

## Letters to Change the World

### Project Explanation

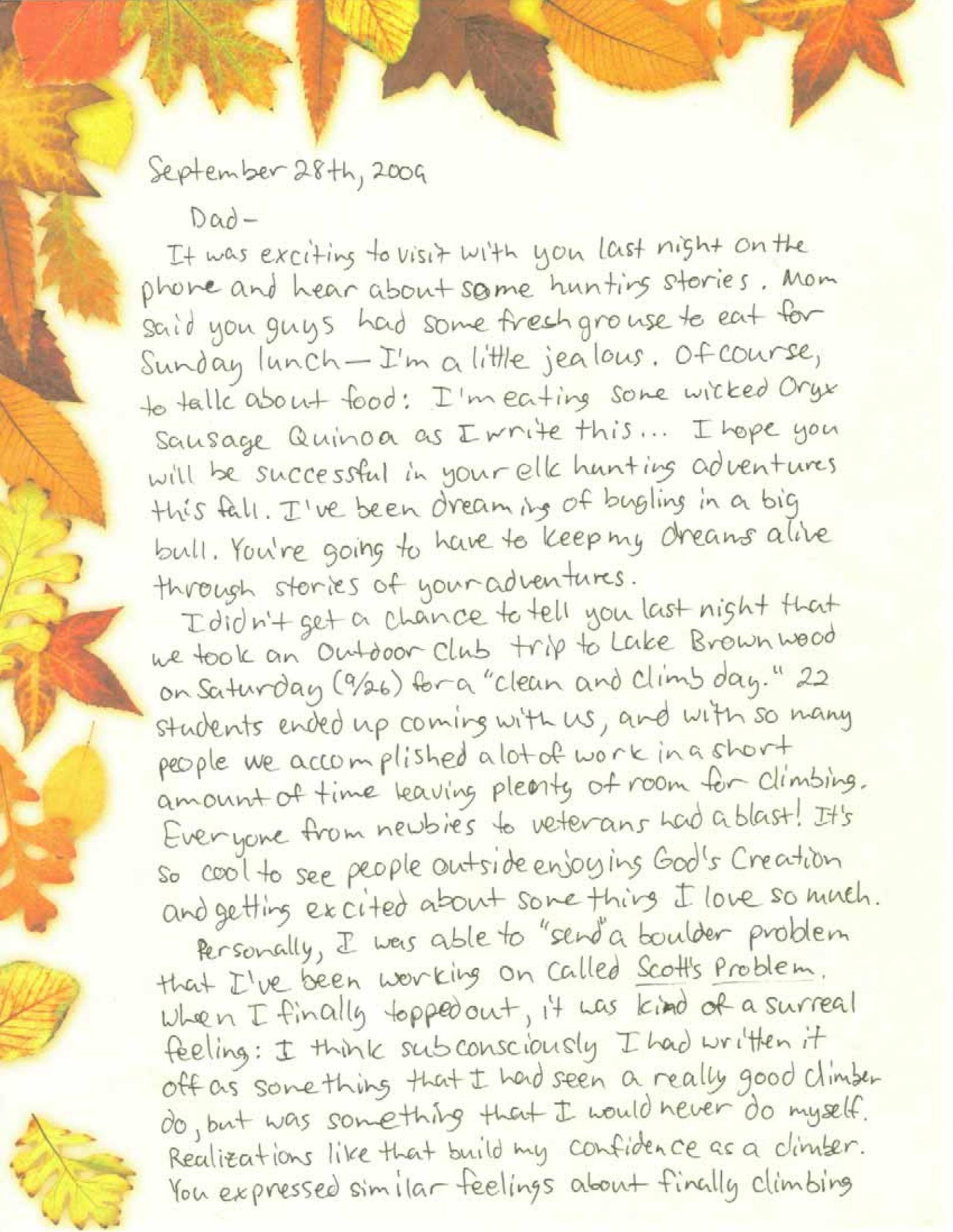
There is something powerful in the written word...the hand-written word. We live in a culture enamored with the ability to send information wherever and whenever by typing messages on our computers or even our phones. Therefore it seems to demand something to take the time to sit down and write out a thoughtful letter to a friend or a family member. (Especially since my hand is so out of shape!) In a sense, I hope my cramped hand will act as a sort of penance of all the careless forms of communication I have used over the years.

I was struck by the thoughtfulness of JRR Tolkien as I read through his letters during this colloquium. Whether it was to a colleague, a close friend, his son, or a critic he took the time to be precise and considerate with what he wrote. I attended a class on the theology of CS Lewis last semester and was also amazed at the time he spent in correspondence with various friends and fans through letters. It evidently absorbed an enormous amount of his time.

Both Tolkien's and Lewis' examples has been the inspiration for my final Artifact assigned in our "Road Goes Ever On" colloquium. I intend to write several letters to various friends and family members (I have to start there since I don't currently have any fans or critics). In order to make it more like writing letters in the era of Tolkien and Lewis I will write the letters by hand, revise them, and then rewrite them on more professional looking stationery. My hope is to begin correspondences that will continue beyond the end of this project and lead me to a life of sending letters.

I would also like to point out some specific intentions I have for the content of these letters. Many times in the past I have fired off quick emails to the same family and friends targeted in this particular project without any real thought and effort put into them. They don't contain much information other than what the weather is like in Abilene or my plans for the upcoming weekend. Although these emails are important and technology in this way has allowed us to be in frequent contact with those we might otherwise not, I feel as though I can put deeper subjects in a letter. To preview a few of the letters to follow, I plan on asking some life advice from my dad, sharing thoughts on a presentation from Summit with my sister, and some anxiety for the future with my mom. As I said earlier, a goal of mine is to continue these correspondences and if I am going to spend the time to write letters I want their content to be as fulfilling as the action of writing.

I realize that the world will not be drastically changed by me writing letters to people as my title might suggest. However, I hope and pray that it will make a difference in other people's lives in addition to helping me express myself better and have more concern for the people around me. There is a Chinese proverb that goes, "A single spark can start a prairie fire." Maybe an individual writing letters will be a spark that inspires others to also seek to deepen their relationships with each other.



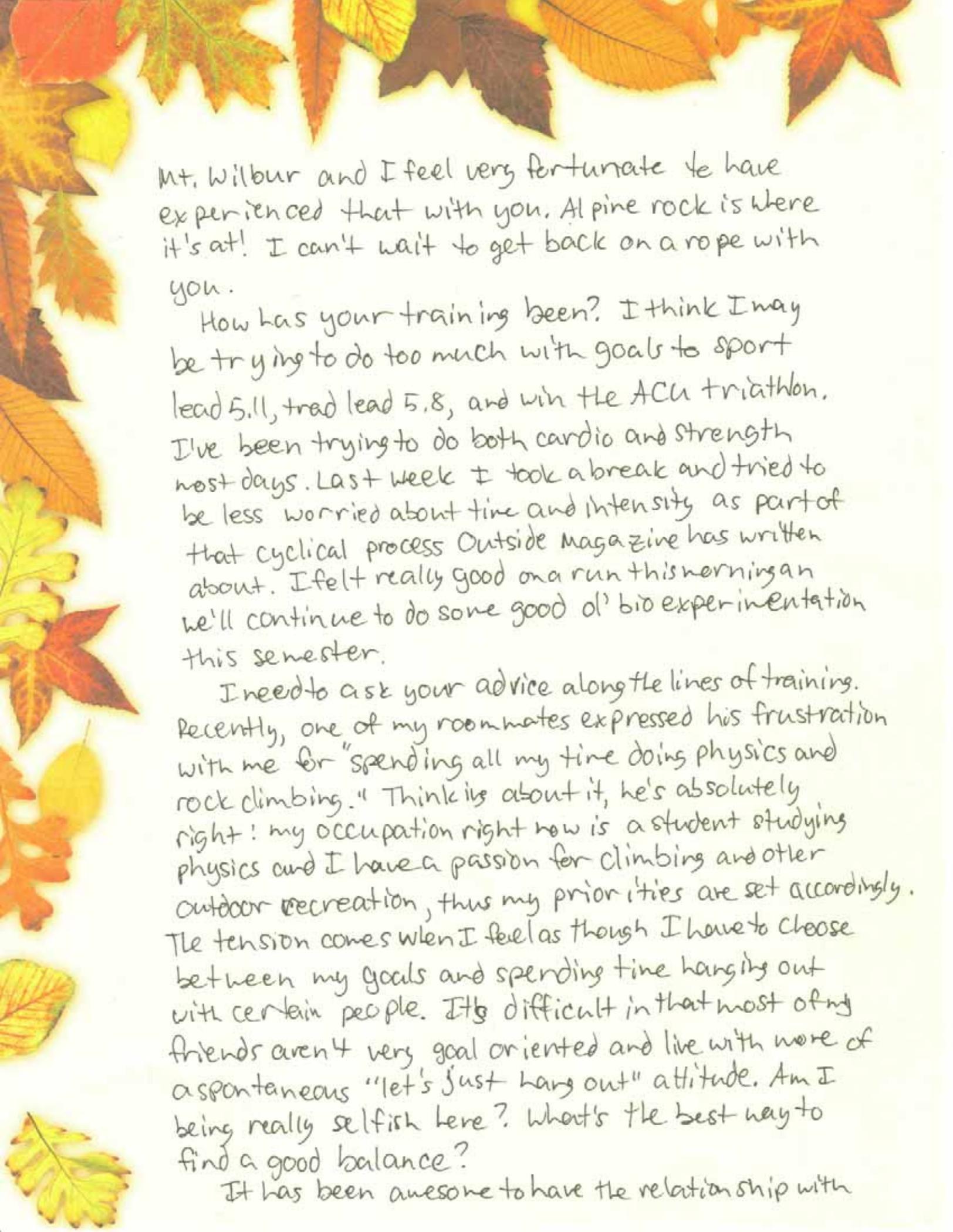
September 28th, 2009

Dad-

It was exciting to visit with you last night on the phone and hear about some hunting stories. Mom said you guys had some fresh grouse to eat for Sunday lunch—I'm a little jealous. Of course, to talk about food: I'm eating some wicked Oryx Sausage Quinoa as I write this... I hope you will be successful in your elk hunting adventures this fall. I've been dreaming of bugling in a big bull. You're going to have to keep my dreams alive through stories of your adventures.

I didn't get a chance to tell you last night that we took an Outdoor Club trip to Lake Brownwood on Saturday (9/26) for a "clean and climb day." 22 students ended up coming with us, and with so many people we accomplished a lot of work in a short amount of time leaving plenty of room for climbing. Everyone from newbies to veterans had a blast! It's so cool to see people outside enjoying God's Creation and getting excited about something I love so much.

Personally, I was able to "send" a boulder problem that I've been working on called Scott's Problem. When I finally topped out, it was kind of a surreal feeling: I think subconsciously I had written it off as something that I had seen a really good climber do, but was something that I would never do myself. Realizations like that build my confidence as a climber. You expressed similar feelings about finally climbing

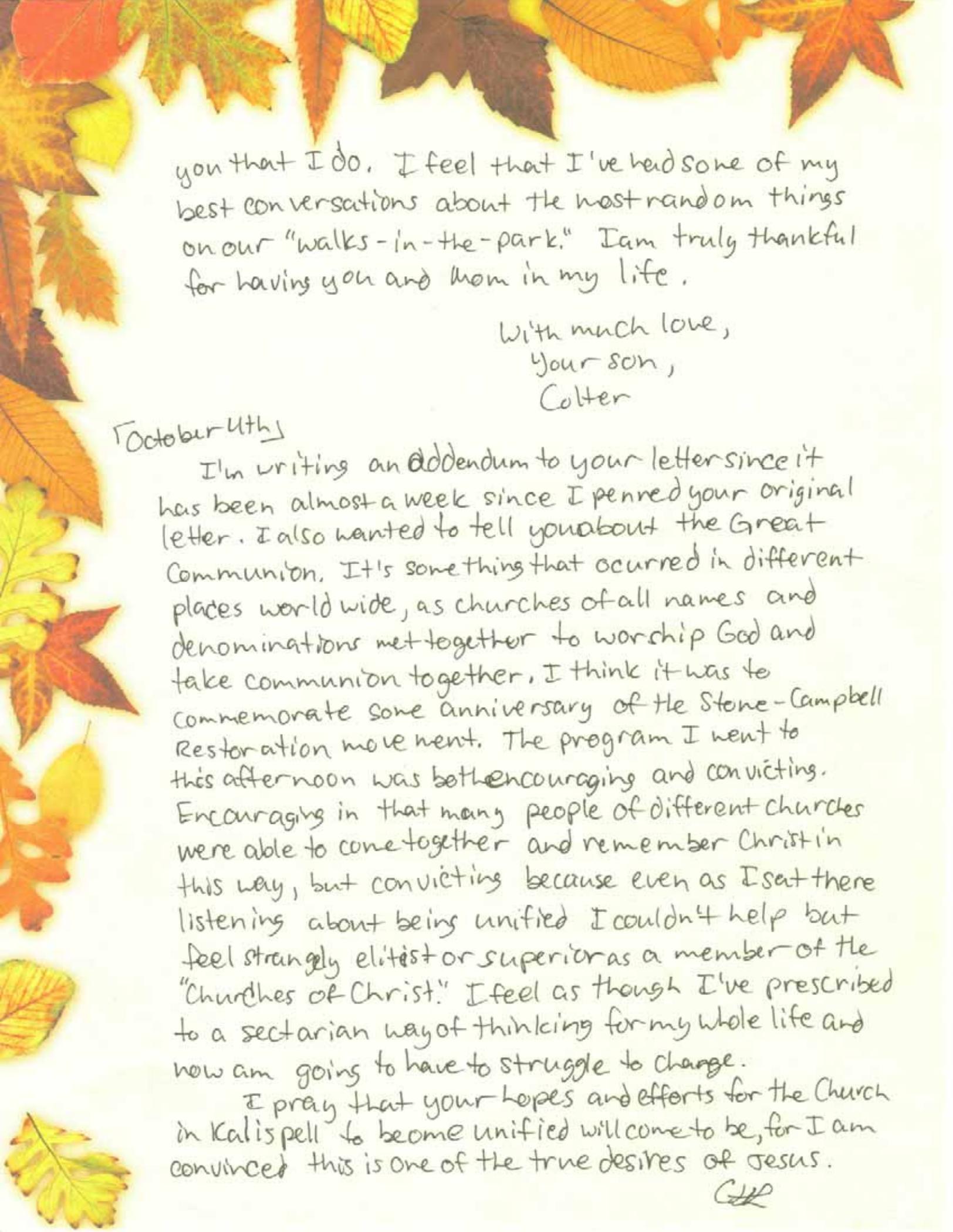


Mt. Wilbur and I feel very fortunate to have experienced that with you. Alpine rock is where it's at! I can't wait to get back on a rope with you.

How has your training been? I think I may be trying to do too much with goals to sport lead 5.11, trad lead 5.8, and win the ACU triathlon. I've been trying to do both cardio and strength most days. Last week I took a break and tried to be less worried about time and intensity as part of that cyclical process Outside Magazine has written about. I felt really good on a run this morning and we'll continue to do some good ol' bio experimentation this semester.

I need to ask your advice along the lines of training. Recently, one of my roommates expressed his frustration with me for "spending all my time doing physics and rock climbing." Thinking about it, he's absolutely right: my occupation right now is a student studying physics and I have a passion for climbing and other outdoor recreation, thus my priorities are set accordingly. The tension comes when I feel as though I have to choose between my goals and spending time hanging out with certain people. It's difficult in that most of my friends aren't very goal oriented and live with more of a spontaneous "let's just hang out" attitude. Am I being really selfish here? What's the best way to find a good balance?

It has been awesome to have the relationship with



you that I do. I feel that I've had some of my best conversations about the most random things on our "walks-in-the-park." I am truly thankful for having you and Mom in my life.

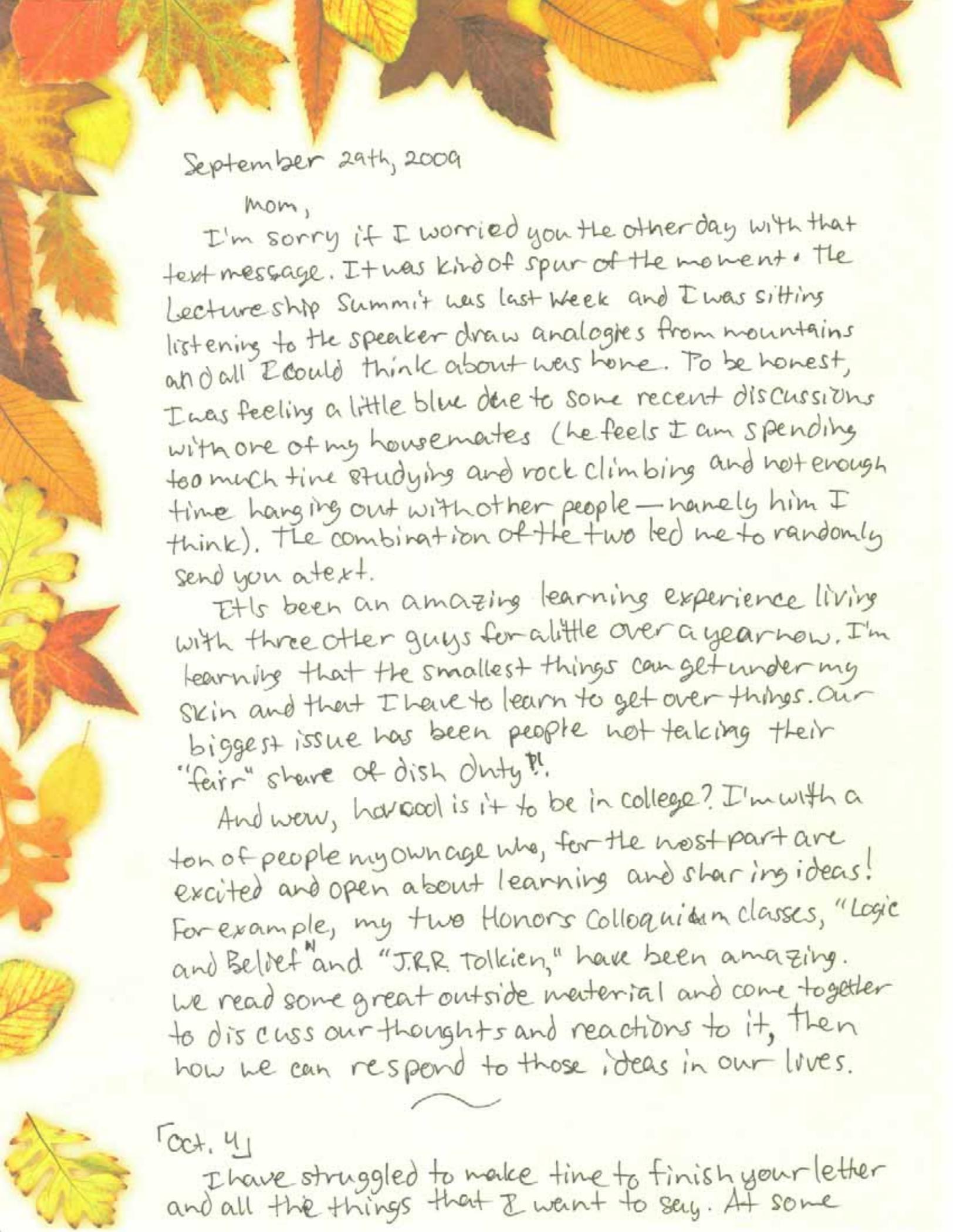
With much love,  
Your son,  
Colter

[October 4th]

I'm writing an addendum to your letter since it has been almost a week since I penned your original letter. I also wanted to tell you about the Great Communion. It's something that occurred in different places world wide, as churches of all names and denominations met together to worship God and take communion together. I think it was to commemorate some anniversary of the Stone-Campbell Restoration movement. The program I went to this afternoon was both encouraging and convicting. Encouraging in that many people of different churches were able to come together and remember Christ in this way, but convicting because even as I sat there listening about being unified I couldn't help but feel strangely elitist or superior as a member of the "Churches of Christ." I feel as though I've prescribed to a sectarian way of thinking for my whole life and now am going to have to struggle to change.

I pray that your hopes and efforts for the Church in Kalispell to become unified will come to be, for I am convinced this is one of the true desires of Jesus.

Colter



September 29th, 2009

Mom,

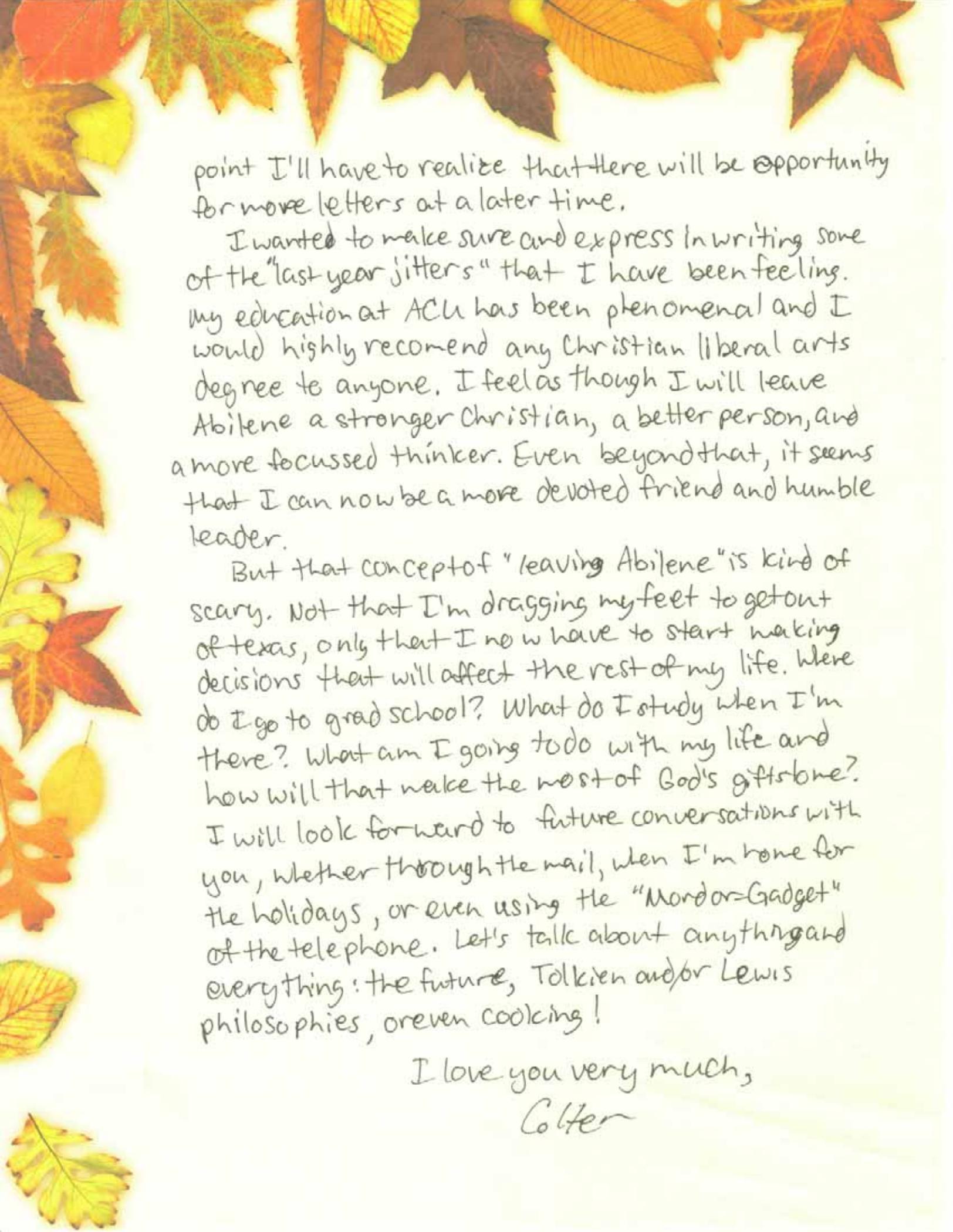
I'm sorry if I worried you the other day with that text message. It was kind of spur of the moment. The Lecture ship Summit was last week and I was sitting listening to the speaker draw analogies from mountains and all I could think about was home. To be honest, I was feeling a little blue due to some recent discussions with one of my housemates (he feels I am spending too much time studying and rock climbing and not enough time hanging out with other people — namely him I think). The combination of the two led me to randomly send you a text.

It's been an amazing learning experience living with three other guys for a little over a year now. I'm learning that the smallest things can get under my skin and that I have to learn to get over things. Our biggest issue has been people not taking their "fair" share of dish duty!

And wow, how cool is it to be in college? I'm with a ton of people my own age who, for the most part are excited and open about learning and sharing ideas! For example, my two Honors Colloquium classes, "Logic and Belief" and "J.R.R. Tolkien," have been amazing. We read some great outside material and come together to discuss our thoughts and reactions to it, then how we can respond to those ideas in our lives.

Oct. 4

I have struggled to make time to finish your letter and all the things that I want to say. At some

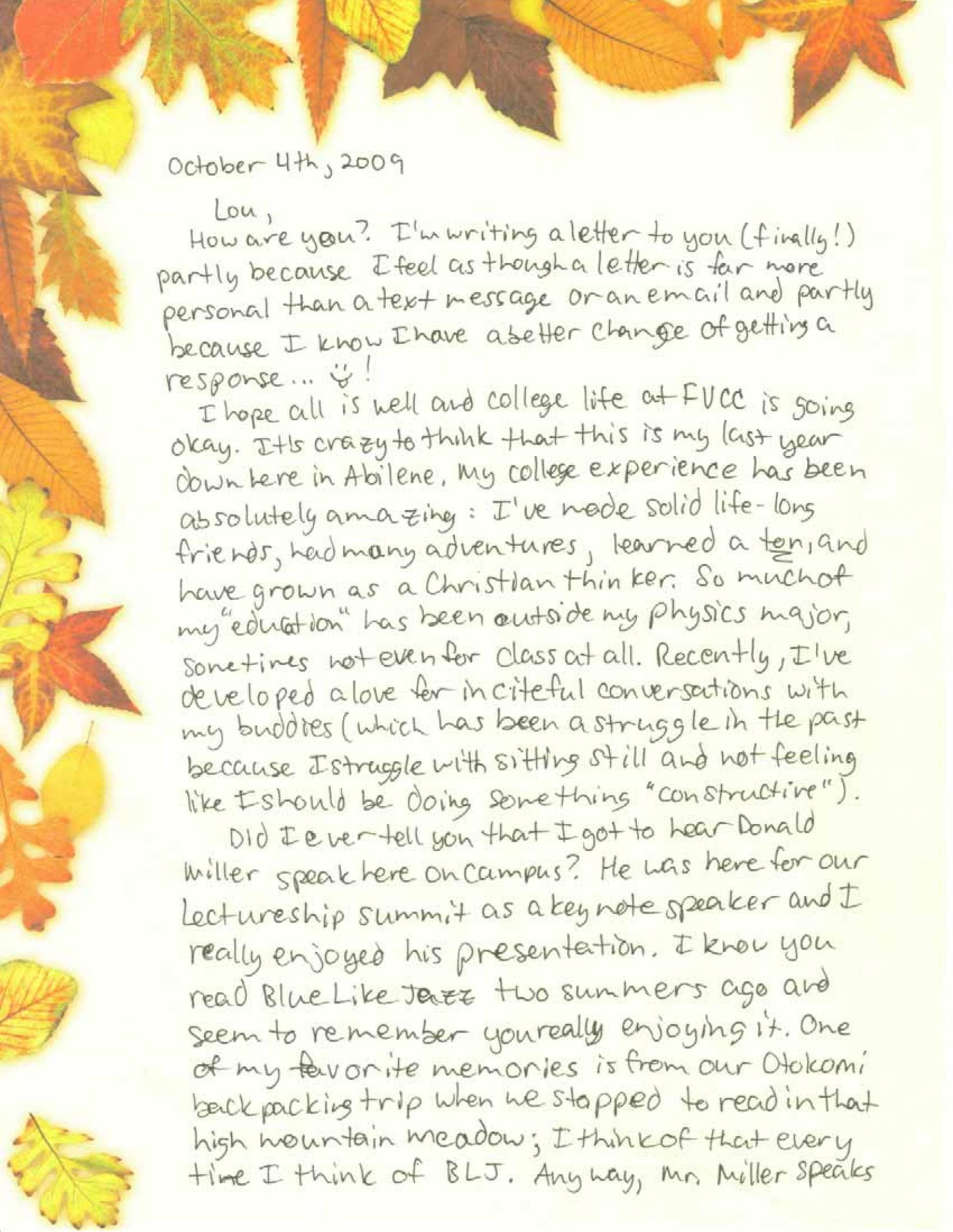


point I'll have to realize that there will be opportunity for more letters at a later time.

I wanted to make sure and express in writing some of the "last year jitters" that I have been feeling. My education at ACU has been phenomenal and I would highly recommend any Christian liberal arts degree to anyone. I feel as though I will leave Abilene a stronger Christian, a better person, and a more focussed thinker. Even beyond that, it seems that I can now be a more devoted friend and humble leader.

But that concept of "leaving Abilene" is kind of scary. Not that I'm dragging my feet to get out of Texas, only that I now have to start making decisions that will affect the rest of my life. Where do I go to grad school? What do I study when I'm there? What am I going to do with my life and how will that make the most of God's gifts to me? I will look forward to future conversations with you, whether through the mail, when I'm home for the holidays, or even using the "Mondor-Gadget" of the telephone. Let's talk about anything and everything: the future, Tolkien and/or Lewis philosophies, or even cooking!

I love you very much,  
Colten

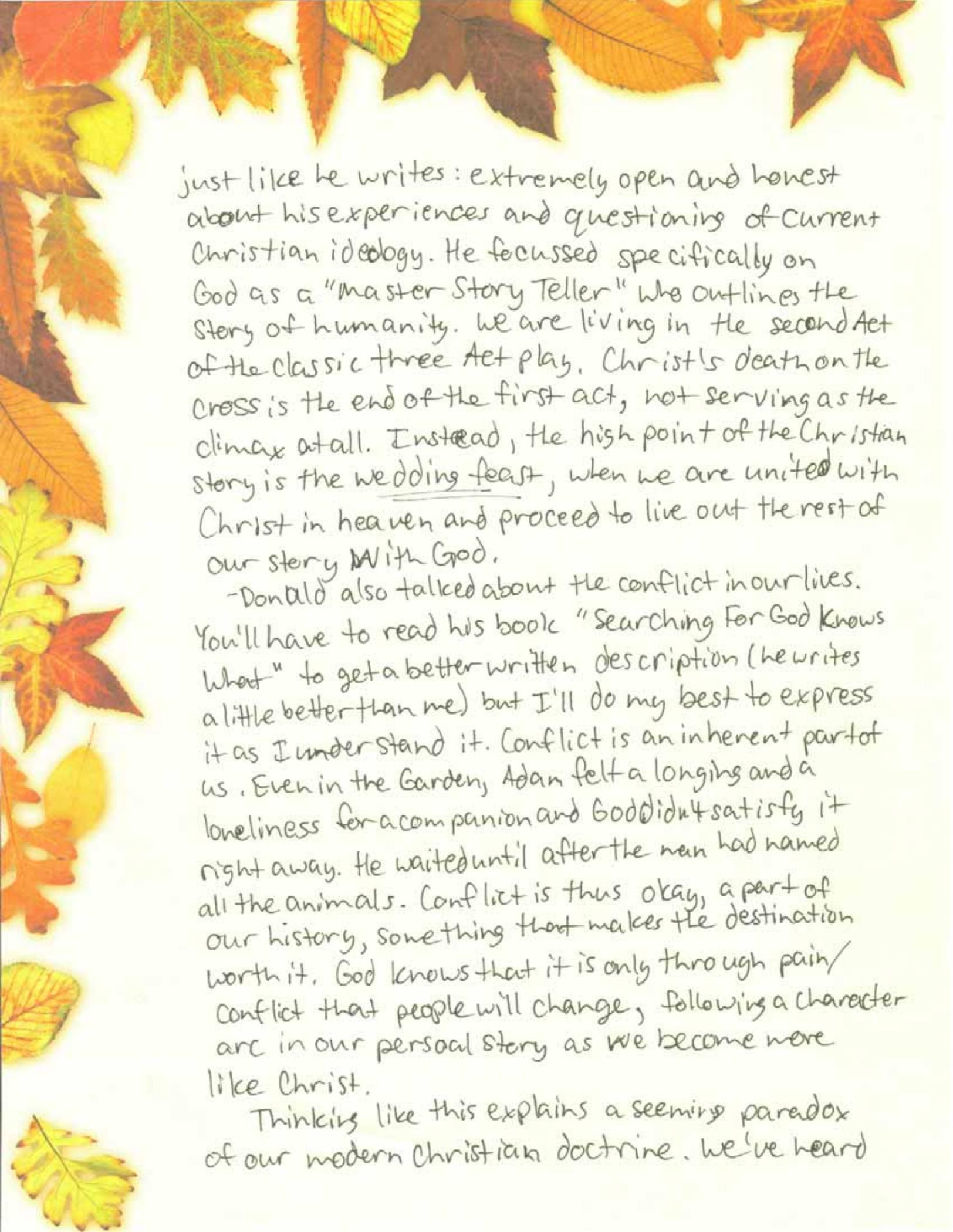


October 4th, 2009

Lou,  
How are you? I'm writing a letter to you (finally!) partly because I feel as though a letter is far more personal than a text message or an email and partly because I know I have a better chance of getting a response... ☺!

I hope all is well and college life at FVCC is going okay. It's crazy to think that this is my last year down here in Abilene. My college experience has been absolutely amazing: I've made solid life-long friends, had many adventures, learned a ton, and have grown as a Christian thinker. So much of my "education" has been outside my physics major, sometimes not even for class at all. Recently, I've developed a love for inciteful conversations with my buddies (which has been a struggle in the past because I struggle with sitting still and not feeling like I should be doing something "constructive").

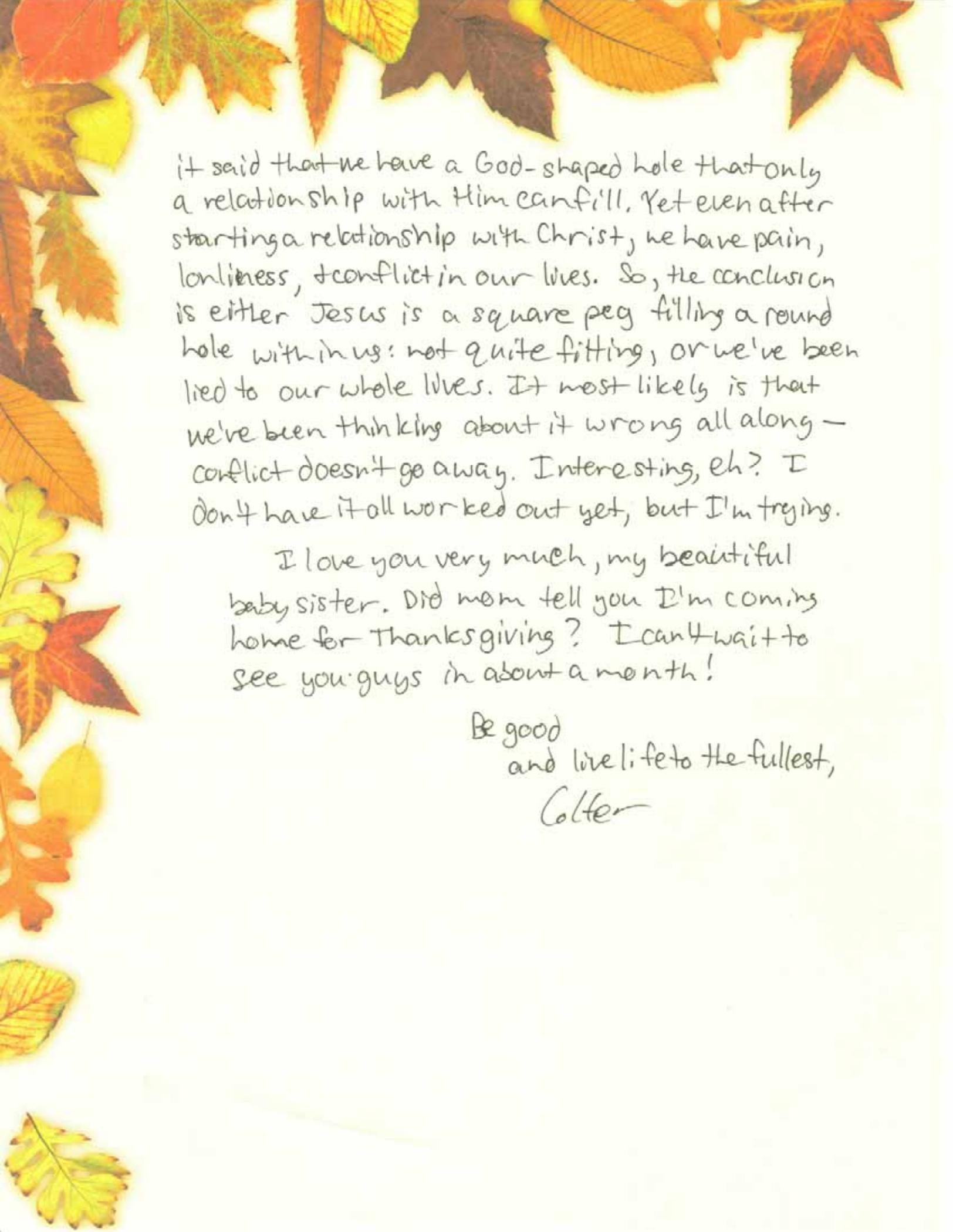
Did I ever tell you that I got to hear Donald Miller speak here on campus? He was here for our Lectureship Summit as a keynote speaker and I really enjoyed his presentation. I know you read Blue Like Jazz two summers ago and seem to remember you really enjoying it. One of my favorite memories is from our Otokomi backpacking trip when we stopped to read in that high mountain meadow; I think of that every time I think of BLJ. Anyway, Mr. Miller speaks



just like he writes: extremely open and honest about his experiences and questioning of current Christian ideology. He focussed specifically on God as a "master Story Teller" who outlines the story of humanity. We are living in the second Act of the classic three Act play. Christ's death on the cross is the end of the first act, not serving as the climax at all. Instead, the high point of the Christian story is the wedding feast, when we are united with Christ in heaven and proceed to live out the rest of our story With God.

-Donald also talked about the conflict in our lives. You'll have to read his book "Searching For God Knows What" to get a better written description (he writes a little better than me) but I'll do my best to express it as I understand it. Conflict is an inherent part of us. Even in the Garden, Adam felt a longing and a loneliness for a companion and God didn't satisfy it right away. He waited until after the man had named all the animals. Conflict is thus okay, a part of our history, something that makes the destination worth it. God knows that it is only through pain/ conflict that people will change, following a character arc in our personal story as we become more like Christ.

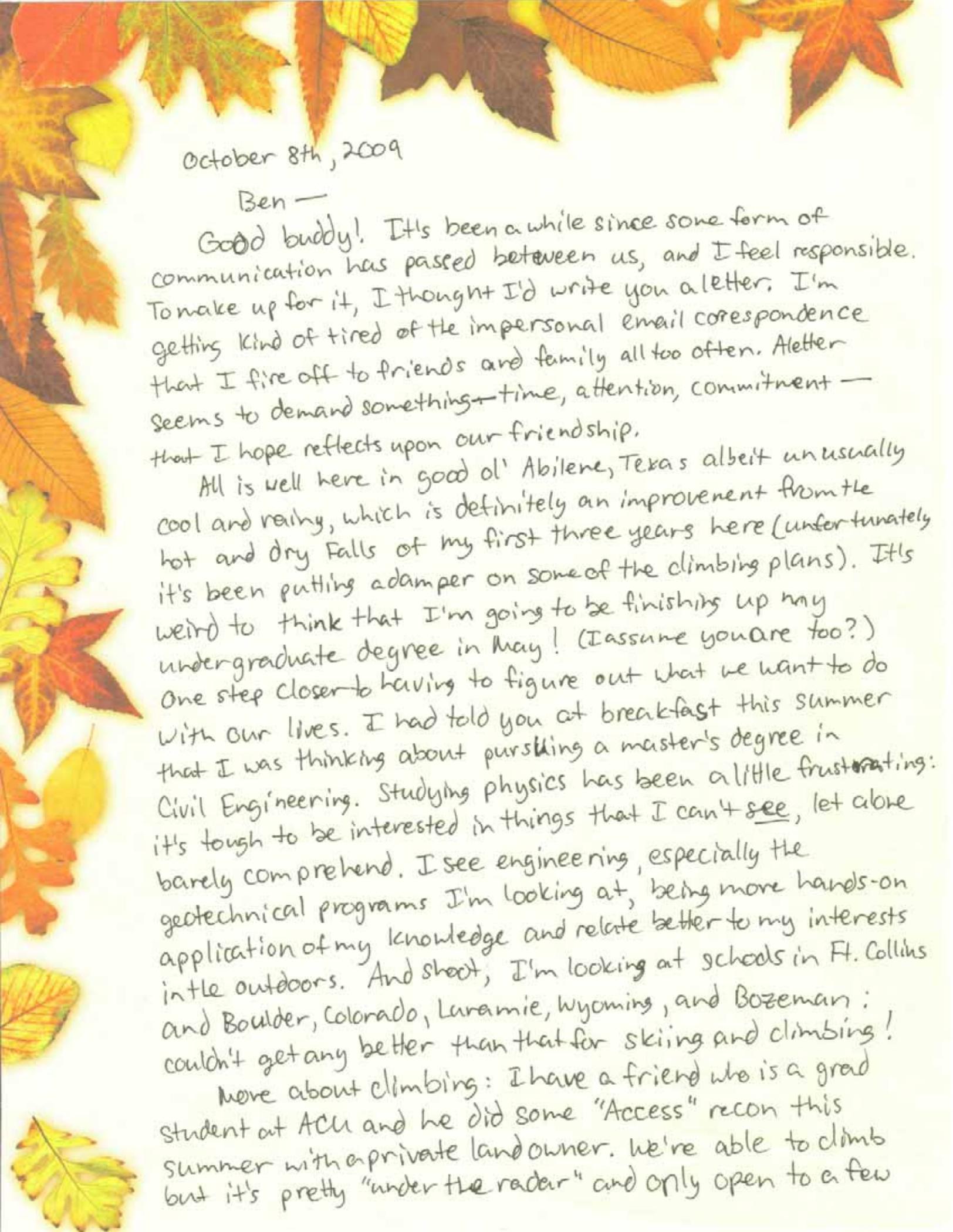
Thinking like this explains a seemingly paradox of our modern Christian doctrine. We've heard



it said that we have a God-shaped hole that only a relationship with Him can fill. Yet even after starting a relationship with Christ, we have pain, loneliness, & conflict in our lives. So, the conclusion is either Jesus is a square peg filling a round hole within us: not quite fitting, or we've been lied to our whole lives. It most likely is that we've been thinking about it wrong all along — conflict doesn't go away. Interesting, eh? I don't have it all worked out yet, but I'm trying.

I love you very much, my beautiful baby sister. Did mom tell you I'm coming home for Thanksgiving? I can't wait to see you guys in about a month!

Be good  
and live life to the fullest,  
Colter



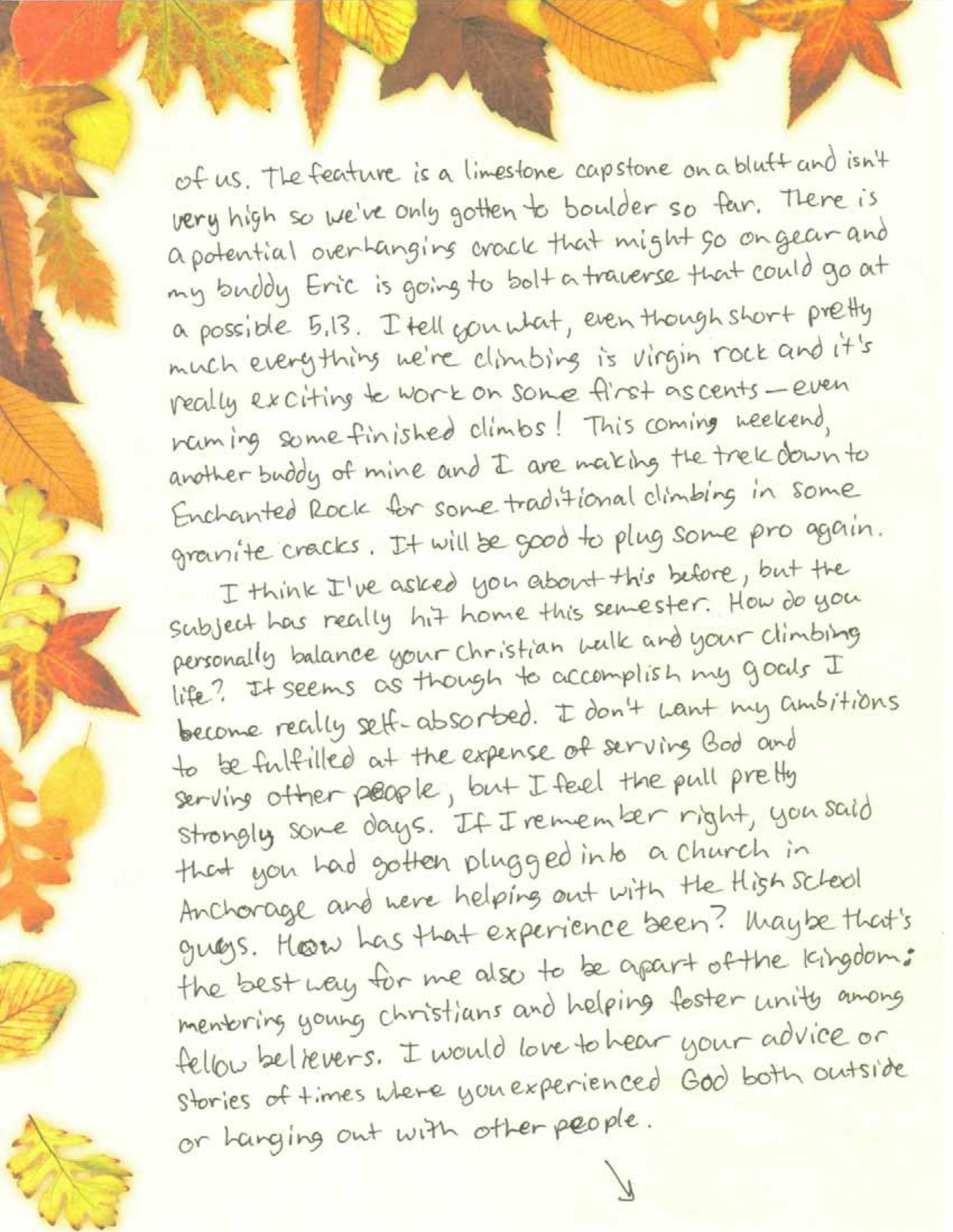
October 8th, 2009

Ben —

Good buddy! It's been a while since some form of communication has passed between us, and I feel responsible. To make up for it, I thought I'd write you a letter. I'm getting kind of tired of the impersonal email correspondence that I fire off to friends and family all too often. A letter seems to demand something — time, attention, commitment — that I hope reflects upon our friendship.

All is well here in good ol' Abilene, Texas albeit unusually cool and rainy, which is definitely an improvement from the hot and dry Falls of my first three years here (unfortunately it's been putting a damper on some of the climbing plans). It's weird to think that I'm going to be finishing up my undergraduate degree in May! (I assume you are too?) One step closer to having to figure out what we want to do with our lives. I had told you at breakfast this summer that I was thinking about pursuing a master's degree in Civil Engineering. Studying physics has been a little frustrating: it's tough to be interested in things that I can't see, let alone barely comprehend. I see engineering, especially the geotechnical programs I'm looking at, being more hands-on application of my knowledge and relate better to my interests in the outdoors. And shoot, I'm looking at schools in Ft. Collins and Boulder, Colorado, Laramie, Wyoming, and Bozeman; couldn't get any better than that for skiing and climbing!

More about climbing: I have a friend who is a grad student at ACU and he did some "Access" recon this summer with a private landowner. We're able to climb but it's pretty "under the radar" and only open to a few



of us. The feature is a limestone capstone on a bluff and isn't very high so we've only gotten to boulder so far. There is a potential overhanging crack that might go on gear and my buddy Eric is going to bolt a traverse that could go at a possible 5.13. I tell you what, even though short pretty much everything we're climbing is virgin rock and it's really exciting to work on some first ascents — even naming some finished climbs! This coming weekend, another buddy of mine and I are making the trek down to Enchanted Rock for some traditional climbing in some granite cracks. It will be good to plug some pro again.

I think I've asked you about this before, but the subject has really hit home this semester. How do you personally balance your christian walk and your climbing life? It seems as though to accomplish my goals I become really self-absorbed. I don't want my ambitions to be fulfilled at the expense of serving God and serving other people, but I feel the pull pretty strongly some days. If I remember right, you said that you had gotten plugged into a church in Anchorage and were helping out with the High School guys. How has that experience been? Maybe that's the best way for me also to be apart of the Kingdom: mentoring young christians and helping foster unity among fellow believers. I would love to hear your advice or stories of times where you experienced God both outside or hanging out with other people.

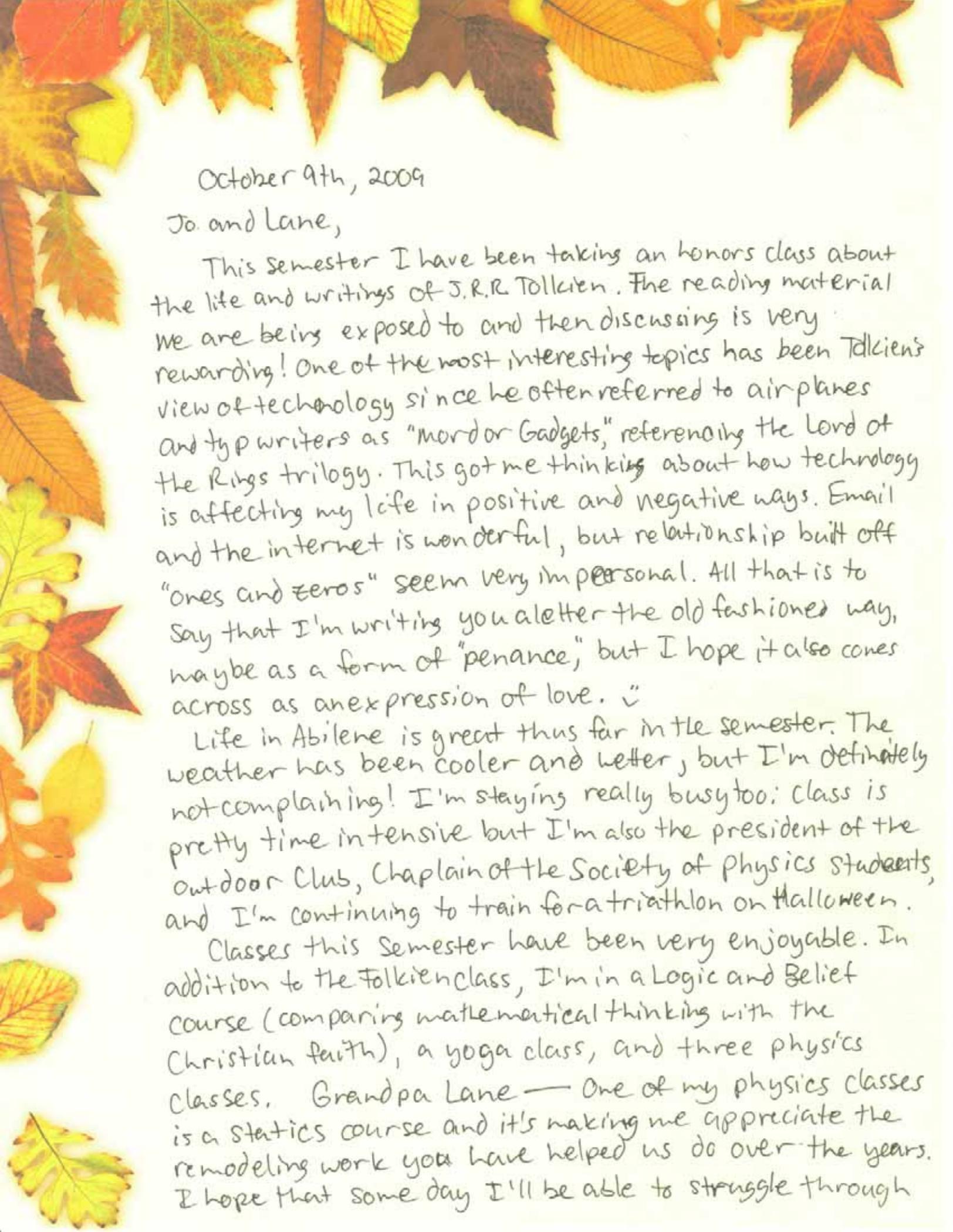
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Dude, I love the adventures that we have had the past couple of years and look forward to more in the future. Thank you for being an example to me as a climber and a Christian brother.

Strength and honor,  
Coltez

P.S. Recently, I have seen references to the Moose's Tooth and Bear's Tooth theater and pub and I'm really intrigued. When I make it up to Alaska for a visit you'll have to take me...

P.P.S. Check out this article from our school newspaper about a climbing trip our Outdoor Club took.



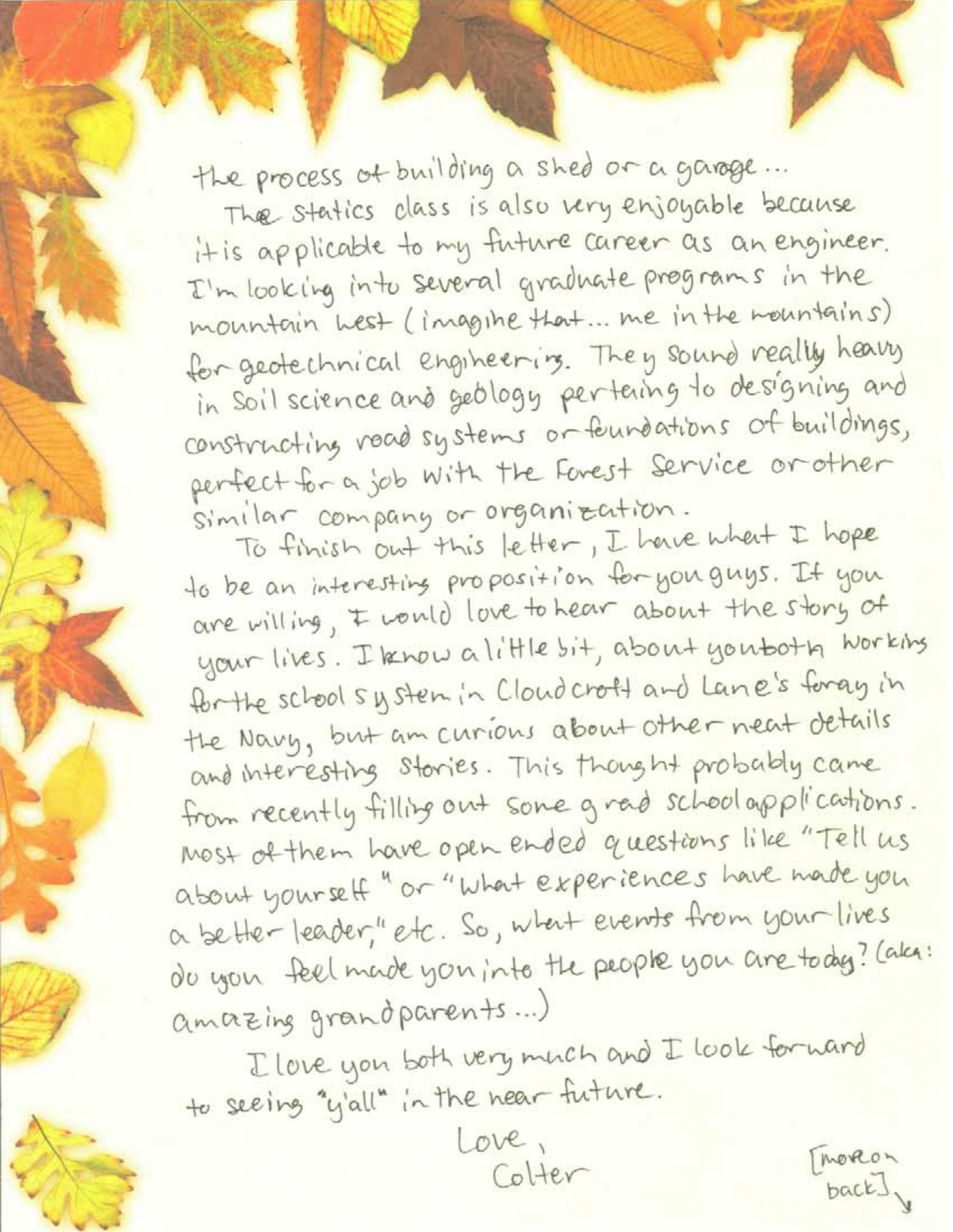
October 9th, 2009

Jo. and Lane,

This semester I have been taking an honors class about the life and writings of J.R.R. Tolkien. The reading material we are being exposed to and then discussing is very rewarding! One of the most interesting topics has been Tolkien's view of technology since he often referred to airplanes and typewriters as "Mordor Gadgets," referencing the Lord of the Rings trilogy. This got me thinking about how technology is affecting my life in positive and negative ways. Email and the internet is wonderful, but relationships built off "ones and zeros" seem very impersonal. All that is to say that I'm writing you a letter the old fashioned way, maybe as a form of "penance," but I hope it also comes across as an expression of love. :)

Life in Abilene is great thus far in the semester. The weather has been cooler and better, but I'm definitely not complaining! I'm staying really busy too; class is pretty time intensive but I'm also the president of the outdoor club, Chaplain of the Society of Physics students, and I'm continuing to train for a triathlon on Halloween.

Classes this semester have been very enjoyable. In addition to the Tolkien class, I'm in a Logic and Belief course (comparing mathematical thinking with the Christian faith), a yoga class, and three physics classes. Grandpa Lane — one of my physics classes is a statics course and it's making me appreciate the remodeling work you have helped us do over the years. I hope that some day I'll be able to struggle through



the process of building a shed or a garage ...

The statics class is also very enjoyable because it is applicable to my future career as an engineer. I'm looking into several graduate programs in the mountain west (imagine that... me in the mountains) for geotechnical engineering. They sound really heavy in soil science and geology pertaining to designing and constructing road systems or foundations of buildings, perfect for a job with the Forest Service or other similar company or organization.

To finish out this letter, I have what I hope to be an interesting proposition for you guys. If you are willing, I would love to hear about the story of your lives. I know a little bit, about you both working for the school system in Cloudcroft and Lane's foray in the Navy, but am curious about other neat details and interesting stories. This thought probably came from recently filling out some grad school applications. Most of them have open ended questions like "Tell us about yourself" or "What experiences have made you a better leader," etc. So, what events from your lives do you feel made you into the people you are today? (aka: amazing grandparents...)

I love you both very much and I look forward to seeing "y'all" in the near future.

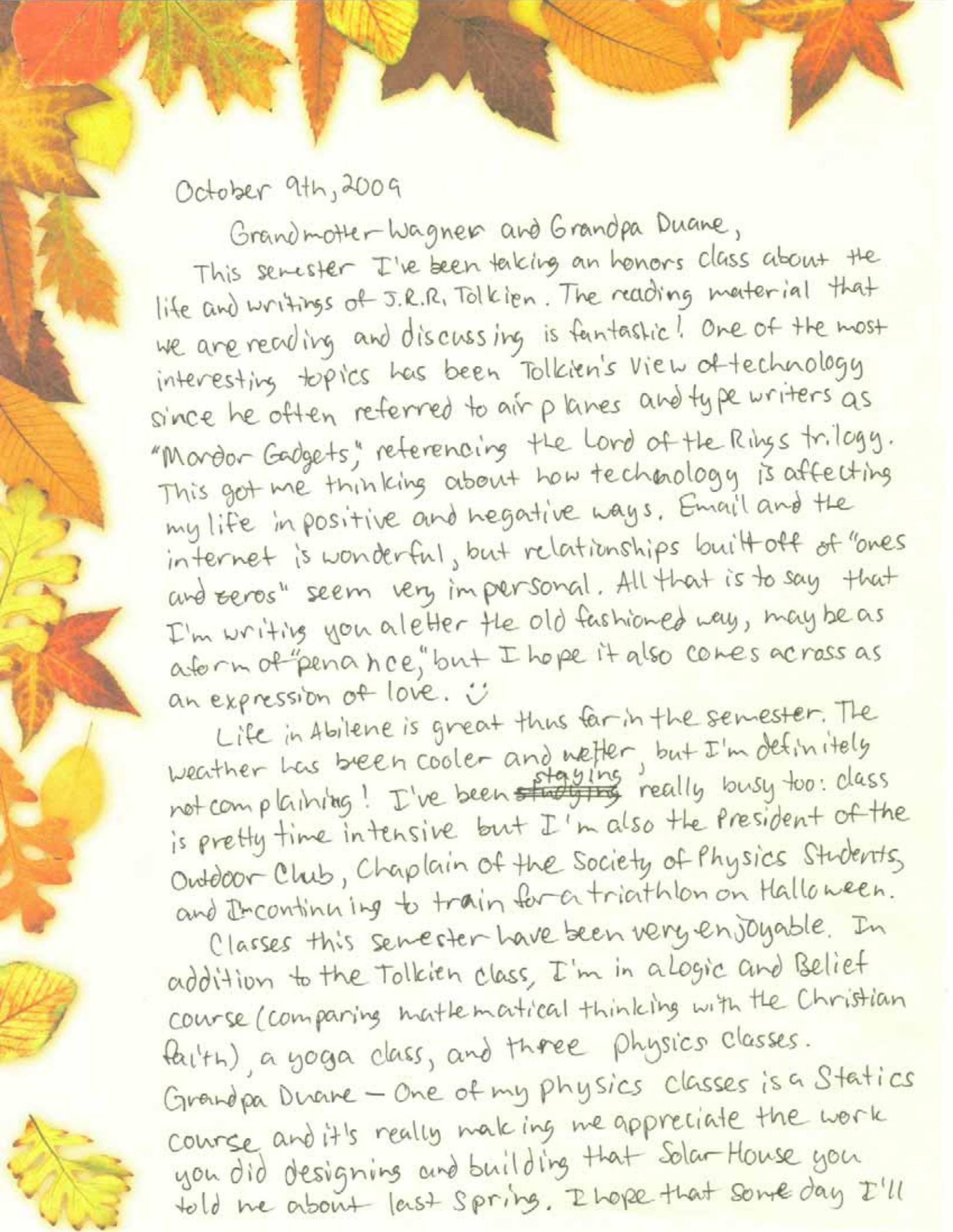
Love,  
Colter

[more on  
back]

P.S. Check out this article from our school about an

Outdoor Club trip we took recently.

P.S. Jo Jo - I feel like I've done really well at cooking this semester: Nathan and I have made good use of the goodies you brought ~~us~~ with some green chili! and oryx sausage pizza (completely from scratch) and some elle steak fajitas. Now I'll just have to try and make an apple pie half as good as yours...



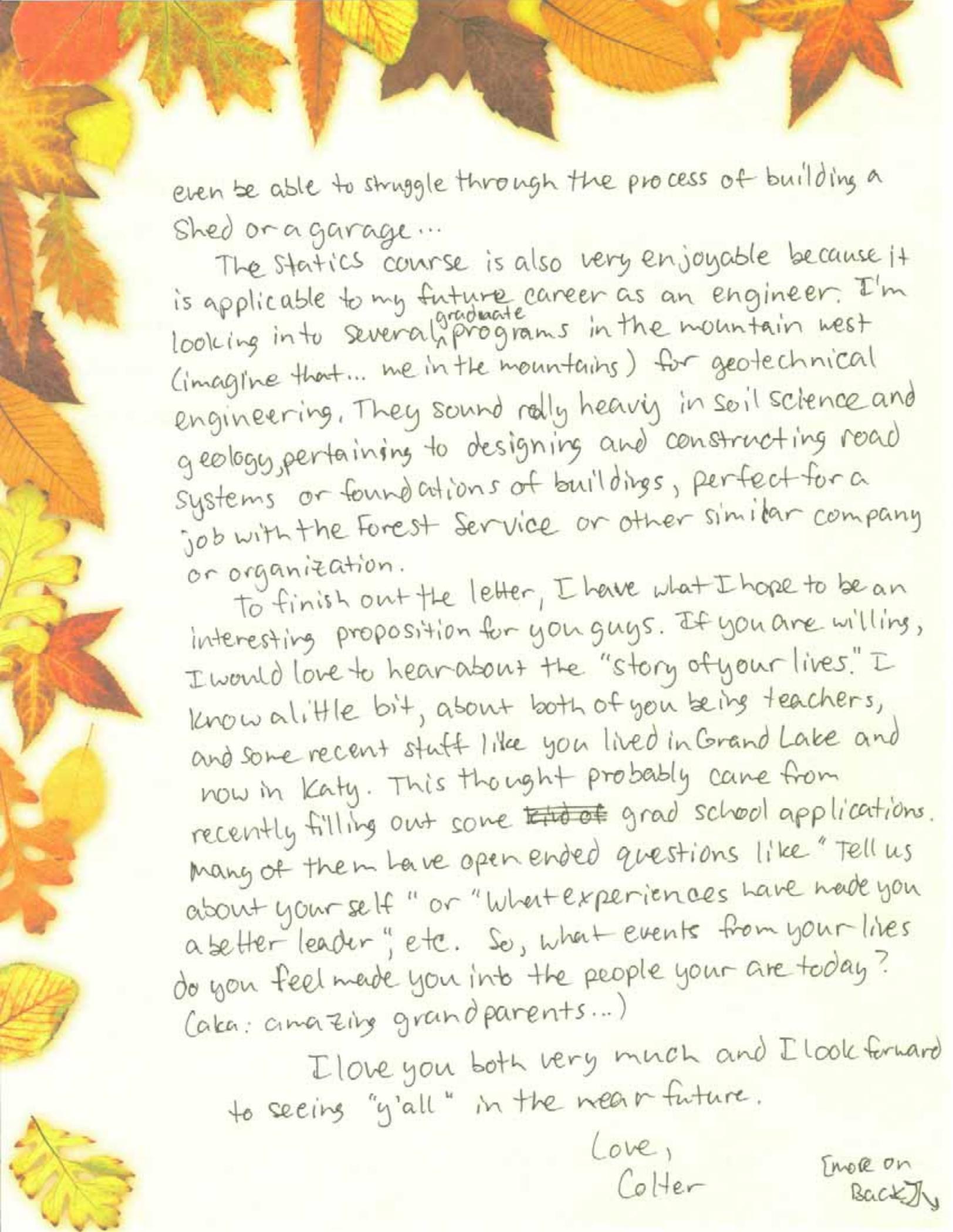
October 9th, 2009

Grandmother Wagner and Grandpa Duane,

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To finish out the letter, I have what I hope to be an interesting proposition for you guys. If you are willing, I would love to hear about the "story of your lives." I know a little bit, about both of you being teachers, and some recent stuff like you lived in Grand Lake and now in Katy. This thought probably came from recently filling out some ~~kind of~~ grad school applications. Many of them have open ended questions like "Tell us about your self" or "What experiences have made you a better leader"; etc. So, what events from your lives do you feel made you into the people you are today? (aka: amazing grandparents...)

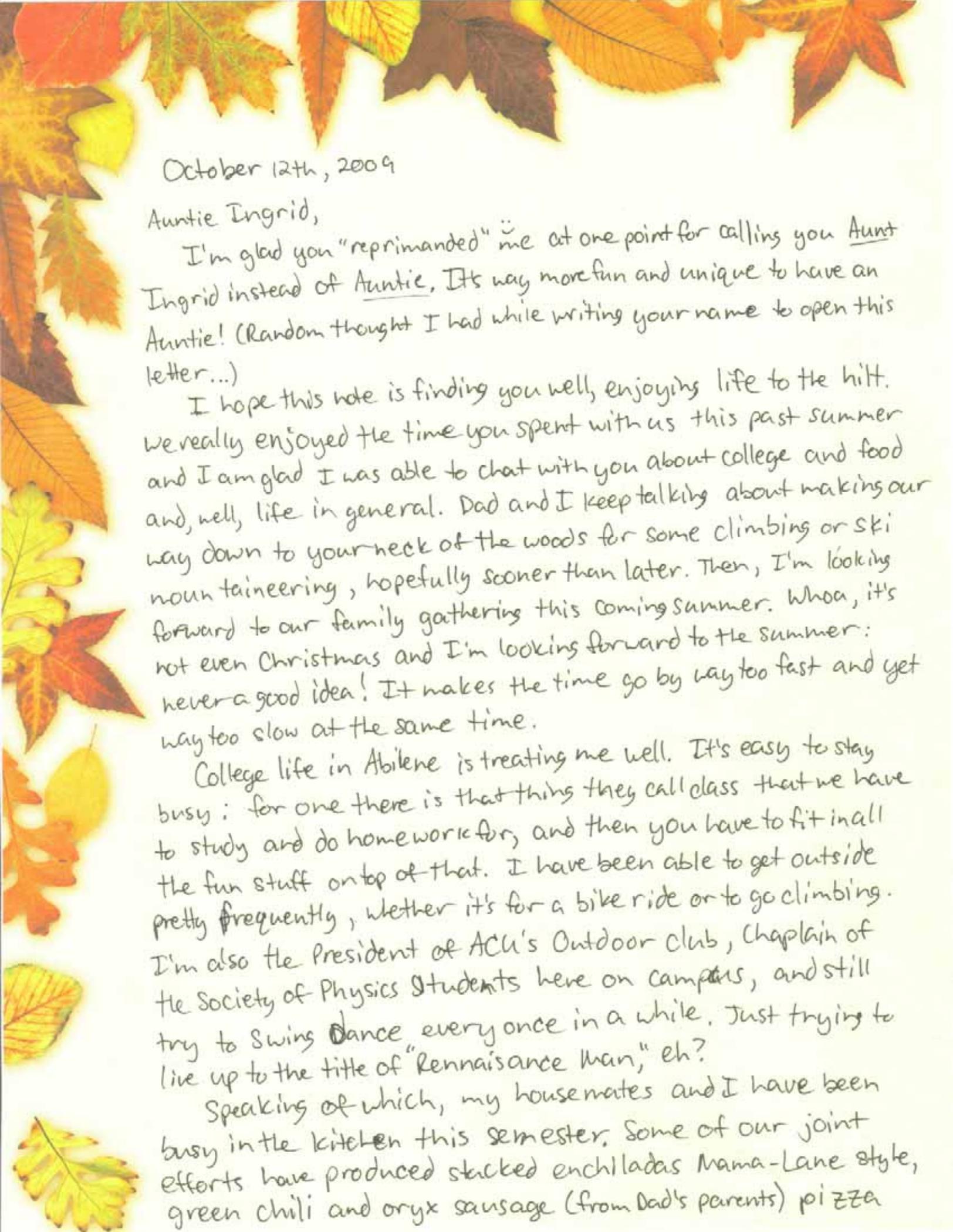
I love you both very much and I look forward to seeing "y'all" in the near future.

Love,  
Colter

[more on  
Back]

P.S. Check out this article from our school about an outdoor club trip we took recently.

P.P.S. Grandmother— I know we've talked about potentially getting together and doing some dress clothes shopping. I would love to hook up with you guys sometime this semester since I'm going to try and visit some grad schools over Christmas break. Be thinking (and I will too) of some possibilities: I could break free for a weekend to come to Houston, or I could meet you in Waco and we could shop/visit Baylor, etc...



October 12th, 2009

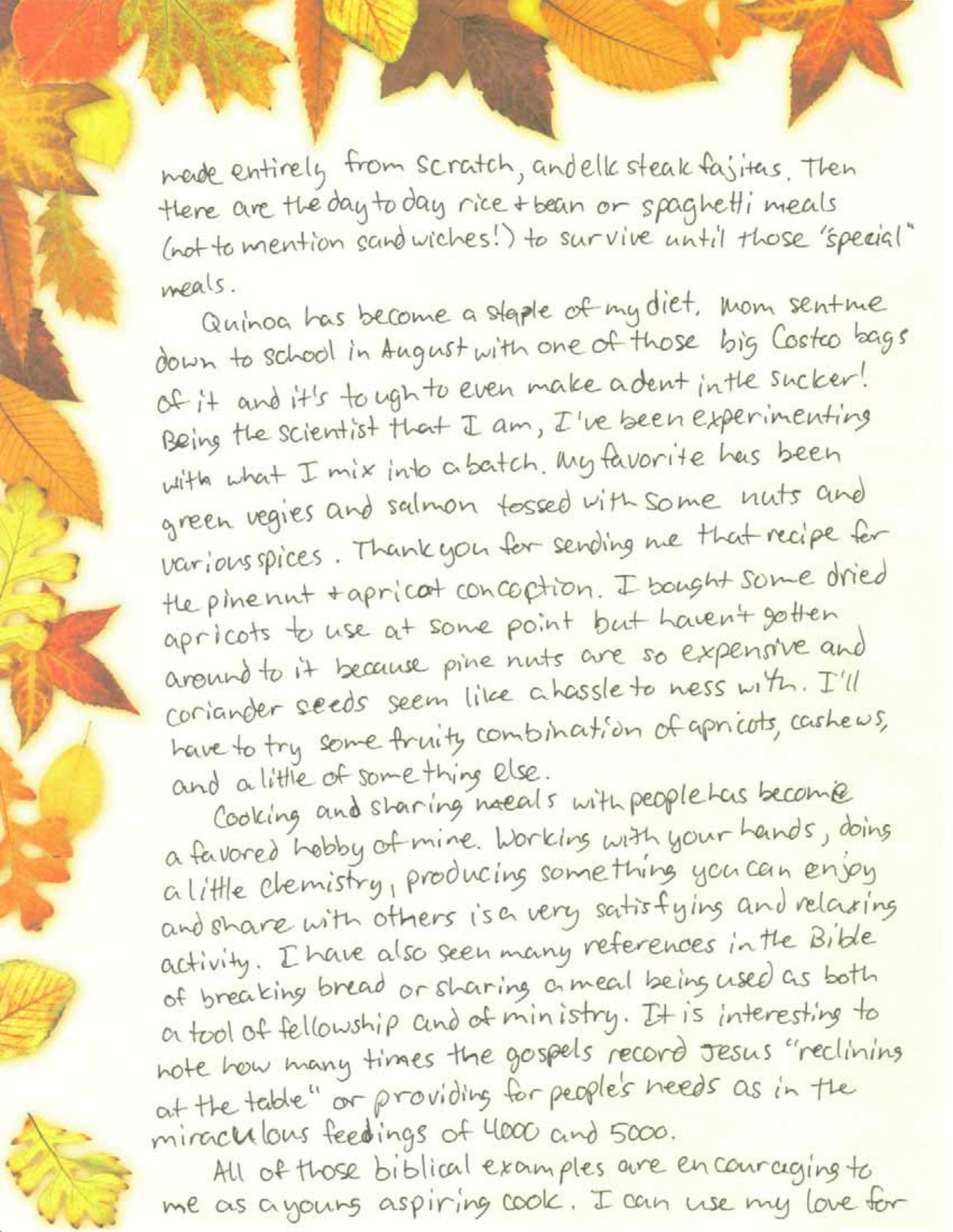
Auntie Ingrid,

I'm glad you "reprimanded" me at one point for calling you Aunt Ingrid instead of Auntie. It's way more fun and unique to have an Auntie! (Random thought I had while writing your name to open this letter...)

I hope this note is finding you well, enjoying life to the hilt. We really enjoyed the time you spent with us this past summer and I am glad I was able to chat with you about college and food and, well, life in general. Dad and I keep talking about making our way down to your neck of the woods for some climbing or ski mountaineering, hopefully sooner than later. Then, I'm looking forward to our family gathering this coming summer. Whoa, it's not even Christmas and I'm looking forward to the summer: never a good idea! It makes the time go by way too fast and yet way too slow at the same time.

College life in Abilene is treating me well. It's easy to stay busy: for one there is that thing they call class that we have to study and do homework for, and then you have to fit in all the fun stuff on top of that. I have been able to get outside pretty frequently, whether it's for a bike ride or to go climbing. I'm also the President of ACU's Outdoor Club, Chaplain of the Society of Physics Students here on campus, and still try to swing dance every once in a while. Just trying to live up to the title of "Renaissance Man," eh?

Speaking of which, my housemates and I have been busy in the kitchen this semester. Some of our joint efforts have produced stacked enchiladas Mama-Lane style, green chili and oryx sausage (from Dad's parents) pizza

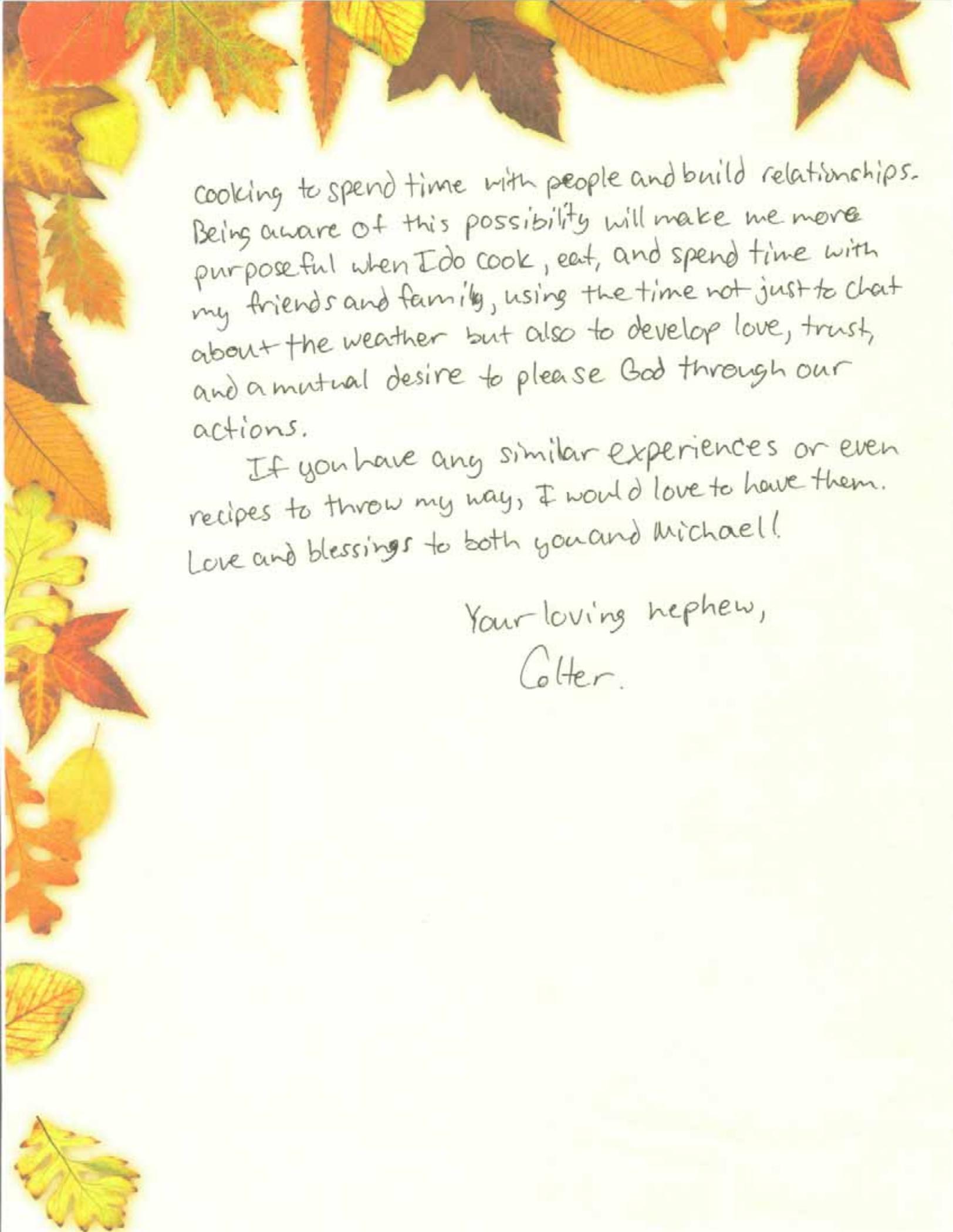


made entirely from scratch, and elk steak fajitas. Then there are the day to day rice + bean or spaghetti meals (not to mention sandwiches!) to survive until those "special" meals.

Quinoa has become a staple of my diet. Mom sent me down to school in August with one of those big Costco bags of it and it's tough to even make a dent in the sucker! Being the scientist that I am, I've been experimenting with what I mix into a batch. My favorite has been green vegies and salmon tossed with some nuts and various spices. Thank you for sending me that recipe for the pine nut + apricot conception. I bought some dried apricots to use at some point but haven't gotten around to it because pine nuts are so expensive and coriander seeds seem like a hassle to mess with. I'll have to try some fruity combination of apricots, cashews, and a little of something else.

Cooking and sharing meals with people has become a favored hobby of mine. Working with your hands, doing a little chemistry, producing something you can enjoy and share with others is a very satisfying and relaxing activity. I have also seen many references in the Bible of breaking bread or sharing a meal being used as both a tool of fellowship and of ministry. It is interesting to note how many times the gospels record Jesus "reclining at the table" or providing for people's needs as in the miraculous feedings of 4000 and 5000.

All of those biblical examples are encouraging to me as a young aspiring cook. I can use my love for



cooking to spend time with people and build relationships. Being aware of this possibility will make me more purposeful when I do cook, eat, and spend time with my friends and family, using the time not just to chat about the weather but also to develop love, trust, and a mutual desire to please God through our actions.

If you have any similar experiences or even recipes to throw my way, I would love to have them. Love and blessings to both you and Michael!

Your loving nephew,  
Colter.

## Reactions to the Project

Writing letters is unexpectedly time-consuming. I don't write legibly very fast and therefore rewriting the letters on the stationary was a lengthy process. By the time I thought about what to write to the specific person (outlining it in several cases), wrote the actual letter, revised it, added sections if it had been a while since I wrote the beginning of the letter, and rewrote it on different paper, each letter took between an hour and an hour and a half to produce. I'm still amazed at the time that Tolkien and Lewis would have had to invest in writing letters.

Because of the constraints of time, there will need to be changes in how I write letters in the future. I still feel that it is important to have purpose in the letter and include revision instead of writing in a "stream of consciousness" style (although there is a time and place for that). In writing letters for the project I eschewed most forms of technology in the spirit of Tolkien, but I would be willing to type letters if it meant that letter writing would be more of an enjoyment than a chore. It will be fun to include other forms of "physical correspondence" (meaning something you can hold in your hand, not "ones and zeros" or conversations on the phone) such as postcards from places traveled, birthday wishes in the form of a card, or care packages to friends.

During the process of writing these letters, I couldn't help but notice how rewarding this experience has been. It is very similar to writing in a journal but to a specific person with a relational background with you. If the relationship is developed enough, personal thoughts put down on paper can be very cathartic and invigorating.

I also feel as though this project has made me a better writer. Through writing letters and revising them, I have discovered that I use a verb tense (present perfect) too often and tend to write extremely long sentences with an exorbitant amount of commas. To progress I feel as though I need to continue to write and analyze my style. Some of my recent forays into the world of writing, writing a Blog to describe my experience studying in Uruguay and a few essays chronicling my climbing experiences, have made me think about improving my writing but have failed to sustain themselves. If I get responses to my letters I hope it will help me continue to write. On top of all that, I am becoming better at expressing myself through my writing and it is carrying over into my face to face interactions with people as well.