

Epilogue: Changes

Our letters continued for two more years until August of 1980, when Otto Frank died.

Fritzi wrote me:

Dearest Cara,

Now my darling Otto has left me and all his friends in the world. Though I know that he wanted to die after his long and fulfilled life with the many sad but also happy events, I miss him terribly. I am glad however that you still saw him when he was his own lovable self. Luckily he did not suffer and passed away peacefully...

This book was one of the hardest challenges I've had to face. For all my efforts are living in the *now*, and everything in this work is in the *then*, where I truly didn't want to go.

It is a book of reminders, of ghosts—of a house in the hills, a marriage, a cozy, secure world that is no longer but has been replaced by an entirely happy, yet completely different scenario. Change, I have come to understand, is an integral part of life. My sons, Ethan and Jesse, are now grown men with wives and children of their own (Jesse with Branda and daughter Autumn; and Ethan with Fabiane and son, Kaio.) I am now “Nana”—a name that suits my soul completely. And though my marriage with Kent ended years ago, we still are good friends; he and his wife, Rosana, and my wonderful husband, Pete, and his grown son, Adam, are now the added elements to a family that have still remained close in spite of the changes.

Change, as this book reflects, is keenly apparent in every moment—every decade. It seems I've had to say goodbye to so many—including in time farewells to my dear friends Fritzi, Miep, Jan and beloved Otto. Life truly is about letting go—nothing remains the same ever, does it? I'm sure you find that in your life as well.

This book has forced me to watch myself grow up. An over-exuberant, ever-dramatic child. And, as Anne expressed in her diary, I felt a lot of ways then that I don't feel now. I spoke a lot about the need to hate, and I don't feel so very extreme—so very black and white about things today. Life is a lot greyer and multi-dimensional. Love is the solution to every fearful situation. I believe this with all my heart.

I also didn't change Otto's charming syntax, nor his proclivity for calling Kent "Ken." I left in my own heady sentences, hopes and dreams, humor and pain; and the hailstorm of explanation points!!!! I read those long-ago letters and see a different me—a "Cara-then" as opposed to a "Cara-now." But how are we different? How are we the same? How did this man whom I so revered truly affect my life? Why did I choose him to have so much power and influence over my life?

Otto Frank obviously fulfilled a need in my life to be validated.

The words "validation" and "choice" are those that resonate with me strongly when I think about what I've learned most of all through that beautiful correspondence and friendship.

If we all took the time to validate each other's thoughts, words, feelings, privacy, even eccentricities what a more caring world this would be, don't you think? To react not in judgment or criticism but with love and compassion is the kindest way to connect with one another.

Otto validated me by not only writing back through the years, but making me always feel that I mattered to him. He did this for young people worldwide. We all felt we truly mattered to this wise and wonderful mentor. Otto cared for us all and he listened. What a gift. When I discovered that he actually saved my words, all of my letters—like he did for his other

global “family”—that was the ultimate validation of his caring nature. I still am greatly moved by this.

Otto encouraged my love of writing, as he encouraged me to be a mother and to really be with and know my children. Many times he expressed his pain in realizing that with all the time and attention he gave to Anne he really didn't know her. The Diary's contents were a shock to him in many ways. He would have thought that his gentle daughter, Margot, would have penned such sensitive missives, not Anne. “Know your children, Cara...” I remembered those words. I kept journals for many years about my sons. The books are treasured and have become a source of great entertainment not only by Ethan and Jesse but now their own families. My grandson, Kaio, falls into gleeful paroxysms of laughter when I read to him what his daddy and uncle did and said as children. And my sons love knowing more about who they are and always were from the start. I am so grateful to Otto for reinforcing the importance of listening to the childhood voices—such a beautiful way to validate their uniqueness and impact on our lives.

Miep validated Anne by respecting her privacy and not reading one word of the young girl's writings. Miep simply tucked them away for Anne until she hopefully returned from the concentration camps. Even when Otto returned from Auschwitz Miep chose not to tell Otto about the saved Diary and the other writing material of Anne's. They were not for him they were for Anne. Only after they received word that Anne had died in Bergen-Belsen along with her sister, Margot, did Miep then give all of Anne's writings to the devastated father. Miep's choice to validate Anne ultimately gave the world *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Validation and Choices. We do have choices every moment. It might not feel that way but we do. “It's not the load that breaks you down...it's the way you carry it.” We all have burdens of our own but we also have choices as to how to deal with them. We can blame others,

succumb to the pain, or become bitter, angry, implode. Otto Frank didn't do any of that and in choosing a more positive and loving perspective, he not only helped himself live and love, he helped a whole world of others too. He kept his daughter's spirit and words alive for generations. He read her words and he listened with his heart and he did as she so passionately wished—

“I want to go on living even after my death.” –Anne Frank, *The Diary*

Even in Auschwitz Otto chose not to focus on the horror surrounding him, but rather he told a young man that they must envision other things—talks of literature and music and even, he requested of the young man, “...to call me ‘Papa’, for that is who I am...” Otto was a father and it was his deep love for his two daughters and the desire to reunite with them after they were hopefully liberated that kept him alive. His love for them and his identity of being a father was a choice of love over hate.

“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.” –Kahlil Gibran

There is a revolutionary book entitled, *The Hidden Messages in Water*, by the renowned scientist, Dr. Masaru Emoto. What Dr. Emoto reveals in his astounding work is that even the tiniest of molecules of water are affected by our thoughts, words, and feelings. He shows us how molecules can actually thrive and flourish from good energy or wither from negative energy. It is an amazing book, a true treasure that I highly recommend everyone read to help realize how important our positive thoughts are in not only changing our own lives, but, indeed the entire

world. This is how Otto Frank helped changed the world. He chose love over hate—hope over hopelessness.

Otto Frank also taught me another tremendous lesson when I asked him if he knew who betrayed them. He simply said, “It doesn’t matter.” And he was right. Some things just don’t matter. His children were dead, nothing that Otto could say would bring them back. He said later to others, “We cannot change what happened any more. The only thing we can do is to learn from the past and to realize what discrimination and persecution of innocent people means. I believe that it’s everyone’s responsibility to fight prejudice.”

I remember once giving a talk to a group of middle school students about Otto and was speaking about the power of forgiveness. At one point a young boy raised his hand and asked me if I then had forgiven Hitler for what he did to the Jews. The question was like a sucker-punch. I had to think about my answer and then said, “Actually, no I don’t forgive him. But I have let him go. I don’t want to carry around hate inside me. I have released the weight of Hitler-hate from my molecules.”

Some things you just have to release. So even though the idea of forgiveness is powerful and edifying, I find that most of us can accept even more the concept of “letting go” in order to go on with our own lives. At least it works for me—and that young student seemed to agree as well.

Fritzi said about Otto, “Although he believed that Hitler’s crimes against the Jews should never be forgotten, he also felt that there was no way forward with hatred.”

I am reminded of one of my favorite sayings, “*Holding onto hatred and resentment and anger is like taking poison and hoping it kills the other person.*” Every time I feel myself

carrying around the weight of negative feelings towards someone else I think of this. And also:
“Before you embark on a journey of revenge dig two graves.” –Confucius

Another lesson I learned looking back on my long correspondence with Otto was that it’s a good thing to follow impulse and write to anyone we choose. We don’t have to expect any answers back either. It’s just taking that leap of faith and showing up to someone we feel compelled to talk to—either through a letter or an email or Facebook or Twitter.

Unfortunately, this new generation barely knows about putting pen to paper, sending out stamped and sealed letters into the world and then waiting, waiting, waiting for the mail to come and with it a response of some kind. Lost is the joy of writing with a solid pen onto crisp paper stock, or even tapping away on a typewriter and feeling like you are truly birthing something special with each ding-click-zip signaling sentence endings and new beginnings...Ah well.

I just want to encourage everyone to connect with whomever they always wished to talk to—be it presidents, authors, kings, queens, wildlife leaders, race car drivers, athletes, adventurers, survivors, scientists, performers, on and on. Who do you admire? Why not tell them? Okay, you might not get an answer back from them personally, but you will feel proud of yourself for simply having the courage to act on your dream. If you hear back, well that’s frosting on the cake. If you don’t, then pat yourself on the back and admire your “cake” of courage to write the letter in the first place and send it out. Never give up. If I had stopped at the point that Otto told me he couldn’t write any more, then I would have lost decades of a friendship that changed my life. I was prepared to just keep writing to him because I wanted to talk to him. I needed to do that—and he understood. No one is too great or unobtainable to speak to.

So, although much has changed in my life and in the world itself since my dear Otto and I corresponded, what has never changed is my love for him and my ever-growing respect and awe for the lessons I continue to learn because of him. Otto Frank took my hand and walked me from childhood to adulthood, as he did for young people all over this world. In our loneliest, angriest, most futile times this grandfather-of-all—this amazing Holocaust survivor—embraced us and loved us unconditionally.

I feel his presence all the time and have come to expect a call to speak about the book oftentimes when my spirit is at low tide. His voice, “Just tell the story” is alive within me, as is his constant belief in the power of forever being hopeful. In fact, ever since my journey continued after Otto died small encouraging signs have buoyed my spirits. Ironically, they’ve appeared as the number eight. The sign of infinity, it shows up on a torn card at my feet, a seat assignment on a theater ticket, eight friends gathered together spontaneously (I was recently the eighth speaker at an authors’ event), or on a bus, truck or cab directly in front of me, on and on and on. Sometime ago I was informed of news that literally took my breath away. “Otto” in the Italian language means “eight.” Every time I see an eight I know it is Otto telling me not to give up.

Otto Frank helped me—as he helped his entire global family—believe in planting new hopes when the old ones withered and died. I continue to plant new and ever more positive perspectives every day. Otto would be happy...