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A Message in a Bottle

When I was a boy in Florida, I put notes in bottles and threw the bottles out into the canal that flowed behind our house. It took me several weeks to collect enough bottles—a few dozen—and to carefully pencil the notes in my little boy's printing, asking questions about the person who found the bottle. Who are you? How old are you? Where do you live? How did you find this bottle with my note in it? Eventually, the bottles were ready, and I threw them as far as I could out into the swift current in the middle of the canal, hoping that they would drift from there to the intracoastal waterway and then into the blue Atlantic. For several days, bottles washed up on the beaches near my house, and I would throw them out again, and at last no more bottles floated back. Gradually, I forgot about the bottles and went on growing up. Only sometimes I would suddenly wonder where they had all drifted. I imagined them bobbing in the sparkling waves, under high, tropical clouds, moving slowly toward their far destinations—toward someone. It must have been three years later that I got a letter—in Portuguese—from the Azores. Included was my original, handwritten bottle note, with all of my questions carefully answered. We found someone to translate the answers and the letter, from Manuel, who had found my bottle as he walked on the island beach one sunny morning far across the Atlantic. Thirty-five years later, I have lost Manuel's letter, but I still have the envelope it came in, and I can't bring myself to throw it away.

I am looking at Manuel's envelope now, the paper faded to beige, the brown and blue Portuguese stamps, the date 1960, the return address in beautiful blue script: Vila de Baixo, Lajes Flores, Azores. Somewhere behind this letter to me, there was a person—a writer. I wonder who he was.

Is a book so different from a message in a bottle? Or from a personal letter? Or from a good talk, in which you look someone in the eye? A book may look like an object, but it doesn't feel to the spirit like an object. A book feels more like a voice, vibrant and seeking. Behind the pages, we sense the eyes of the author. There is an individual behind each book, a human being. Some person is writing to me,