

The Gift

BY DIANA RAAB, PH.D.

After you were gone, there wasn't much talk about you, your life, or your ending, until one day more than twenty years later when my parents were moving from Queens, New York. While packing, they stumbled upon your retrospective journal, which you'd written after emigrating from Vienna in the early 1930s. Only after reading the document did I come to understand the deep roots of your depression, which had clearly tormented you for your entire life, and eventually led to your suicide.

I tucked the journal away, and ten years later pulled it out, just after my breast-cancer diagnosis. I was hungry for answers about my illness—after all, no one in my family had ever been diagnosed with the disease. I considered the possibility that you'd committed suicide as the result of a cancer diagnosis that you'd kept to yourself. I hoped your written words could provide an explanation for my own health crisis, but they didn't. However, something even more profound occurred: the details of your tragic life drew me closer to your spirit. I also realized that my love for writing came from you, and for this I'd like to now thank you.

From your journal, I learned that you were orphaned during World War I at the age of twelve. While disturbingly unsympathetic soldiers marched through your childhood town, you witnessed Russians killing a little boy on your street. You wrote about trekking for hours through the countryside to an infirmary to find your mother dying of cholera. On a floor lined with bodies, you had to identify the one belonging to your mother. At the age of fourteen, along with your younger sister, you immigrated to Vienna and lived in an orphanage. With no parents to support you, you were forced to work in a bank while attending school.

While reading your journal, I realized that I'd never connected with another woman in the same way since your death. As a child, I was an extension of you, and even more so as an adult after your passing. I am also a survivor, having endured two different bouts with cancer, but the genetic connection I was seeking pales in comparison to the bond we share through writing. You were the person who planted the seeds for my writing—not only because you were devoted to the written word yourself (evidenced by daily journaling and a propensity for leaving notes on the

kitchen table), but also because it was you who taught me how to type. The black Remington typewriter (which I now have a replica of in my own writing studio) was perched on your vanity in your bedroom. Do you remember that Saturday morning before breakfast when you invited me into your room?

The conversation went like this:

“Have a seat,” you said, pointing to your vanity chair. “I’m going to teach you how to type. This is a handy skill for a girl to have, plus you never know what kind of stories you’ll have to tell one day.”

You stood behind me, and I gazed at your reflection in the mirror—your dark roots framing your bleached-blond hair, and your glowing smile revealing the rather large space between your two front teeth. I wasn’t surprised to learn years later that as a young woman you’d won numerous beauty contests in your native Vienna.

You took my right hand and positioned it on the home keys, carefully placing one finger at a time on each letter, repeating the same gesture with my left hand.

“This is the position your fingers should be in. When you become a good typist, you won’t have to look at the letters. Let’s see if we can type your name,” you continued.

With my left middle finger, you had me press on the “D.” Then we moved to the right middle finger and moved up a row to type an “I.” Then my left pinkie pressed the “A,” a tricky maneuver for a novice typist. You then instructed me to move my right thumb down to the bottom row to type an “N.” Then my left pinkie typed the final “A.” I glanced up at the paper to see the results of my efforts, and then proudly looked up at your face in the mirror.

“You see? You did it!” you exclaimed, squeezing my shoulders. “Like anything in life, the more you practice, the better you’ll become. You must work hard to get results; you’ll learn that soon enough, my love.”

That moment in time marked my own lifelong commitment to writing. Days after learning how to type, I went back and forth between writing stories in my journal and typing on your Remington, much in the same way I do today—alternating from journal to keyboard. Thanks to you, in college I earned extra money by typing term papers for other students, and as a young mother I chronicled my kids’ early years. As a breast-cancer survivor, I wrote a memoir based on that experience. And I

completed *Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal*, on what would have been your 100th birthday.

Although you chose to finally give up after a life spent in hardship, your life story was one that you felt compelled to share in your journal. I'm grateful for this gesture and am relieved that you chose to keep it tucked away in your closet, since you could have just as easily destroyed it. Had you done so, I would never have found it, and telling your story would not have been possible.

Writing about and studying your life has been my way of keeping you alive. Sharing your story has also allowed me to understand who you were, what you went through, our common traits, and why you ended your life. Reading your journal reminded me of the intrinsic value of writing and the value of passing on stories from one generation to the next. I believe that we stand on the shoulders of giants, but if we didn't know their stories, we wouldn't be aware of that. Your journal was the greatest gift you could have ever bestowed on me. Your words and life experiences have inspired my own writing and will continue to do so, as I hope my own words will for future generations.