

Ripples on the Prinsengracht ~~ the Abiding Challenge of Anne Frank

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Its name is difficult to say, but for Jews there is something natural in the guttural sound of Dutch, something natural in breathing the same air as she did, feeling the same breeze that forms timeless ripples upon the water, feeling the longing, the yearning that lingers in that place. The Prinsengracht is the outermost of four canals that ring Amsterdam in a semi-circle, as arms opening to embrace, from the heart, toward the heart, drawing life-blood from the waters of the Amstel River. Unlike a natural gathering of water, as a sea or lake, or the flowing of a stream or river in its course, a canal is shaped by human hands, a shaping of destiny, a means of transit from place to place, from here to there, from now to then, and back again.

There are times in our lives when we reencounter someone we had met earlier. We try to remember the first meeting, but we can't, not exactly. When, where, how old were we? Like the blurring image of an old photograph, memory fades. Standing at its edge, the canal flows as a stream of consciousness. There, along the Prinsengracht, I had the gift this summer of reencountering Anne Frank.

Mieke and I were in Amsterdam for a conference she had, travelling by train from Belgium, after visiting with our family there. It was a priority to visit the Anne Frank house at number 263 Prinsengracht. We made our way by bicycle, ubiquitous symbol of mobility and freedom for the Dutch. While in hiding, Anne dreamed of being able to ride a bicycle again, "I long to ride a bike, dance, whistle, look at the world, feel young and know that I'm free (24 December, 1943)." We parked in the plaza behind the Westerkerk, the church by whose bells the counting of hours, marking the passage of time for those in hiding. I tried to hear them as they might have, the sound of each chime drifting off into the air, if only to float off with it. There, not far from where he lived, Rembrandt is buried in the church. Music, art, the human spirit rising, mocking the destroyers. Voices seem to echo from the cobblestones. I am feeling more vulnerable with each step. We pause to look for the three stone triangles scattered through the plaza that together form the "Homomonument," a memorial to gay people killed by the Nazis and persecuted in so many places still. The yellow star and pink triangle, colors taken together to form the Magen David marking gay Jews, each now a badge not of shame, but of pride. The third stone triangle is formed of steps going down into the canal, time washing over. We make our way across the plaza, a place where hatred is breathed away with the whispered "why?" of a child.

We waited in line for an hour and a half. I have never felt so patient waiting in line. The line seems never to end, continuing into the evening when other sites such as museums and galleries have long closed. I prefer not think of it as a museum. Flowers are left by the front door, as of a holy place, a place of remembrance. The wait encourages a sense of pilgrimage. People talk in line, offering each other what they know of Anne's story, everyone becoming a little more familiar with the story, with her and with each other. That we are all interwoven, and therefore responsible for each other, is the lesson that should come of being here, of waiting. Some around

us are clearly Jewish, parents haltingly sharing with their children matters of identity, of what it means and might have meant then to be Jewish. She too struggled with what it means to be Jewish and to be human, our questions, but for her, a Jew hunted and in hiding, powerfully poignant in still seeking harmony between the universal and the particular: "One day this terrible war will be over. The time will come when we are people again, and not just Jews.... God has made us who we are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again.... Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good.... We can never become just Netherlanders, or just English, or representatives of any country for that matter, we will always remain Jews, but because we want to... (11 April, 1944)." Jews and non-Jews, it is for each to consider their own identity in coming here, and their place in a slow moving line of humanity inching its way forward. It is part of the meaning and the hope of Anne's house that most in the line are not Jewish. Their questions and words to one another are spoken with a hush, in many languages, but of one tongue, the language of the heart, each drawn to the story of a young Jewish girl. There is universal recognition, identification with her through all the languages of the diary's translation, by any one who has ever winced at human cruelty, at pain brought to another or to oneself.

There is so much life along the canal. There are lovers walking arm in arm, vendors hawking their wares, cyclists weaving in and out among the crowds, delivery trucks pausing in the narrow way, houseboats moored along the quay bursting with flowers, tour boats motoring slowly, fingers pointing to the house now before us, ripples on the Prinsengracht, hard to tell which way they flow. We enter the building through a time warp, a video to set the context of a world at war. They are the familiar images, unbearable, of the camps, of brutality, reminding of the need for sanctuary. From within their hiding place, they knew, the one's whose spirits fill this place, feeling for others as well as fearing for themselves: "The English radio says they are being gassed. I feel terrible..." (9 October, 1942). If they knew, surely the world knew. The horrific merges into the ordinary, an all too easy transition. Climbing the narrow stairs to the next level, we realize the meaning in the metaphor, ordinary people rising to confront the horrific in the midst of day to day details, climbing yet higher. We stand in the 1940's offices of Otto Frank's business, so ordinary too, the grinding of spices for sausage, a gelling agent for jam, products that tell of home and warmth. The heroes who hid them working here by day, tending to the hidden by night, bearing witness with every breath; Miep Gies, Victor Kugler, Johannes Kleiman, Bep Voskuijl, holy names among the righteous of the nations.

We pass through the hidden door behind the moveable bookcase and ascend higher, to the "house behind," *Het Achterhuis*, the Dutch title of the Diary, "the secret annex;" "Now our secret annex has truly become secret. Mr. Kugler thought it would be better to have a bookcase built in front of the entrance to our hiding place" (21 August, 1942). So they lived, a confined space, but not so different from all the places that form the contexts of our lives, defined, confined, unto ourselves, striving to give meaning to those places and spaces we share with others, the world so small. The living quarters are empty, but for the echoes we strain to hear that come amidst the hush. The German occupier had ordered the removal of all furnishings after the arrest that followed betrayal, of all that defines a space as home, that gives context to the familiar, offering comfort. Left empty at Otto Frank's insistence, the guide brochure explains, "The empty house symbolizes the void left behind by the millions of people who were deported and never returned."

We looked up to the small attic where food was stored, lifting our eyes to the window through which Anne gazed at the upper branches of the chestnut tree that gave her such solace. The tree has fallen, a new one planted from its seed, and other shoots throughout the world, including one on Boston common, living memorials, comfort and connection, roots and branches; "From my favorite spot on the floor I look up at the blue sky and the bare chestnut tree, on whose branches little raindrops shine, appearing like silver, and at the seagulls and other birds as they glide on the wind" (23 February, 1944).

We stand before a small exhibit in a glass case, a *siddur* in Hebrew and German that had belonged to Anne's mother, Edith, who evidently sought to share some of her own religious background with Anne. For all of the tension between mother and adolescent daughter, as evidenced in the diary, if only Edith could have known the depth of spiritual fervor and Jewish awareness that stirred in her daughter's soul. I felt a surge of connection as I gazed at the page the prayer book was open to. It seemed so random, not the *Sh'ma* or *Modah Ani*, perhaps, that mother might more likely have tried to share with daughter, but a lengthy Aramaic prayer poem called *Akdomos* that is said on Shavu'os. I felt a shiver of recognition. *Akdomos milin*/In introduction to the Words, the poet sings with love and longing, realizing the futility of words to praise God. It is all as introduction, "Even if the Heavens were parchment, and the forests quills; if all the oceans were ink...." My dear friend, Mr. Jack Gardner, of blessed memory, a Holocaust survivor in my congregation in Victoria, British Columbia, would sigh, *Akdomos milin*, if all the trees were pens and all the seas were ink there could never be enough words..., and his voice would trail off.

We return to where we began, but it is not the same place. It is a different room, a different time, but the same question. What would you do? Not then, but now. The video screen at the end flashes images of immigrants in the streets of Europe. The message is clear, our purpose in having been here is not simply to remember, but to make a difference, to make the world better, in all the places the pilgrims of the long line of waiting will go home to. Anne's spirit fills the house with a plea and a challenge, speak up for those without a voice, the oppressed and despised, not to attach a virtual star or triangle to their clothing, as those once yellow and pink. The sunshine glints off the ripples on the Prisengracht.

I have tried to understand why our visit to the Anne Frank house affected me so deeply, so unexpectedly. I cry easily in thinking about her. I am drawn to search out information about her, to find out more than I had previously known. I have always been touched, as most people are, by the diary and the story of its young writer, but not in this way, not so personally, so many years after my first reading. Perhaps, as in the way of personal encounter that make the lesson real, I had to go there, to be where the words were formed, to hear the echoes, to breathe the spirit. There is an openness and a stillness in her house that is conducive to reflection, to wondering, perhaps part of the wisdom of Otto Frank's desire to leave the space open, empty, allowing us to be alone with our thoughts and with her. There are no signs of horror, only a gentleness that washes over as counterpoint, like ripples on the canal. I have always imagined her as a young girl frozen in time, as she smiles from the cover of the diary. Standing there where she wrote, my thoughts flitted back and forth unbound by time and tragedy. I imagined her as my daughter, my mother, a

student, a muse, a teacher. She would be eighty-four years old today. How much might she have given to the world as the writer she longed to be? Perhaps she gave all she could have given, even if the Heavens were parchment, and the forests quills, all the oceans ink..., all the rest only to have been commentary. A thought comes to me, perhaps that too is why the prayerful page was open to *Akdomos*. With all the yearning for words unwritten, she was the writer she never became.

As I reread the diary upon our return from Amsterdam, my heart opened to its wisdom, wellsprings from which I could not have drawn as a young person so close in age to the writer. The English title seems to do a disservice to the depth of life content within. "The Diary of a Young Girl" suggests the musings of a child, not meant for an adult. Perhaps that is simply a sad reflection of our own bias against learning from the young, the inexperienced. Growing toward the adult she would like to be, she pleaded with her father, and so to us, "You can't and mustn't regard me as fourteen, for all these troubles have made me older..." (5 May, 1944). I add words to the title that reflect my own amazement for what I hadn't seen before, "The Diary of a Young Girl and an Old Soul." She was prescient, anticipating a time, ideas and possibilities, that lay just beyond the short span of her own life; "I must have something besides a husband and children, something that I can devote myself to...! I know what I want, I have a goal, an opinion, I have a religion and love.... I know that I'm a woman, a woman with inward strength and plenty of courage..." (4 and 11 April, 1944).

Pulsating with power, illusive and present, of terrifying truth that we fail to grasp, as Ripples on the Prinsengracht ~~ the Abiding Challenge of Anne Frank comes so close to the end, the denouement, perhaps the most familiar of her words and the most foreign, a sacred text unto itself: "It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out..." (15 July, 1944).

Expressing the depth of my own struggle with what it means to be human in this world, I believe that these words are Anne's greatest gift to us, and yet we have such a hard time receiving them. We wrap them in the cloak of a child's innocence, failing to make their challenge our own; for all she experienced, what did she really know, she was only fourteen. Of remarkably similar experience, except she survived, Eva Schloss, Anne's posthumous step-sister, wrote with searing irony in her own memoir, "I can't help remembering that she wrote this *before* she experienced Auschwitz and Belsen." Against that backdrop of Auschwitz and Belsen, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of the killing fields, of Rwanda and Darfur, an endless litany of human brutality, we can have no illusions about the cruelty and depravity that human beings are capable of. I do not believe that Anne had any illusions either, even as her old soul saw the end that was coming and yet looked beyond it. For all that we embrace her, we too easily avert our eyes from her smiling, gently pleading gaze, too often sanitizing the power of her message for its being contained in "The

Diary of a Young Girl."

In the scarred and scared vulnerability of our adult souls, we cannot avoid the questions that cry out from Anne's words, that become her abiding challenge. In all the ways of our own expression, these are the questions we wrestle with most deeply, that make us cry for desire in wishing to hold and embrace them, even as we wish we could hold Anne and bring her back again to live the life that might have been. In their pure and tender framing, only some two weeks before German jack boots stormed the secret annex, Anne's words of ultimate belief and faith become the summary of her life, touching at the core questions of these days of Awe and Turning, of all our days, of every day. What do we believe and how do our deepest beliefs infuse our actions in the living of our lives? What do we tell this child in hiding, even as we receive her wisdom? What do we tell our own children and grandchildren to help them live with meaning, to know that their lives are precious and of transcendent value? There is a universal truth so deep in Anne's quest for her own future, for neither can we build hope "on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death." There is no purpose or ultimate meaning in a world so bleak, and therefore neither purpose nor meaning to our own lives. All becomes then, truly absurd. To believe that people are "really good at heart" is to recognize an essential goodness and purpose in creation itself that is not denied by the presence of evil. Good becomes the purpose, the inspiration toward its own fulfillment, each of us the means of its becoming, and our own. We each look up into the sky through the windows of our own confinement to see little raindrops shining on the branches of a chestnut tree, and birds on the wing.

Yearning to soar and sway in the breeze above, we approach the new year with our feet on the ground, seeking the way. Ageless wisdom through the medium of a young girl illumines our path, the Diary as a *Machzor* in our hands, offering guidance for the journey, infusing the vision of her challenge with details of every day marking the way. Writing to her sister, Margo, "it's easier to whisper your feelings than to trumpet them..." (20 March, 1944). So too, if we wish our feelings to be heard, and from this place and time we would then walk on together. It is the still small voice that Elijah sought, rising as prayerful song on Yom Kippur, the voice of God within. Looking there within herself, her words offer guidance for these days of turning, "I know my own faults and shortcomings better than anyone, but the difference is that I also know that I want to improve, shall improve, and have already improved a great deal" (14 June, 1944). As in our lighting of Shabbos candles and yahrzeit candles to remember and renew, Jewish ways and days were far more part of her life than I had realized, "When I looked into the candle this evening, I felt calm and happy. Oma seems to be in the candle and it is Oma too who shelters and protects me and who always makes me feel happy again" (3 March, 1944). Humor and compassion, the ability to laugh at ourselves while feeling the pain of others, well-taken advice for all of us, are two strands that weave throughout the diary and belie the context of its writing.

Seeking solace from the sorrows of the world and from the hard times that come of living, Anne seeks refuge in nature, and with words reminiscent of Rebbe Nachman, she urges us to do the same: "The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature, and God.... Go outside to the fields, enjoy nature and the sunshine, go out and try to recapture happiness in yourself and in God. Think of all the beauty

that's still left in and around you and be happy!" (23 February, 7 March, 1944).

As a smile forms on our lips, her spirit lifting our own, we can quickly forget that in the context of her writing, Anne's only outlet to nature was the view through an attic window. In the larger context of a war that defined the parameters of their lives, and of the hate she knew in the end would devour them, she saw the futility and insanity of war itself. Struggling with her own deepest ideals and beliefs, her questions remain a plea waiting to be heard: "Why do they make still more gigantic planes, still heavier bombs and, at the same time, prefabricated houses for reconstruction? Why should millions be spent daily on the war and yet there's not a penny available for medical services, artists, or for poor people? Why do some people have to starve, while there are surpluses rotting in other parts of the world? Oh, why are people so crazy?" (3 May, 1944). As requisite reading in schools throughout the world, the hardest questions in the Diary of Anne Frank deserve their own curriculum, that someday there shall evolve an enlightened humanity.

Canal waters flow in either direction, depending on the gates of sluice and dike, the opening of locks, and the pull of tides upon waters beyond. The way the waters flow is up to us, opening the gates is in our hand, to wash away the absurdity of war and hate on the homecoming tide of human history. At the gates of a new year, our answer to her is in spite of everything to still believe that people are really good at heart. It is to open the gates of justice and decency, of kindness and compassion, to release a flow of goodness into the canals that join us to each other. It is to live now ideals so long upheld, for the time has come to carry them out. It took going to Amsterdam, city of canals, for me to realize in all its depth the Abiding Challenge of Anne Frank as it flows from the diary of a young girl. Emerging from the house at number 263, we left through the same doors by which they were taken away, and we gazed through a prism of tears at the shimmering Ripples on the Prinsengracht.