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# Drops of Water

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> *When you do not realize that you are one with the river, or one with the universe you have fear. Whether it is separated into drops or not, water is water. Our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact, we have no fear of death any more and we have no difficulty in our life.*[1]

When I was told that I had been assigned a person named Yoshiko Meyers to visit, the questions began. What do you talk about with someone who is dying? Would they be interested in small talk about the weather outside their room? Does the news hold any importance for them? Would they like to talk about their religious beliefs? But what if they have none? Would they want to talk about their feelings? And if they wanted to talk about death, what could I say?

I was a hospice volunteer in Boston, a young man on my way to graduate school to become a psychologist. I thought that I was supposed to talk with Yoshiko about dying, and while I reassured myself that I was ready, I knew that I was not. I had worked in emergency rooms, operating rooms, rehabilitation units, and nursing homes. I had seen illness and death. In the hospital I had seen people torn apart by cars and each other. I had seen people gasp their last breaths. I had wheeled dead bodies and body parts into the morgue. I had carried stillborn infants in my arms. And yet, I was full of anxiety.

I was well aware that Yoshiko was Japanese, and that was why she was assigned to me. Yet I did not know what that meant for her or for me. Was there any special way of dying that I was supposed to understand? I associated death with Buddhism, be-

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cause the only time my family would go to the temple in Japan was when someone died. But I knew very little about Buddhism and its relation to death and dying. I wondered about Yoshiko's religious beliefs, although the hospice agency had informed me she had no religion. This did not surprise me, as most Japanese deny having religion, yet Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism pervade our lives. Did Yoshiko really have no religion? If so, how did she face death without religion?

I imagined that the comfort of religious beliefs and symbols is most poignant at the moments near death. When I was a student, I read Victor Frankl on his experience of surviving the Nazi concentration camps and recall being stuck on the passage that described the peace of those who went to gas chambers with a prayer to God on their lips. As someone who had lost faith in God, I wondered how those who did not have the faith to pray went to their deaths.[2] My once Catholic, but avowedly agnostic father gave me some insight when he repeatedly mumbled on his deathbed in a near-comatose state, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph."

I wondered if Buddhism now brought comfort to Yoshiko. My understanding of Buddhism came mostly from my grandmother. She had shown me paintings of heaven and hell, while confessing that she didn't really believe in them. She did tell me that she hoped there would be another world where she would be somehow reunited with those she loved. Though she told me that I could save money by scattering her ashes over the ocean, I sensed that what troubled her was the question of where her remains would lie and who would care for the grave. I suspected that she would like them placed next to her mother's in the graveyard in Kuma, the mountain village where she had spent her youth. Her family's tombstone was there, as was her husband's, but she had made it clear that eighty years with him had been more than enough, and that she did not want her ashes placed in the same tomb as his. But her only child, my mother, was now an American, returning to Japan as a dutiful daughter only for a few months at a time, before rushing back to be with her daughters and grandchildren in the U.S. She could not be relied on to care for the tomb. Nor could I, her only grandchild in Japan, for despite living in Japan for more than twenty years, she felt that I too might return to America at any time.

Like my mother, Yoshiko had been a war bride who had married an American and gone with him to a new country where

he and her children were her only family. I wanted to ask Yoshiko if she was concerned about such things as where to put her ashes. Was she worrying about whether there would even be any ashes—would she be cremated like a Buddhist, or simply buried like a Christian? Did she wonder where her grave would be and who would care for it? Did she believe in the heaven and hell of Buddhism? Was she hoping to go to heaven? Did she fear going to hell? Or did she think that death would simply bring a peaceful rest?

## The First Visit

My mind wandered wildly, disturbed by such thoughts and memories, as I walked through the quiet pre-dawn Harvard campus on my way to visit Yoshiko. The squirrels rushing around gathering acorns for the coming winter were the only sign of activity. I wondered if Yoshiko really wanted to see me; my presence would be further confirmation that she was near the end. The sunshine seemed unnaturally bright and in stark contrast to the increasing darkness I felt growing inside me as I approached her house.

On the way to her house I suddenly saw a small bird on the ground, twitching in the throes of death. I flashed back to the time in childhood when a mouse had been caught in a trap in our kitchen. The trap had not killed it, and I watched it, frozen in horror, as it struggled in agony. My father had earned my admiration by rushing over, picking up a frying pan and with one swift whack putting it out of its misery. As I stood there wondering if I should give the bird a whack, it suddenly ceased its movements, its body gave a final shudder, and it died. Unsettled, I moved on toward my destination.

I had been informed that Yoshiko had a cancer that swept through her body leaving her frail and decimated. She had been told that more therapy was futile; it was just a matter of time, perhaps a few months, till she would be dead. Had the directness of her American doctor had shocked her? When the doctor found stomach cancer in my father-in-law in Japan, the family was told, but not the patient. There was a conspiracy of silence. When my mother claimed that it was his right to be informed, she was dismissed as "too American." I wonder if Yoshiko would have wanted it the "Japanese" way. Was she denied the comfort that her culture may have provided on her deathbed? Or was she strengthened by the knowledge of her predicament?

I had gone through hospice training to work with the dying so I had some idea what I should talk about. I could skillfully help Yoshiko go through the stages of dying as outlined by Kubler-Ross.[3] We would work together through the denial and the anger and the bargaining and in the end she would find acceptance and die in peace.

This idyllic image was shattered as soon as I entered Yoshiko's apartment. She was lying on a bed in her living room with a cloth wrapped around her head which I imagined was bald. Yoshiko was very skinny. The unadorned smell of her body filled the room. I went over near her and smiled and introduced myself. She gazed at me intently for a moment, smiled weakly, and motioned for me to sit down. I sat down stiffly on the sofa near her.

Should I ask her how she feels, I wondered? Or would that sound too stupid? While I was thinking of something safe to say, Yoshiko fortunately asked me about myself. I told her about what I thought we shared in common—my life in Tokyo, my Japanese mother and American father. She told me that she too was from Tokyo and had come to the United States with her American husband twenty years earlier.

We chatted a little more, then the silence settled. Yoshiko really didn't seem to care to talk much. This did not surprise me, because my Japanese mother also spoke very little, but I found myself distracted by confusion and doubt. I thought again of Kubler-Ross's stages of dying. I wondered whether Yoshiko was just denying the whole thing and therefore needed to move through the stages, or had she already gone through them and was just resting?

I questioned why I was there and what I was supposed to do. I reminded myself that I was there because I wanted to help. But how was I going to help anyone face dying? Wasn't I there also because I was trying to relieve my own fear of death? I was convinced that I should be a healer of sorts, and not shrink from any human condition and embrace even death. So was I using Yoshiko as a way of making myself feel that I was living up to my image of who I am or who I am supposed to be?

But faced with such stark reality, I felt the desire to escape from the oppressive feeling of the dark cave-like apartment and go back out into the sunlight. I longed to run back to the college and lie on the grass among the carefree students. I glanced around the room. The room of a dying person looks like this,

I thought. I felt afraid and needed to be doing something so I stood up and emptied her urine bag, filled her water bottle, and opened a new box of tissues and placed them on her bedside table. But the silence was heavy. I felt that death lingered in the room as if lying in wait to take her spirit away when her body died.

The sound of the door opening startled me as a man entered. He was smiling and seemed oddly cheerful, introducing himself as "John, Yoshiko's husband." He kissed her gently on the forehead and asked her how she was. Yoshiko just smiled weakly as a response.

I was relieved that John was there, as he filled the silence with nonstop chatter. He explained how hospice had been his idea and Yoshiko had simply gone along with his suggestion. He knew that for her as a Japanese, the presence of the hospice volunteer was strange. In fact, she had initially protested that it would be too much of an intrusion to have a stranger in her home.

John rambled on about the old days, how they had met when he was in the military stationed in Japan. Charmed by her at a chance meeting, he had boldly asked her for a date. They were supposed to meet in front of the station at Shimbashi, but he waited for more than an hour before Yoshiko finally arrived, accompanied by her girlfriend. Their romance flourished and eventually they married and came to the U.S. They had a son who lived nearby, whom I was to meet for the first time at his mother's funeral.

I wondered if John was the one who needed the support and noticed that my attention seemed to go more to him than to Yoshiko. As someone who felt removed from dying I felt more in common with him than with her. I sought to cross this barrier of separateness between the living and the dying but often retreated to John's company instead of accompanying Yoshiko. Perhaps John and I found comfort in each other as we watched death come slowly toward her.

## The Final Visit

I had been assigned Yoshiko because of our shared cultural backgrounds, and I tried to understand what it meant to be Japanese and facing death. I relied on my grandmother who talked openly about dying, mostly about acceptance, saying *Shikata ga nai*: It can't be helped, we all have to die. She also spoke of her desire to avoid *Meiwaku*, burdening the family. I thought that I should

ask Yoshiko how she felt about dying, but never found the right moment.

I learned from John later that Yoshiko's story was actually more complicated. She had been born as Kim Yong Mi. Her father had come from Korea to Japan in search of a better life, intending to be a sojourner, but had decided to stay after marrying Yoshiko's mother, a native Japanese. Yoshiko was born a Japanese national, but lost her status after the war, becoming a Korean national, and despite living in the U.S. for twenty years, she had never naturalized. Yoshiko's family's grave was in Korea, and Japan was not the same homeland to her as it was to my grandmother or mother. Some people say that we want to die where we were born. But when I asked my mother, she told me she has no wish to die in Japan. I wondered about Yoshiko. Would she want to be buried in Korea, in Japan, in the U.S., or did it not matter to her? Did either the Buddhism of her youth or the Christianity she had engaged with as an adult in America provide any comfort to her?

My understanding of Bushido, the samurai code, taught me that accepting that death is inevitable and certain brings an appreciation of life, an openness to life just as it is, in each moment. I comforted myself with the belief that since death came to everyone, there was no reason to fear it. I sensed that the fear of death and the desire for life are intricately intertwined so that the denial of death leads to a numbing of the life force as well. Unlike people who reach this realization after their own confrontation with death through a serious illness or a near death experience, I needed to find another way. Perhaps that is why I was drawn to hospice—I was striving to overcome my fear of death.

My confrontation with Yoshiko left me in silent awe at the power of what was occurring. I found that I knew nothing about dying. I was so full of anxiety that I wasn't quite there. Trying to be there for this dying person I found myself distracted by confusion and fear. Mostly I ended up sitting in silence, filled with self-doubt, wondering who I was and what I was to do.

I began to sense that the problem I was experiencing came from placing Yoshiko in a special category as a dying person, and separating myself from that category. I felt that death is special and those like myself not dying, are distinct from those like Yoshiko who are dying. But this feeling of separateness reinforced the fear of death. I sensed that the way of overcoming this separateness was to see that Yoshiko was not special, but like her, I too was dying. It helped to realize that I am confronted with the

problem just as much as she, blocked by my identification with my body as my whole being and my mind as the whole reality.[4]

I wondered what I could do in my time with Yoshiko. The message came to me, "Those who open to their own suffering can open to mine." I sensed that its meaning is that to care is to become one with another, to join with a person beyond the cultural, racial, sexual, and all other barriers we erect between ourselves and others. I saw that the opportunity to be with Yoshiko was a means of working on myself, that I would be effective only if I was affected.

I should have known all along that I had not come to counsel or to teach, but to learn. As I sat there I slowly began to realize that I did not have to do anything. I just needed to be willing to be there, as present as possible without withdrawing. I was not there to save her. I could do nothing to relieve her suffering, but at least I should not run from it. I had to avoid the desire to alleviate her discomfort as a means of alleviating my own. Whatever she was experiencing, I wanted to have room in my heart for receiving it. I struggled to open myself to her. I fought my impulse to pull away rather than enter the fire.

One day Yoshiko was in obvious pain. She told me she needed more morphine, so I called the nurse, who came in a short while and gave Yoshiko an injection. I wondered when her life would reach a point when it would be more humane to assist its ending, recalling my friend Chio's life-ending injection in a Tokyo hospital, at her bequest.

Yoshiko drifted in and out of consciousness. Her breath was like the sound of waves in the quiet apartment. I could see the gentle rise and fall of her decimated chest beneath the blanket. Unconsciously I began to breathe with her. The only sound was that of our shared breath. I felt a strange sense of unity as though we were somehow together in the mystery and wonder.

Was this mystical feeling a sign that we are all connected far beyond the limits of our ordinary consciousness? Was caring the way that we reach beyond the illusion of separateness that traps us in our bodies and minds? Were we simply two parts of the same whole? If we believe that there is no other, then there is just being, experienced from different focal points. I felt that if I could be fully present there would be no such thing as another person, just two perceptions of the same existence.

I came a few more times to sit by Yoshiko's bed. We never did talk much. I don't know what I provided for her, but I know

what I received. Perhaps sensing my discomfort, Yoshiko was compassionate. She knew that I was sitting next to her because I wanted to help, and wanted to learn. My belief was simply that it was important to cherish life until the very end. And that is why I was sitting there by the bed of this stranger—in the hope that whatever growth could take place in her last moments might somehow be assisted by my mere presence.

One night I drifted off to sleep as I sat there. When I awoke and glanced over at her I found Yoshiko gazing deeply into my eyes with a look that expressed to me her gratitude for my presence. Her eyes communicated a tenderness and kindness that I associate with images of a compassionate Buddha or Christ. I felt a powerful sensation that she may also be telling me that she was on her way from this world, and reassuring me that everything was all right.

The next day I received a phone call from the nurse, telling me that Yoshiko had died. When I hung up, I cried for this person who had once been a stranger and yet had entered so deeply into my life. I cried for myself too for I knew in that moment that I shared her fate.

It was not clear to me at the time but I was searching for knowledge of life through confrontation with death. And although I found it hard to know what to say, it may be that very few people can respond on a verbal level to any concepts about dying. To try to convey seemingly profound messages may only bring on confusion or an intellectual discussion. I learned to just sit by Yoshiko's bed and wait, trying to be present to what is happening, with a spirit of willingness to help. I learned to listen with my heart to what Yoshiko was experiencing or saying. I know nothing about death—I can only be open and hopefully enter a space of surrender or acceptance that some might call love or God. In that space of openness or oneness, perhaps it is easier for the dying one to embrace the mystery and wonder.

## Notes

1. Suzuki Shunryu, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (Boston: Shambhala, 2011).
2. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997).
3. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner, 1997).
4. Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu, "We Are Not Our Bodies," *Academic Medicine* 84:8 (August 2009): 981.