

# Episode 128: My Postcard Teacher

Did you see the Academy Award-winning documentary [My Octopus Teacher](#)? It's like a real-life Charlotte's Web. But instead of a clever spider, there's a clever octopus that provides lessons that are unexpected. And true. On the surface, the movie is about a man who found joy and purpose through immersion in nature and a remarkable bond with an octopus. And it's really remarkable. But it's deeper than the story of just a diver and an octopus. It's also about how that man created a connection with his son while he built this deep admiration for an octopus. And that octopus taught him so much.

Postcards, in a way, are my octopus. I've been thinking about that a lot. You've heard me talk about how postcards connect people. Mainly, I mean that in the sense of one person getting to know one other person. That part holds. But there's more. It's deeper than that.

Postcards connect people...as in we're people of the world. They connect us to something larger.

What made me start thinking about all this? Colors. And a postcard.

Well, I was staring intently at a postcard Ana sent me of a typical park bench in Buenos Aires. The bench is built with lateral wooden slats and is painted azure blue. The bench could seat three people comfortably. Its rounded metal feet are painted the same azure blue as the slats, and the feet are resting on ground that's covered in small paving stones the color of biscotti. There's a long, warm shadow of the bench that goes from right to left, so the photo appears to have been taken in the late afternoon in the summertime. It looks warm there. Behind the bench is a wooden lath wall painted dandelion yellow. The horizontal pattern of the lath of the wall mimics the horizontal pattern on the bench. On that yellow wall there are closed wooden shutters painted emerald green. Directly behind the bench is a lattice doorway painted chili pepper red. To the right of the lattice doorway is a column painted just a shade lighter blue than the bench; I'd call it cerulean if I were looking for paints. And to the right of that, column, leading off the right edge of the postcard, is a seaweed green concrete wall.

I looked and looked and looked at that picture on the postcard. Noticed the primary colors. Then the additional colors. Then the patterns. Then the composition. Then the sunlight. Then the ground covered in paving stones. I could have stopped there. And I would have been happy. The image is fresh and clean and warm and uplifting. It makes me wanna be in the scene, as Robert Pirsig wrote in [Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance](#), when he talked about the difference of riding in a car versus a motorcycle:

In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame.

On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming.

To be in the scene. And the presence is overwhelming. That's what I mean by *My Postcard Teacher*. When I look more closely at the blue bench postcard I see there's a description on the back of the card. It says:

v/o Ana of [Cartas y Postales](#): *Caminito es un callejón museo y un pasaje de gran valor cultural y turístico, ubicado en el barrio de la Boca, Buenos Aires. El lugar adquirió significado cultural debida a que inspiró la musica del famoso tango Caminto, por Juan de Dios Filberto.*

If you didn't quite catch that, Ana said, "[Caminito](#) is a museum alley and passage, of great cultural and tourist value, located in the neighborhood of La Boca, in Buenos Aires. The place acquired cultural significance because it inspired the music at the [famous tango Caminito](#), composed by Juan de Dios Filberto."

Again, that information would be enough on most days. But I recently saw the famous Jeopardy champion [James Holzhauer](#) comment about the difference between amateurs and real trivia professionals: It's curiosity. Holzhauer said, "An amateur picks up a book, looks at it, and puts it back down. Mostly forgets about it. A professional researcher, on the other hand, picks up a book, looks at the cover. Writes

down a few questions. Does some background on the author. Asks about why the title is the title. Asks questions to go deeper. And reads the book."

That's the essence of learning, isn't it? The endless curiosity. What Maria Montessori called *following an idea to its logical conclusion*. And yes, I want to read the book.

So, there's more I can learn from Ana's Blue Park Bench, isn't there? As I read the description on the card, I wondered why they called the neighborhood *La Boca*. I wondered about the history of the the barrio. Which made me wonder about the history of Buenos Aires. Especially its architecture. I looked it up. After all, it's My Postcard Teacher.

\*\*\*\*\*

This is Frank Roche, and you're listening to Episode 128 of The Postcardist Podcast: My Postcard Teacher.

\*\*\*\*\*

Here's the show for today. You know how the mind works. I was curious. I wondered if I just stuck my hand into a pile of postcards I got recently, what could I learn. And what did I miss?

This show is about that little experience on this day in February 2022. This show is called My Postcard Teacher.

Let's get started. I have 10 total cards I pulled out. The first one is the blue park bench in Buenos Aires. Come along with me on a little journey to discover what all these postcards taught me today.

### **Postcard One: Park Bench in La Boca**

Let's start with Ana's blue park bench in Buenos Aires. I had three questions; Why was the neighborhood called La Boca? What was the significance of that neighborhood in the photo? And what should I know about the history of Buenos Aires?

Let's start with La Boca -- The Mouth. It's a neighborhood (barrio) of the Argentine capital, Buenos Aires. Many of its early settlers are from the city of Genoa, Italy; and still to present day it has an Italian *flavor*. [Wikipedia](#) tell us, "La Boca is a popular destination for tourists visiting Argentina, with its colorful houses and pedestrian street, the Caminito, where tango artists perform and tango-related memorabilia is sold. Other attractions include the La Ribera theatre, many tango clubs and Italian taverns." By the way, it's no kidding about La Boca being a popular tourist destination. It's a top destination, and you can see lots of colorful photos from that neighborhood on social media sites.

My second question was sort of answered, wasn't it? What's the significance? Certainly, from what I read, La Boca still has an independent streak. Back 140 years ago, the area tried to secede from Argentina. That didn't work, but the independent spirit still is there. (On a side note, I'm watching an Argentine series right now on Netflix called [Okupas](#), which is about a group of young men who take over (occupy) a building as squatters in the year 2000. That kind of fighting spirit seems to describe La Boca, as well.)

My third question was about the architecture of Buenos Aires. Let's just say [Architectural Digest](#) describes Buenos Aires as the Paris of Latin America. I could go on and on here. If you used to follow me on Instagram, you saw that I wrote extensively about the [Planetario Galileo Galilei](#) and the glow-in-the-dark stamp that was created to honor its 50th anniversary. There's so much to say here...but I'd say this about My Postcard Teacher -- it's always worth looking for more. And I have. Let's keep going. And learning.

## **Postcard Two: Peace Fountain**

The second card in my stack of 10 is from Justin. It features a watercolor drawing titled *Peace Fountain Charles E. Gagnon, 1989*. Here's what I found out by looking for a little more information on the [Gagnon Museum website](#):

In 1988 ,the City of Rochester, MN commissioned Charles E. Gagnon to create the Peace Fountain. Chuck worked day and night to create this breathtaking sculpture. The Peace Fountain was dedicated on June 25, 1989 at the end of the RochesterFest celebrations. It is located in the heart of downtown Rochester in

the appropriately named Peace Plaza on 1st Avenue SW & 1st Street SW. (Go ahead a drive around Rochester as I have done many times on streets that are named the same thing only with a map coordinate designation to make all the difference.)

There's so much more. Of course, I had to look at [Charles Gagnon's biography](#). He spent his career creating sculptures that promoted world peace. He incorporated doves in much of his work, and on a personal note, I have to say the museum in Rochester, Minnesota is worth visiting. I had reasons to have extended stays in Rochester, and in addition to the fabulous healthcare I got at Mayo Clinic, going to the Gagnon Museum was a highlight of my time in Rochester. So....that's the Peace Fountain card and I know more than when I started. Of course, I had to look up the history of Rochester, Minnesota, and [here's what I learned](#):

The area developed as a stagecoach stop between Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Dubuque, Iowa near the Zumbro River. The community was founded by George Head and his wife Henrietta who built a log cabin named Head's Tavern in 1854 and named the city after his hometown of Rochester, New York. When the Winona and St Peter Railroad initiated service in October 1864, it brought new residents and business opportunities and spurred growth. In 1863, Dr. William W. Mayo arrived as the examining surgeon for Union draftees in the Civil War. Yes, that Dr. Mayo. I'm glad he did what he did.

If I were purely using the Montessori Method, I'd also tell you 220,000 people live in Rochester. That the biggest employer is Mayo Clinic. That it's rural around the area. And that Pádraig O'Tuama read a poem by James Wright on his [Poetry Unbound podcast](#) that references Rochester, and each time I drive there I play it as a novena. Rightly, it's called *The Prayer*. Here's a snippet.

### **V/O Pádraig O'Tuama reading first two lines of *The Prayer***

I highly recommend going to *Poetry Unbound* and listening to everything Pádraig reads and reading everything he writes. His work is part of the [On Being](#) project, which they describe as questioning *What does it mean to be human, how do we want to live, and who will we be to each other?*

Do you see how all this works? The convergence? One postcard -- a Peace Fountain postcard -- and look how far I've roamed. Postcards connect people. And postcards teach people.

### **Postcard Three: Disney World**

Next in the stack is something fun. Uplifting. It's a lenticular postcard sent from Disney World by my daughter-in-law Ashley and my grandson Jamo. (You know, you heard him on this show talking about Biggie.) The postcard they sent has Mickey Mouse tugging at his tie with a big number 50 in the upper lefthand corner, celebrating 50 years of Walt Disney World. So, what did My Postcard Teacher teach me about this one?

Well, first, the [50th anniversary celebration](#) of Disney World kicked off on October 1, 2021. Yeah, except for that pesky worldwide Covid pandemic that led Disney to postpone the celebration on the day and extend the party for the entirety of 2022. Yep, it's going on now. Did you know Walt Disney started Disneyland in Anaheim, California in 1955....but it was called [Project Future](#)? He then bought 27,000 acres in central Florida after opening Disneyland, and that was the start of Disney World.

Curious about the price of an entrance ticket at Disney? According to their website, a day pass for age 10 plus is \$109. But there are add-ons, and everyone takes the add-ons. For instance, if you pick the Park Hopper option, the price goes to \$199 per day. And remember that thing I said where the price is for 10+? Yes, there's a discount for ages 3-9...you save five bucks. It's \$194 per day for a Park Hopper pass for a kid...of course if your kid is less than age 3 it's free. But trust me, and this comes from someone who took a kid younger than 3 to Disney World, it ain't free. Sure, park admittance is free. But you have to rent a stroller. Then drag your kid around all day. There's a tax on your body for that.

### **Postcard Four: Disneyland**

Know what's not as taxing? Another lenticular Disney card I got from Clocky of the [Sent from Disneyland](#) podcast. The card features Mickey Mouse in front of a banner that says 2021. Plus, there's a rendering of the Magic Kingdom. This one is from Disneyland Resort. [Disneyland opened on July 17, 1955](#). And did you know they had a

[disastrous opening day?](#) [History.com](#) writes about how construction was lagging and many rides weren't open for the first day. It got worse. They write:

So many weeds sprouted along the banks of the Canal Boats of the World ride that Disney ordered workers to place signs with exotic species names in Latin next to them to resemble an arboretum. In temperatures that reached 100 degrees, the fresh asphalt on Main Street, USA melted into a sticky tar that ensnared the high heels of some women while a paucity of drinking fountains due to a plumbers' strike led to frustrations, rather than water, bubbling over. Plenty of water, however, could be found washing over the deck of the Mark Twain riverboat, which was filled beyond capacity and listing from side to side.

Even worse, Disneyland was overloaded with party crashers. The theme park expected a crowd of 15,000 people at the invitation-only opening, however, 28,154 passed through Disneyland's gates thanks to counterfeit tickets. A few more even scaled a fence using a ladder erected by a makeshift entrepreneur who charged \$5 a head.

Even by southern California standards, the seven-mile backup to Disneyland on the Santa Ana Freeway was epic. Passengers baked in their cars, and kids were forced to take bathroom breaks on the side of the freeway and even in the Disneyland parking lot. Unprepared for the throng, Disneyland's refreshment stands and three restaurants ran out of food, and sweating parents and thirsty kids abandoned many of the long lines.

Know what else I learned? That Walt Disney took a huge risk. But he believed in his dream. And now, for the small price of only \$199 to walk through the turnstile, you can, too.

### **Postcard Five: Van Gogh: The Meadow with Butterflies**

Know who else had a dream? Vincent Van Gogh. Next up on My Postcard Teacher is a card from Nikita featuring Van Gogh's 1890 painting titled *The Meadow with Butterflies...or* , alternatley, *The Asylum Garden*. Your choice. And there's much to learn here.

The National Gallery, where the painting is on exhibit, [uses this description](#):

Van Gogh painted this patch of meadow when he was a patient at the psychiatric hospital at Saint-Paul de Mausole, near the village of St-Rémy in the south of France. While at the hospital he made a number of sketches and paintings that look down at small areas of meadow or undergrowth.

Although there is no horizon or sky, the path near the top of the picture creates an effect of depth. In contrast to the boundary formed by the path, the remaining space is open and potentially extends beyond the sides and bottom of the canvas. The grass is painted with distinct brushstrokes of varying length, laid down in clusters like the clumps they describe.

Van Gogh's interest in depicting nature in detail may have been encouraged by what he had read about Japanese culture, and his belief that 'the wise Japanese man...studies a single blade of grass'. But there were also important precedents in Renaissance art and in seventeenth-century Dutch painting.

So, just when I thought I knew a little about Van Gogh, here comes a more obscure piece of his work, and that led me down the path to discover much more. And yes, I read more about why Van Gogh was in the psychiatric hospital...okay, I'll tell you. First, he was very productive there, and he painted more than [150 works during a year-long stay](#). You probably know about him cutting off his left ear. That's disputed by some who say he only cut off part of it, but nonetheless, he was having bouts of mental illness in 1888 and 1889, and people in town started calling him *fou roux* (the redheaded madman). In fact, they got the police to shut down Van Gogh's house and basically ran him out of town. To say the least, that's not very nice. But Vincent knew he was in enough trouble that he committed himself to the hospital in the Provence. While there, besides painting the painting on this card, he painted *The Irises*. We all know that one.

### **Postcard Six: Man Near Manhole, Times Square, 1922**

My next postcard comes in the form of a black-and-white postcard titled [Man Near Manhole, Times Square, New York City](#). It's from a gelatin silver print from 1954 by



the photographer [Louis Stettner](#) that's in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. In his obituary written in the [New York Times](#), his work was described this way:

With an unerring eye for the poetry of the everyday, he trained his camera on subway riders and pedestrians in New York — the unceasing human ebb and flow in the old Penn Station — and ordinary Parisians going about their daily rounds, like the woman walking her dog on a deserted and misty Avenue de Chatillon in 1949.

You might know that I made a comment about the commercial viability of black-and-white versus color postcards, and even did a podcast about it. My Postcard Teacher came to my aid in the form of many black-and-white postcards people sent to me to increase my knowledge. I didn't know Stettner's work, except to say I recognized a couple pieces. Now, with the prompting of this card from Denise, I started down the path to learn more about his work, including the politics of photography in the 1950s in the U.S.

### **Postcard Seven: La Conquista de Espacio (1785)**

I have this really big thing about hot air balloons. Whenever I see one I think it's a sign of good luck. So, when Maggie sent a card that's of an old time hot air balloon titled La Conquista del Espacio, Globo de Lunardi 1785, you can bet I had to know more. First, the card was illustrated by the artist [Alfredo De la María](#), whose work spanned everything from polo (where his works are legendary in Uruguay), to automotive magazines in Buenos Aires, to this set of hot air balloon illustrations called La Conquista del Espacio. On top of finding out more about De la María's work, I then read more about [Vincezo Lunardi](#), the guy in the balloon in 1785.

But it all started in 1784, the first year of balloon flight. Listen to this passage about Lunardi from Wikipedia:

There was a flying craze in France and Scotland with James Tytler, Scotland's first aeronaut and the first Briton to fly, but even so and after a year since the invention of the balloon, the English were still skeptical, and so George Biggin and 'Vincent' Lunardi, "The Daredevil Aeronaut", together decided to demonstrate a

hydrogen balloon flight at the Artillery Ground of the Honourable Artillery Company in London on 15 September 1784.

However, because the 200,000-strong crowd (which included eminent statesmen and the Prince of Wales) had grown very impatient, the young Italian had to take off without his friend Biggin, and with a bag that was not completely inflated, but he was accompanied by a dog, a cat and a caged pigeon. The flight from the Artillery Ground travelled in a northerly direction towards Hertfordshire, with Lunardi touching down briefly in a cornfield in the parish of North Mymms to release the cat which had become unwell. After the brief touch down, Lunardi continued his flight before eventually bringing the balloon to rest in Standon Green End.

The 24-mile flight brought Lunardi fame and began the ballooning fad that inspired fashions of the day—Lunardi skirts were decorated with balloon styles, and in Scotland, the Lunardi Bonnet was named after him

Oh, it goes on...and gets better:

Lunardi's next flight was made nearly a year later on 29 June 1785 and left from St George's Fields on the south side of the Thames. Lunardi and Biggin, and two invitees, Letitia Ann Sage and Colonel Hastings, were supposed to make the flight, but the balloon wouldn't take off because of the weight. Lunardi and Hastings stepped down, and the balloon took off with Biggin and Mrs. Sage, making her the first English female in flight. 90 minutes later, they landed near Harrow, where the two aeronauts had to be rescued by a group of boys from Harrow School from the angry farmer whose crops were damaged.

Oh, man. What a story. You'd think you would know the ending. But you don't. Lunardi didn't die in a ballooning accident, although he came close a few times and he had to leave England in 1786 after what was supposed to be his 12th launch at Newcastle upon Tyne in 1786 ended in a casualty, when Lunardi spilled sulfuric acid on the ground. Assistants restraining the already buoyant balloon fled from the place which caused it to take off. One of them, the son the under-sheriff of Northumberland, had a rope twisted around his hand and could not disengage himself in time. He was

drawn up in the air. Eventually, he fell to the ground and died later from internal injuries.

Yes, I said he spilled sulfuric acid . Which made helpers drop the ropes. Which left the son of the under-sheriff of Northumberland twisted in the ropes as the balloon rose unexpectedly. And he fell to his death. Writers, all the stories you ever need to know are out there, and if you use a single postcard as a teacher, this is what you can learn.

### **Postcard Eight: Real Alcázar de Sevilla**

Card number 8 is of stucco decoration in the Patio de las Doncellas (The Courtyard of the Maidens) at the Mudéjar Palace in Sevilla, Spain. Okay, that's a long enough description. Well, maybe it's not. This card is from what's known as [Real Alcázar de Sevilla](#), one of the oldest royal palaces still in use and it has the [largest late-medieval garden in Europe](#). The palace was built over a 500-year span, starting in the year 913. I could go on with this one all day, but let's just say I put this on my bucket list.

### **Postcard Nine: Wild Animals in Hokkaido**

Do you know how to say deer in Japanese? How about how to say red-crowned crane in Japanese? I got a postcard called Animals in Hokkaido, and the writer told me. The deer from Hokkaido are called Ezojika, and the cranes are called Tancho. The species of deer are called [Sika](#), and the males can grow to more than 200 kilograms. The cranes are somewhat amazing. As a birder myself, I'm always fascinated with adding to my Life List. Many people thought they would never add the Tancho because it had been considered extinct. But somehow the species made a comeback in eastern Hokkaido, and now there are [specially preserved wetlands](#) where a few lucky birders can catch a glimpse of this symbol of Japan.

Also, I can't not comment on Hokkaido. Hokkaido is the second largest, northernmost and least developed of Japan's four main islands. Its weather is harsh in winter with lots of snowfall, below zero temperatures and frozen seas, while in summer it does not get as hot and humid as in the other parts of the country. By the way, if you wanna be on Jeopardy, you have to know your islands, including your [Japanese islands](#), which number 6,852 in the archipelago. But really, you just need to know the five main islands from north to south: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, and

Okinawa. Honshu is the biggest, and where Tokyo is located. Little fun fact: Historically, Honshu was called Hondo. You can thank me (and My Postcard Teacher) if you get that one right on a Jeopardy clue.

## **Postcard 10: Stonehenge**

Now we're around to card number 10. I got a super cool round Stonehenge card from Devin. And although I've seen [Stonehenge](#), I needed to know more. Remember that part about My Postcard Teacher? Quick facts: It's a World Heritage Site. Stonehenge is perhaps the world's most famous prehistoric monument. It was built in several stages: the first monument was an early henge monument, built about 5,000 years ago, and the unique stone circle was erected in the late Neolithic period about 2500 BCE. In the early Bronze Age many burial mounds were built nearby. In about 2500 BCE the stones were set up in the centre of the monument. Two types of stone are used at Stonehenge – the larger sarsens (which are sandstone boulders and a killer word to add to your vocabulary) and the smaller 'bluestones'. The sarsens were erected in two concentric arrangements – an inner horseshoe and an outer circle – and the bluestones were set up between them in a double arc.

Okay, I could go on and on all day about Stonehenge. And I might. But not today. Lets just say the stones were brought from great distances...the bluestones were brought from 250 kilometers away, and the sarsens were brought from 25 kilometers away. I'll remember that the next time I complain about having to roll out the trash cans on Monday morning. Those people back then were strong.

So,, that's a wrap. Ten postcards. Lots and lots and lots to learn. What did you think? Do you know a little more than when you started listening? I do...or I did learn as I went along

I've taken advantage of time I found by taking a break from Instagram. And when I say found time, I mean like 30 hours a week. By taking that break it's allowed me to slow down, sip my coffee, and learn more about the world. Yes, these 10 postcards had a place orientation, which makes it easy to find out more. But I'd like to suggest if you slow down and look, each postcard can be a teacher. Do what Mark Routh does as he documents the history of thousands upon thousands of postcards on his site, [Mark's Postcard Chat](#). Mark writes about the significance of each card, about designers, and

about value. On Ana Padovani's [Cartas y Postales](#) blog, she writes about card and letter collection, and has recently started writing about a collection of [postcard love letters written](#) between two people in 1907 in Uruguay and Buenos Aires. And Lizzy Maguire's [Flea Market Love Letters](#) is another example of how to slow down and really look at what postcards and letters can teach us. Those are three really good blogs to read, and I'd recommend adding them to your subscriptions. If you have recommendations for me or others I should add to the mix, please let me know. You can reach me at postcardist at gmail dot com.

Well, that's my lesson for today. My tiny little mantra is "learn something new every day." I try to honor that. And postcards make that possible. Here's to you, My Postcard Teacher.

Thanks a lot for listening.