

Brief Encounter from the Taos Institute

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Theory in Action: The Story of the One Raspberry



By Bob Cotter, MD

A very special friend of ours will soon celebrate her 90th birthday, a birthday she had never really expected to experience. Her life journey has been extraordinary. Her ability to reconstruct herself and her life has been incredible. She was born in Poland in May, 1924, the younger of two children in a middle-class Jewish family. By the time she was 21, she had spent six years living under Nazi rule, three of them as a slave laborer in Nazi factories. Her parents and brother had been taken away, never to be seen by her again. Her best friend died in her arms during a 350 mile death march which began with 2000 women and ended with only 120 surviving. She weighed only 68 pounds in May, 1945, when she was found by American forces in an abandoned bicycle factory.

She had survived and, again, rebuilt her life. She married the American soldier who rescued her and immigrated to the US where she and her husband raised three children. Ever since regaining her freedom, as an author, a historian and crusader for tolerance, she has taught the world that it is often in our most hopeless moments that we discover the extent of our strength and the depth of our love. She has stated: "I pray you never stand at any crossroads in your own lives, but if you do, if the darkness seems so total, if you think there is no way out, remember, never give up."

Our friend does not know the language of social constructionism. She certainly would not describe herself as a constructionist. Nevertheless, she clearly shows the relational, appreciative and collaborative ways of being that have guided her in the many effective deconstructions and reconstructions she has experienced throughout her lifetime. She recently wrote a small book honoring her childhood friend who had died in her arms near the end of the death march in 1945, describing how her friend had once found a raspberry in the gutter of their prison camp and carried it all day in her pocket to present to her that night on a leaf plucked through the barbed wire fence. This raspberry was her friend's only real possession at that time and she gave it to her! That was a gift of love and kindness that our friend has never forgotten. She created an adult life in which her many acts of love and kindness with others have replicated what she had experienced with that one raspberry. She has shared her stories in books, in person and on film. Her emphasis is how positive and loving life can be even if we encounter horrific obstacles.

Our friend's life reflects, in many ways, how challenging the taken-for-granted, building on strengths, appreciating successes, honoring relationships and envisioning the future generates the resilience and determination that can enable all of us to create the new meanings and realities that allow us to find and establish a more effective and satisfying outcome when we encounter our crossroads. Change is not a threat to her. She sees it as part of life and as an opportunity to create new possibilities for living a life of love and satisfaction.

I want to thank our friend for being such an incredible model for living life so fully and so productively and allowing us to directly experience the awesome power and quality of constructionism when practiced in a real life over nine decades. Again, "theory in action."