Twice this week I was rendered speechless by the power of unexpected generosity. The first was an actual gift from someone I barely knew, and the second was a story of survival that took such courage to write that I experienced it as a gift.

The gift was brought by one of my students, from her mother who I only met once. It was her mother’s way of saying thank you to me for loving her daughter so well, and I literally could not speak when I unwrapped it. A weaver, she raises sheep for wool which she shears, cards, cleans, spins and dyes with plant dyes before weaving it into blankets and shawls.

She made a shawl for me, determining my colors from that one time we met – bright autumn shades – and designing it for the person she remembered. My hands touched heaven when I unwrapped the shawl, and for several minutes I simply stared, speechless with both the beauty of it and the magnitude of the gift. I imagined the months of work she had done, all the while imagining the person who would receive it at the end of the process. It was as if someone had been praying for me all this time, while I had had no idea it was happening.

What goes round, comes round, she might say – reciprocal blessings between two mothers connected by one of their children, and their mutual gratitude for what they each offered. She was thanking me for guiding and loving her daughter – ‘gathering her to your hearth,’ was the way she put it and I, in turn, was grateful for the privilege of teaching such a daughter. And now such a gift! We were both astounded by each other’s generosity, and grateful.

I am reminded of when I was a student in France, living in a provincial household as a nanny with a wonderful family. All the proprieties were expected of the 5 children, and therefore of me, including the morning handshakes, the 2-cheek kisses and, my favorite of all, the interminable thank-you’s that went something like this:

Merci.

Mais c’est moi qui doit vous remercie!

No, it is I who should be thanking you!

No no, it is I who thanks you!

No no no, it is my turn to thank you…and so on. Sometimes it took forever to get out the door! But I know well that feeling of being grateful for generosity, and wanting to give it back. It’s built into us, I think, the wish to both honor and be honored, to see and be seen
in return, to give and to receive.

Later in the week I finished reading a book for young people, GIDEON by Chester Aaron, a novel about a 14-year-old boy who survived the Warsaw Ghetto. Even though he wrote it for children, Chester pulls no punches and brings us right into an unthinkable world where adults wantonly murder children, parents are rounded up and tortured, and our fellow men – mostly men – become monstrous killing machines obeying orders from shrieking madmen. Very few survive the ongoing slaughter, but some fight back and this is the fictional story of one who, by his wits and youth and ingenious courage, does – and he lives to tell the tale.

I had to keep reminding myself that Chester himself had not experienced the ghetto firsthand, although his life was permanently marked by witnessing the results of carnage as a young soldier liberating a death camp at the end of the war. That meant that, in order to write this book he had to deliberately bring back the feelings and the images of that world, heart, mind and spirit. He had to immerse himself in the stories of survivors, remember the sights and sounds of unthinkable horror, and re-imagine himself a young boy having the courage and wily imagination to survive and help others survive. He did that for himself, I am sure, but he also did it for us.

How long did it take him to write this book, I wonder, all the while living inside the mind of a boy facing unspeakable loss and soul shock amongst people gone mad? One year, two years?

I am awed by the generosity of this man, his deliberate choice to spend years of his life bearing witness and reporting back to us through time and space the imagined mind of a 14-year-old boy fighting for his life. In effect he is saying, “You have to know! You have to see the horror and learn from it that yes, humans are capable of unspeakable evil. But you must know that we are also capable of the opposite: of generosity and courage and beauty. Even when we are frightened or in the midst of horror, we are probably stronger than we think. To be human is to be both, and everything in between, and don’t you forget it!

I bow to you both, Rebecca and Chester, with gratitude for your gifts, your generosity, your brilliance and your grace. I wish someday you could meet.

You’d love each other.