

The Letters

LETTER 01

THE MOST GRATEFUL OF PARENTS

Samuel Bernstein to Serge Koussevitzky

15 September 1941

At New York City's Carnegie Hall on 14 November 1943, the life of twenty-five-year-old Leonard Bernstein changed in an instant when a last-minute substitution led to him making his conducting debut with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. By all accounts it was a huge success – so much so, in fact, that the next day he was famous, thus accelerating a glittering music career that would span decades and continents and see him held aloft as one of history's greats. In the summer of 1940, three years before he was handed that baton, Bernstein had been chosen by the music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky, to be one of the conducting fellows at the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, an opportunity he grabbed with both hands. Koussevitzky became Bernstein's idol and mentor, his love for music intensifying to the point where it was all he could think about. This development was noticed by his father, Samuel, who had initially opposed this obsession of Bernstein's. In September of 1941, acutely aware that his son was destined to continue on this path, he wrote a letter.

THE LETTER

Sept. 15th, 1941

Dr. Serge Koussevitzky

Lenox

Mass.

Dear Sir:

Please forgive this liberty which I am taking in communicating with you but since the matter is an urgent one, I know you will understand my reasons for writing you at this time.

My son, Leonard, has just returned home after a few weeks vacation and, not only from fatherly instinct but from every outward indication, it is quite obvious that Leonard is unhappy for the reason, as you can probably appreciate, that he is so preoccupied with the work upon which he centers his every thought MUSIC. Please forgive this humble parent, therefore, in trespassing upon your privacy but I must, of necessity, appeal to you for some assistance in Leonard's behalf. Quite frankly, Dr. Koussevitzky, Leonard idolizes you; I know what you have come to mean to him and your kind efforts manifested in his

behalf is a fair indication of the mutual feeling which exists between you.

It is with great concern that I am now appealing to you to find some opportunity for Leonard so that it will be possible for him to continue with his first Love Music, and in the particular field in which he is so greatly interested. I hope and pray that you may find some opening [for] him somewhere in these United States where he may continue with his work. The financial aspect does not enter into my thoughts for my chief concern is to find some haven for Leonard where he may continue with his work and know happiness.

Please forgive me a thousand times for inflicting my problem upon you but I felt it my duty as Leonard's Father to approach you and knowing you for the type of man you are, I am certain you will understand. May God spare you for many, many years to come so that you may continue with your accomplishments and with the good that you have done in this world and will continue to do and of the many good deeds you have accomplished, one of importance, yes, one I believe very necessary for the future well-being of my Son, will be that which you will accomplish now in his behalf.

I appreciate more than can be expressed by mere

words, your kindness to Leonard and for the interest which you manifested in his interests and you would make this Father, The most grateful of parents, if you would but continue in your efforts. Leonard's pride would never have sanctioned my approach to you in this manner, I know therefore that you will understand my request that this letter be held in strict confidence.

Thank you, Dr. Koussevitzky, and may God bless you!

Respectfully yours,
Samuel J Bernstein

LETTER 02

I LOVED THE BOY

William Wordsworth to Robert Southey

2 December 1812

1812 was the darkest of years for William Wordsworth, the English Romantic poet responsible for many enduring masterpieces, including 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' and the posthumously published autobiographical poem The Prelude. In June, his three-year-old daughter, Catherine, died after suffering convulsions; then, on the first day of December, his six-year-old son, Thomas, passed away, having suffered from measles and pneumonia. On 2 December, with both children buried beneath the same tree in the Lake District, William Wordsworth wrote to friend and fellow poet Robert Southey.

THE LETTER

December 2, 1812
Wednesday Evening

My dear Friend,
Symptoms of the measles appeared upon my Son Thomas last Thursday; he was most favorable held till Tuesday, between ten and eleven at that hour was particularly lightsome and comfortable; without any assignable cause a sudden change took place, an inflammation had commenced on the lungs which it was impossible to check and the sweet Innocent yielded up his soul to God before six in the evening. He did not appear to suffer much in body, but I fear something in mind as he was of an age to have thought much upon death a subject to which his mind was daily led by the grave of his Sister.

My wife bears the loss of her child with striking fortitude. For myself dear Southey I dare not say in what state of mind I am; I loved the boy with the utmost love of which my soul is capable, and he is taken from me—yet in the agony of my spirit in surrendering such a treasure I feel a thousand times richer than if I had never possessed it. God comfort

and save you and all our friends and us all from a repetition of such trials—O Southey feel for me! If you are not afraid of the complaint, I ought to have said if you have had it come over to us! Best love from everybody—you will impart this sad news to your Wife and Mrs Coleridge and Mrs Lovel and to Miss Barker and Mrs Wilson. Poor woman! She was most good to him—Heaven reward her.

Heaven bless you
Your sincere Friend
W. Wordsworth

LETTER 03

GROW UP AS GOOD REVOLUTIONARIES

Che Guevara to his children

1965–66

In 1955, Argentinian-born Che Guevara met Fidel Castro and quickly joined his efforts to oust Fulgencio Batista as leader of Cuba – a revolution in which he would go on to play a major role, and which would lead to Guevara becoming Minister of Industry under Castro's rule. By 1965, Guevara was keen to spread his revolutionary ideas: he began by travelling to what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he unsuccessfully attempted to train rebel forces in the area, then moved on to Bolivia, where he was ultimately captured by the Bolivian Army and executed on the orders of President René Barrientos. Before he left for Bolivia, he secretly visited his wife back in Cuba and gave her this letter, to be read by his five children in the event of his death.

THE LETTER

To my children

Dear Hildita, Aleidita, Camilo, Celia, and Ernesto,

If you ever have to read this letter, it will be because I am no longer with you. You practically will not remember me, and the smaller ones will not remember me at all.

Your father has been a man who acted on his beliefs and has certainly been loyal to his convictions.

Grow up as good revolutionaries. Study hard so that you can master technology, which allows us to master nature. Remember that the revolution is what is important, and each one of us, alone is worth nothing.

Above all, always be capable of feeling deeply any injustice committed against anyone, anywhere in the world. This is the most beautiful quality in a revolutionary.

Until forever, my children. I still hope to see you.

A great big kiss and a big hug from,

Papa