on the power of the pen, encouraging ordinary citizens to write to leaders around the world.

In particular members spoke out against torture, the death penalty and the wrongful imprisonment of prisoners of conscience.

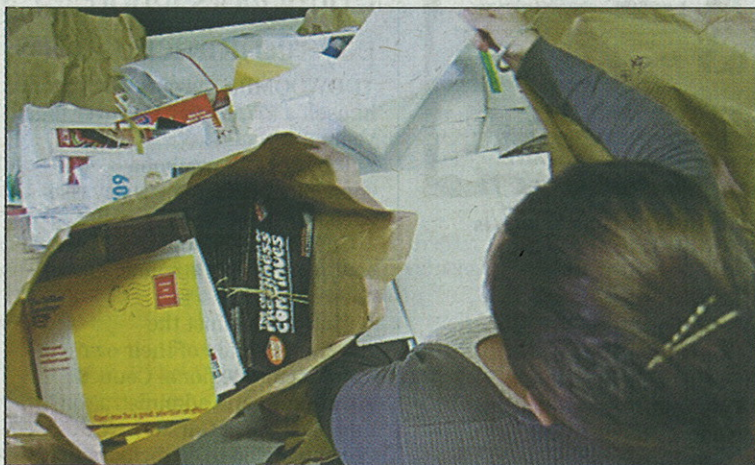
And the group to which I belonged — simply did that — we wrote letters.

Does this work — or is it just a feel-good session for the letter writers?

Well my local parish priest certainly thinks it works.

In the 1980s Father Jack Peard lived and worked in Chile.

He bravely stood up against torture and "disappearances"



In the age of emails, receiving or writing a letter is a rare event.

PICTURE: AAP IMAGE

which were all too frequent under the dictatorship of Pinochet.

For his troubles Jack was himself locked up and endured brutal punishment.

A group of Amnesty letter writers in a Toowoomba Catholic secondary school wrote to the Chilean government on behalf of Jack.

To this day he credits the efforts of people like these young students for keeping him alive.

The Pinochet regime knew that they were being watched and this ensured that Jack did not meet with an "accident" like other priests of his time.

My neighbourhood letter-writing group was almost entirely made up of women — all with one occupation — nurses.

Many people have inspired me in my life, but when it comes to letter writers the person who is top of the tree is Dorothy Campin.

Dorothy joined our group in her late 80s.

She would write with passion and with purpose.

Her anger at the capacity of humanity to be cruel to their fellow human beings was palpable.

But it didn't stop there.

Her passion extended to the environment.

Often she picked up the pen or dug into her pockets and campaigned for a better world.

She wrote letters on behalf of the flora and fauna that call the Murray Darling river system their home.

She spoke out about nuclear

weapons maintaining that she had witnessed the British testing atomic weapons off the Western Australian coast in the 1950s.

And Dorothy knew just a little bit about life.

Hailing from Western Australia she had joined the army as a nurse in 1941.

She was there for the fall of Singapore and was part of the evacuation on the Empire Star in February of 1942.

This ship was attacked by countless Japanese bombers and despite loss of life miraculously made it to Batavia.

Dorothy survived to provide care as a nurse in a range of very trying situations.

She worked in the outback in Kalgoorlie and Witenoom where she met her husband.

She worked as a matron in hospitals in Perth through to the 1980s.

For more than the past decade Dorothy has called Toowoomba home. She is now in her last days and continues to live each moment with a twinkle in her eye.

When she finally meets her maker I am sure she will find in heaven a book filled with letters of gratitude. The forests, animals, fish and birds will have their gratefulness recorded in this book, along with those who survived murderous regimes due to Dorothy's writings.

The pen is mightier than the sword and blessed are the letter writers.