Turning Tragedy
Into Activism

excerpted from
Gerda Weissmann Klein’s Address

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Author, historian, and speaker Gerda Weissmann Klein has captivated audiences worldwide with her powerful messages of hope, inspiration, love, and humanity. She draws on her wealth of life experiences — from surviving the Holocaust and meeting her husband on the day of her liberation, to her journey to the United States, to her constant fight to promote tolerance and fight hunger. Her account of living through the Holocaust is documented in her autobiography, “All But My Life.” In 1998, with her late husband, she founded The Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation. Dedicated to easing human suffering, it fights hunger and violence, promotes tolerance, lessens prejudice, and encourages community service focused on local hunger relief.

Let me tell you a little of my story. Where I grew up were loving parents, a child who loved to run outdoors to pick flowers and cherries, to play with my cats. I was 15 years old on a sunny day to be exact, a Sunday, September 3, 1937, when the world I knew and loved and was a part of was irrevocably destroyed.

I know that you are well familiar with World War II, with the stories of the Holocaust, with the pain, the destruction, the horror. But this is not what I want to talk about. I’d like to address myself to the other dimension which I believe has never been sufficiently illuminated. And that is not the horror inflicted upon us, but rather the love, the friendship, the sharing and the caring that existed in the camps. … [This] gives one hope for the ultimate goodness of humanity. And since those who perished there left no children behind, you are the spiritual heirs and you must know of the greatness of their legacy that is yours. …

Because I’ve so often been asked, “What was it like? How did it happen?” You can probably link it easily to the tsunami. It was a wave that rose from an angry sea and swept away parents and children and homes and lives and left the survivors on desolate beaches. This wave, at my age 15, took my parents, my only brother, my uncles, my aunts, my home, my life, and there I was alone. …

I was sent to a succession of concentration camps. You know the stories … but I would rather illuminate the acts of goodness because they really are the sustaining force of the magic of life — particularly in a setting such as this one with young people from all over our country, our world. If I may tell you one story of someone who was your contemporary, she was a childhood friend of mine … and we grew up together. Our mothers were best friends but in all honesty, I really did not like her. My mother always told her what a well-behaved good little girl she was, how beautifully she played the piano, how I should try to be more like her. And predictably, I really never wanted to play with her. But when we were together we always managed to have a very nice time.

Together we were separated from our parents, sold on the slave markets of Germany to a succession of slave labor in concentration camps. In the camps we became to each other the only family we had. She left me many memories and the memories of two incredible gifts. The first was in a bitter camp called Greenberg where one morning on the way to the factory in which we worked she found a single raspberry in the gutter. She carried that treasure all day long to present it to me that night on a leaf, which she plucked through the barbed wire. Can you imagine a world where your only possession is one slightly bruised, dust-covered raspberry? And to give this treasure to a friend?

Tragically she never tasted another raspberry again. [She] died in my arms … in Czechoslovakia. She was 18 years old. In the last hour of
her life she gave me the greatest gift of all and revealed the depths of her humanity. She asked me that if her parents and little sister survived not to tell them how she died. They did not survive. And then she said that she was angry at no one and hoped that no one was angry with her. And lastly she asked me to promise her to go on for one more week — a week in those days was a very long time. A week later, exactly to the day, perhaps to the very hour of her death, we were liberated by American forces. …

I was separated from my parents and my brother, never to see any members of my family again. I was three years in slave labor and concentration camps which resulted in a death march, known as such in your history books. Our march lasted from January, 29, 1945, until May 6 when we covered 350 miles on foot. … Four thousand girls were started; fewer than 120 survived. We were locked into an abandoned bicycle factory in a small place in Czech as our captors fastened a time bomb so that we may not know the joy of freedom.

… I remember that night. I remember our prayers. Suddenly it started to rain, a rain which resulted in mud, preventing the bomb from connecting, and obviously it never went off. I remember standing in the unfamiliar May sunshine as the doors were thrust open and we had voices calling, “The War in Europe was over!” What do you feel in such a moment — a moment you had prayed for in every waking hour for six long years?

Suddenly, I saw a strange-looking car coming down a gentle hill. Its color no longer green, and its hood had not a swastika but the white star of the American Army — brighter than any star I had ever seen in the universe. Two men in unfamiliar uniforms jumped out and one came running toward me. I looked at that man who granted me freedom with awe, disbelief, but I knew very well that I had to identify who we were. I looked at him with fear and trepidation and said in a very small voice, “We are Jewish, you know.” For a long time he didn’t answer me and then finally when he spoke, his voice portrayed his emotion. He said, “So am I.” It was a moment of incredible disbelief to be liberated, not only by an American but by a fellow Jew. … By what miracle could I have conceived that I would marry him a year later in Paris, and he would bring me home to this beloved country which I so proudly call my own.

During the years of my slavery, I prayed for freedom, a family, a home, and never to be hungry again. My dreams were fulfilled in a means I could never have imagined. … Survival is an incredible privilege, a privilege which weighs heavily with obligation to tell the story and dreams of those who never fulfilled them, and to make sure that others never ever suffer the same fate. …

Please remember that 35 million Americans and millions of people all over the world are still hungry. This is your mission — through community service, which is the most noble of all things you can do, go and help. … You have the power, the hearts and the brains to bring this beloved country of ours to the same heights which were born in the hearts of men here in Philadelphia, when they wrote the charter that made America great. … I know that the future of my grandchildren is assured, resting in your hands.

For more information about Gerda Weissmann Klein’s work, visit www.kleinfoundation.org.