

*"Backyard Pesto is a big hit! Thank you, Scott!" The email came last Saturday, around 6:30 in the evening, presumably as the sender and her family were enjoying the recipe we published in a recent issue of The Skinnie.*

The sender – we'll call her Phyllis, because that's her name and I doubt she'd mind me using it – is a person for whom I have genuine affection, and she'll check in with a nugget of mutual interest from time to time. A sample size of one is not statistically significant (at least I remember this much from all the math I took), but a single reader taking the time to affirm the value of our work – to her, anyway – is heartwarming, nonetheless.

Then, the sample group grew. Jenna, who is unusually adept at creating and maintaining relationships with our advertising partners, was visiting one to arrange a photo for an upcoming issue. One of the women in the visited office offered the following aside: "I don't really like to cook, but I LOVED the lemon pasta recipe (from an issue earlier this summer), and the Backyard Pesto, too!" Jenna, delighted by the feedback, teased out more. Said the cooking-unenthusiast, "We'd love a recipe or two for a great and simple summer salad." And so, it will be.

Let's not forget Herb. He might be my most vocal supporter, and the spryest man his age. He texts. He did so on February 3: "Just read your current Up Front – Amen, brother!" On March 15: "Enjoyed your Up Front – Classic you." Somehow, I know exactly what he meant. June 8: "Current Up Front – First class love story!" I love Herb's sense of curiosity and wonder and genuine interest in the world; he has the enthusiasm of a boy, which hasn't been suffocated by nine decades of significant life experience.

My mom is arguably my most ardent and biased fan. A few weeks ago, she texted: "Just read your Up Front again and it is a really good one / U will probably get great response."

To which I answered in wet-blanket fashion: "I don't really get much response to any of them but thank you."

I toggle between assumptions. Is the silence that follows my thought-sharing an indication that almost-nobody reads my stuff, that those who do don't care about or enjoy it, that it's not very interesting or good? Or for every Phyllis or Herb or salad-seeking-office-worker or Mom, are there dozens more with whom I unknowingly commune, at fortnight increments, with thudding regularity, as the decades pass?

A magazine like this one is a business – a commercial enterprise. But it's a conduit, too. It connects us to you. Jenna and I often sit around our house exchanging ideas for features, shuffling through photos that might look good on the cover, reviewing ads to ensure our clients get noticed and promoted in the most favorable light. There's a personal aspect to an essayist's work. It's therapeutic to unburden oneself of private thoughts, as it's simultaneously daunting to do so. There's a strange du-

ality that exists within the psyche. On one hand, general indifference to the state of nearly-non-existent feedback; on the other, an emotional rush when you realize you have connected with someone through your thoughts and words.

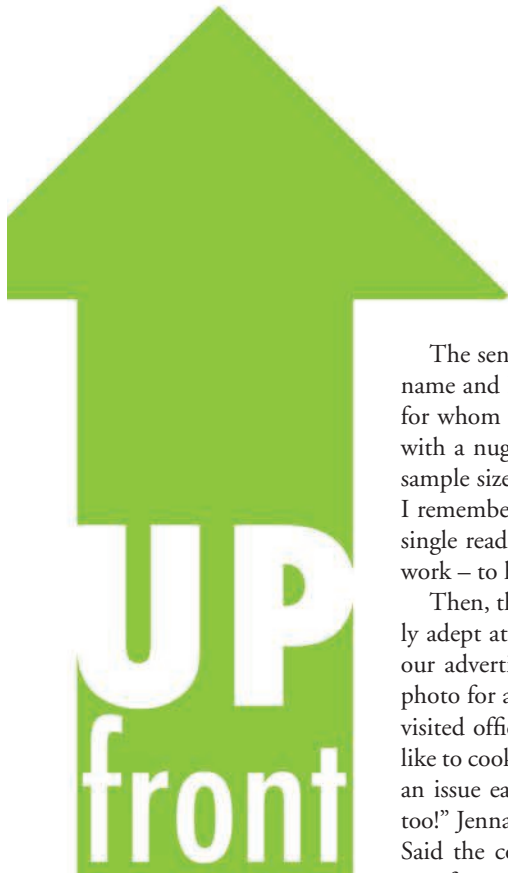
This is more than an insecure quest for accolades. At least, I hope it is. I/we enjoy the vitriol, too...sometimes the invectives are more fun than the praise. Although, as I've detailed, most readers remain anonymous to us, we can easily tell when we've irritated a collective nerve. There are those who relish the opportunity to share with us their disdain.

The nature of our enterprise suggests a significant component of community service, which we are happy to provide. In fact, it's our reason for being, our sustaining force. But sometimes we are amused by the expectations that some of our constituents apply to us. This is an actual excerpt (with identifying details omitted) from an email I received yesterday, three days after deadline for such submissions: "I'm a member of The Landings...I need (the event) listed in the calendar portion of *The Skinny*...I need it published in the next issue and all issues leading up to the event." Attuned to the urgency suggested by the writer's language, I dropped what I was doing, which was related to an altogether different but important-to-me-and-others endeavor, and wrote back to the sender that, despite the difficulty associated with shoehorning her item into an already-built publication, we'd do our best. I thanked her for thinking of us while resisting the temptation to correct the spelling she chose for our name (though that temptation obviously got the best of me here).

What's the point? Sometimes I wonder what you make of us. The guy who sent a photo of the magazine in his trash can because he assumed our politics don't align: Does he still secretly read every two weeks, perversely and subconsciously hoping to be annoyed? Is there another family like Phyllis's who were as blown away by the elemental deliciousness of a five-ingredient, no-cook sauce as I was when I first conceived it? Will you look at our cover and think: That's beautiful? Mostly, I/we will never know. Which is fine. But if you ever want to engage, or seek us out to satisfy your informational needs, that's fine, too. We'll be here.

*Scott A. Lawrence*

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