

Dear Uncle Johannes, *How are you?*

Actually, please forgive me for asking — I know how you are. You're dead.

In fact, I feel a little foolish even writing to you like this. But the thing is, I've been having these vague doubts about this new millennium we're starting next year, and I just had to get a few things off my chest.

DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU STARTED WHEN you came up with that loony idea to combine a goldsmith's punch with a wine press? Religion, politics, science, literature — none of these would have been the same if not for you.

I know the Archbishop of Nassau (not to be confused with the island) wasn't your fault, and believe me, we're all still pretty bummed out about that — especially since you'd barely gotten over losing your press to Joe Fust six years before. But you have to admit that the bishop's little burn-and-pillage party in your home town of Mainz helped spread "Gutenberg presses" all over Europe.

Speaking of Fust, I really hope that after all these years you two have finally made up. I think you knew all along that he was a "Show me the money" kinda guy, and maybe, if only you'd caught that Tom Cruise flick (if only movies had been invented), you would have twigged to the idea that doing deals on the side wasn't the best way to preserve a partnership. Oh, well. Live and learn, eh? At least he died of the plague.

But you know what was really great about you, Uncle Johannes? You were just a regular guy, like all of us, looking for the "big score" so you could pay for your *real* hobby — wine tasting. By the way, that's one of your traditions that's survived intact until today: pressmen still love their beverages.

And selling the Church on mass-producing genuine "handwritten" indulgences so the rich and sinful could buy their way into heaven — well, I have to hand it to you, Uncle Johannes, that was pure genius.

Except, not fifty years after you cashed out, all hell broke loose — pardon the expression — when that German kid Luther put your machine to work to blow the whistle on the Big Boys in Rome.

Isn't it ironic that, over 550 years after you got that flash of insight about moulding hot lead into fonts, we salute you as the father of the press — when the fact of the matter is that what you set out to do was build a *copier*. I mean, why else would you design your font set to include several variations of each letter of the alphabet, the better to fake different styles of handwriting?

When most people think about you today, they think of the printing press. But between you and me, I think Chester Carlson was actually the guy who finally figured out a better way to do what you wanted to do — but not until another 500 years had gone by.

By the way, it took quite a while for somebody to improve on your system for setting type. In fact, who knows where we'd be today if Bill Church (now *there's* irony) hadn't built that simple typesetting machine of his. But, gosh, that took almost four centuries!

Of course, if fifty years later Christopher Scholes hadn't figured out how to stuff the whole alphabet into a box with keys, we folks sitting here at the end of the millennium might still be dragging letters around our screens one at a time with a mouse (although I bet you would have come up with a better name than "typewriter").

