

Letter to Bernard Levin, The Times



This is a letter I wrote to Bernard Levin at a distraught time in my life – simply because I admired his journalism and I wanted someone to know my feelings.

Dear Mr Levin,

I rang your secretary twice last Friday to be told you preferred to receive a letter. I shall give you a brief 'curriculum vitae' before getting down to the 'nitty-gritty'. I am twenty five, born 13th July 1954 to wealthy country gentlefolk in the Cotswolds. From Cothill Preparatory School I went to Eton, gaining 14 'O' levels, 3 'A' levels and 2 'S' levels. From there I went to Christ Church, Oxford. At Oxford I am afraid I spent most of my time either on the golf course or at various social functions in London.

Unfortunately this behaviour didn't cut much ice with the academic authorities and after one year and two terms among the lovely spires I retired. I then took a 50p per hour job as a dishwasher at a London club before accepting my first 'real job' offer, which was with a re-insurance firm, Greig Fester. I survived that for one and a half years before wanderlust struck. I earned some hard cash during that year (1977) before setting off to New York and points south. My route was, briefly : New York, Atlanta, Houston, Yucatan, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama and Bogota.

I spent five months travelling overland through Colombia,

Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil – including three weeks chugging along the rive gauche of the Amazon – and returning to Colombia. Eventually I returned to New York in July 1978 and then to London. I was still searching for some concrete direction. I wrote to Intermediate Technology Ltd., then took a job at Habitat, King's Road, until Christmas 1978 before setting off overland at the end of January 1979 towards Nepal. I must have been one of the last few travellers to follow that well-worn path, but fate smiled gently. Turkey was foul (and fowl) – a veritable Midnight Express but my two days passing through Iran were memorable. Most Iranians, I feel, are honest, caring people . I crossed into Afghanistan at the beginning of March. What a relief it was to reach Herat and meet the proud and strong Afghans.



Climbing above Gulmarg, Jammu and Kashmir

From Kabul I set off again through Pakistan and even went skiing for three or four days, climbing up above Gulmarg, an old hill station near Srinigar. Finally I reached the dreamy Kathmandu at the beginning of April. Here I joined a trek organised by Edward Montagu, consisting of nine Europeans and twenty seven porters and sherpas. The scenery was spectacular

and the mountain people enchanting.



Trekking in Nepal

A three week walk in the Jugal Himal took us up one valley, across a ridge and down the Indrawati valley. I then travelled on round India for two months – receiving a lot of bad ‘vibes’, through Iran to Turkey, Greece, Italy and London. I returned home on 1st July 1979. At this stage I was hoping to set myself up on a smallholding in Southern England after gaining at least one year’s experience on someone else’s land. However, I never seemed to have the necessary dedication or money (£3,000 per acre) – so the farming idea was shelved.

I was considering opening a restaurant until, during a round of golf with a friend, the idea of ‘frozen foods’ developed.

My partner and I started experimenting with recipes and how well they turned out when cooked etc.. Early attempts were tasted and enthused over by my friends and I am convinced that the company MANGE 2 FOODS Ltd., will be a success. Half my company’s profits will go to charities after the initial year.

Virtually all my ingredients are organically grown; we do four soups, three or four mousses and about six entrées, not to mention the biggest seller yet – heart-shaped salmon fishcakes.

It was on 17th December 1979 that my life suddenly changed. I was delivering the first of my MANGE 2 products (with a free 'backsheesh' home-baked wholemeal loaf) to some friends and saw a girl there whom I hadn't seen for years. It was love at first sight and the light of our Lord was shining through Cha's eyes. Suddenly my outlook on life was changed from a mild pessimism to an inspired confidence and faith. Our great friend in the sky took over my life completely in all its aspects. It had all been a question of giving ; if you give so shall you receive. All my life He had been grooming me for this time and I have the spirit and emotion to do His will on earth; and believe me I am most honoured.

Christmas slipped by – at Elsenham on the Eve, then hitching on Christmas Day back to London – I then rang a friend, Kim Beddall and spent the evening and night of Christmas Day there. Kind people ...



Mary Rose at Vale do Lobo, Algarve 1974

On Sunday evening 5th January 1980 (having finished the golf

competition at Rye), I planted out about five hundred bulbs in the garden of Mary Rose's Belgravia maisonette, then boated, trained and taxied up to Klosters in Switzerland. I was due to stay for two weeks. The snow was perfect and we had some great times.

Mary Rose is a girl of twenty two, radiantly beautiful and full of giving and love. I lived, on and off, with her for three years until quite suddenly she became engaged to Greville Howard, and the day she married at her uncle's house (Beaulieu), I was skiing at 18,750 feet in Bolivia. Now back in Klosters ... I was staying in a little room lent to me by a fabulous family called the Fatorinis as there was no room in our family flat. I did, however, sometimes take my lunch and dinner in with the rest of the family. Now my sister Carole started behaving irrationally towards me, eventually throwing a glass at me (it missed) and accusing me of talking nonsense to her children (aged eight and seven).

She has these depressed fits sometimes, but not usually so violently . Anyway, I decided to leave her in peace by cutting short my holiday, and on Saturday 12th January I told my brother-in-law that I was leaving Klosters. I stayed around until the 14th, which is Kitten's (another elder sister) birthday and then hitched off towards home, going by train most of the way to Paris. In Paris I saw some great friends and enjoyed la bonne vie, but something told me I ought to be getting back to London.

I arrived back on Thursday 18th January at 7a.m. off the boat train and collected my 1966 Morris Minor Convertible from its menders, then polished it up and started preparing to cook some of my dishes for sale when at 10.30a.m. Georgie Chichester rang to say, " Mary Rose is dying ". She says little else. Mary Rose was knocked unconscious whilst out riding (never her favourite sport) on the frosty ground on 12th January 1980 – the same day that I had declared my intention of leaving Switzerland – and had been in a coma

ever since. Her husband Greville and her mother and father stayed at her side throughout. On that Thursday morning I broke down to a physical and mental heap on my kitchen floor for some time before going out walking. I try to enter churches but they are locked. The sixth, in Clapham, is open, but the builders have perched their coffee mugs on the altar – so I go screaming on Clapham Common to pull the adorable Mary Rose through. In the evening Georgie rings again to say that Mary Rose's heart is beating more strongly and that she has passed urine. So back I go to Clapham Common and scream for miracles. I offered to help in any way, but Georgie said, " Pray from where you are ".

On Friday, ignoring Georgie's advice, I drove my Morris down to Lymington and appeared at noon at the family house. Mary Rose is still living, contrary to what a friend had told me that morning, " Oh, she died – didn't you hear ? ". I had taken down six of my heart-shaped salmon fishcakes and we moved across the Beaulieu Heath to their granny's house, and just before lunch Lady Chichester rings to say, " ... it is finished ". I share their grief for some five hours before returning to London.

On Saturday I rose early again and drove down to Heathrow to meet Cha Weychan off a flight from Bulgaria; marvellous but she arrived on a plane that didn't exist. All the same I met some good people working in the Terminal 2 Coffee Bar. Cha rang later, which was much appreciated. That afternoon I made more bread and went off to dine with friends in Bucharest Road, SW18. They offered to give me a bed for the night, and I accepted, but I could not sleep ... or rather, God did not want me to sleep, so I left quietly at midnight, lighting a candle in their spare room, and returned to my home in Altenburg Gardens.

Minnow, one of my housemates asks, " Where on earth are you going ? ". " West. ", I replied. So I packed all that I might need for a couple of days on the road, put my feet into

my Adidas trainers (60,000 miles and still going strong) and lit one more candle at my house and another in the ashtray of the Morris. We are off again, following our fortunes, doing His will on earth. First nature call stop was at Heston at about 2.30a.m. where I picked up two Welsh hitch-hikers who had been standing there between four and five hours. What a charitable nation we are. I tell them I'm not sure where we are going, but Bristol seems a possibility. Avebury, let's go to Avebury – so we pull in at Membury Services (which seems incidentally to operate as a pick-up joint for the call girl market in those early hours). I saw a man with a friendly face and asked him, “ Excuse me, could you help ? I'm going to Avebury “. “ Oh, I live there. Got a seventeenth century cottage right in the village “. He directs me to Avebury, where we stop to listen, to touch the stones, to feel the brilliant stars. There was real power and the moles were pushing up their pyramids as we walked around. Avebury church was dream-like; its stained-glass windows sentinels of salvation.

So, from the dolmens and monoliths (these people understood nature as much if not more than we do today), the Morris drove us quickly through Bath and to Bristol central. Ritchie (one of my hikers) knew a splendid midnight cafe where we had coffee and breakfast. A man with a limp came up to me and said, “ Excuse me, can I help you at all ? “. I asked where was the best hospital for serious accidents ? “. “ Oh, just across the road from here, the Bristol Royal Infirmary. “ There I acquired my first taste of hospital inquiry desks : Mary Rose wasn't there, but we discovered where she was. The time was now 7.45a.m. on a Sunday morning, and I clambered up Sion Hill, Clifton to the Camera Obscura, and for me that was the most spectacular dawn ever . Flocks of birds were floating along the Avon Gorge and the frost was thawing slowly. It was obvious what my mission was ... to say to Mary Rose, “ Arise and walk “ . I rang up Cha Weychan's mother and went round to be fed coffee and a great rap we had too.

At about 10 o'clock Wanda Weychan took me up to Frenchay Hospital up in North Bristol. I was then at the last gate, telling the fat man behind the Frenchay Hospital inquiry desk my story. It was obviously not his responsibility so he passed the proverbial buck to a Dr. Briggs, who was in the ward carrying out post-mortems on a Sunday " because there was such a backlog ... we've had a lot of experience here with death and I can assure you that we are acting in your best interests ... ". The clinico-scientifico anti emotion syndrome.

Wanda, a veritable saint, drove me back to Clifton. As we said goodbye and as the sun was so hot on that amazing morning, down came the Morris's soft top. My candle still burns in the gusty conditions and snuffs out on Sion Hill between the obelisk and the church where they queue to hear the man preach.

Yours sincerely,

Jamie Summers

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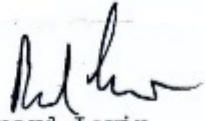
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6th February 1980

Dear Mr. Summers,

Thank you for your letter and
this account. I offer you my
sympathy.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Bernard Levin', written in a cursive style.

Bernard Levin

J. Summers Esq.,
London SW11.