

A Joy Not Shared

LAST YEAR, WHEN I WAS IN Japan, I sought out Kenzaburo Oë, the stormy, controversial novelist whose book "A Personal Matter," I admire. I had written him from America, but Oë was not an easy catch. Notorious for resolute protection of his privacy, he did not, at first, respond. Then word returned that Oë had not granted an interview for months, that he was hard at work on essays about America and did not wish to be disturbed.

But I persisted, and Oë must have sensed a special urgency beyond my announced purpose to discuss with him the dark recesses of Japan's modern psychology. He met me at the train station not far from his home in the pleasant Seijo section of Tokyo. There, in the midst of the fluid throng, I did not recognize him immediately. In my mind was a 20-year-old photograph from the jacket cover of "A Personal Matter." It showed a bespectacled figure with rather prominent bulbous ears and a remote, independent air, riding a bicycle with his young son. On the book jacket, the boy looked perhaps 4 years old, and he had the same prominent ears as his father. In the photograph, the child looked perfectly normal.

For all his early elusiveness, Oë could not have been more forthcoming as we walked through the narrow streets of Seijo, past the walled mansion of the actor Toshiro Mifune, in this village in the heart of Tokyo's vastness.

We share a common outlook. He had been an uncompromising leader in the Japanese antinuclear movement, a strong voice for the view that Japan, as the only victim of nuclear warfare, must remain a model for disarmament to the world. I find in his novels and essays about his generation's predicament over Japan's defeat in World War II a parallel for my own work about my generation's coming to terms with the Vietnam defeat.

But these common views, largely cerebral in nature, were not the core of the matter. Rather, the situation of his son, struck down at birth with a congenital abnormality of the skull, provided my urgency. For I, too, have a child who was devastated three years ago, at the age of 18 months, by an undiagnosed brain disorder. I, too, have pictures of myself riding a bicycle with Hillary, and in them, she, too, can look perfectly normal.

In literary gossip, the affliction of Oë's son is often mentioned as a turning point that had a profound influence on his later work. It is said that after his personal tragedy he had become brusque and distant to the point of paranoia in his personal relations, as he became more

passionate in his social and political beliefs about the aftereffects of Hiroshima and human survival. In the last three years, I have wondered if my own personality and later work will be similarly affected.

In three hours of animated conversation with Oë, we touched upon our bond only once, fleetingly. There was not much to say. I told him how I identified with the book's rage and the desire for release in outrageous, depraved behavior from the horror of a dying child. I had been moved, I told him, by the affirmation of life that emerges from despair at the end of the novel. But particularly, I had found useful one notion in the book where grief is likened to a mine shaft, narrow and deep.

Recently, Oë's mine shaft has returned to me often. Two months ago, sweet Hillary developed a second, life-threatening disease, quite unrelated to her neurological scourge, and, for weeks, lay close to death in the inten-

sive-care unit. My impulse was to withdraw down that hole. It was a personal matter, narrow and deep. There was no way to make grief horizontal. It could not be spread sideways.

Inevitably, one presents a certain face to the world. You are told that things are going to be all right, and how well you are handling "this thing." What else can others say? What can they really do? It is a dangerous time for friends, for they must beware of the shame and the embarrassment and anger that comes with acute distress. I watched their awkward shifting about as they searched for the right thing to say.

When friends said I was handling this well, that everything was going to be all right, as those tubes protruded grotesquely from Hillary's orifices and the machines beeped and flashed red lights and nurses scurried about under the obscenely bright, unrelenting lights, I wanted only to shrink away. I seethed with the outrageous anger I had found in Oë's book, wanting to cry out: No, you don't understand, it is not going to be all right; and no, I am not handling this well. I longed for release from this suffocating situation. I wished I could find escape in exotic, private dissipation.

Men are not well suited to emergencies with their children. Our impulse is to block, to deny, to leave it to the women. We become shut out, but the truth is, we want it that way. The brave stiff upper lip is expected, although an occasional relapse into public tears is allowed for the modern man.

And yet, I have discovered that there is a corollary to Oë's mine shaft. As Hillary fluttered slowly, haltingly, out of danger, like a mourning dove, my joy, too, was vertical. It was a veritable laser beam of joy that had no terminus. It was mine alone, totally a personal matter. It could not be shared. As Hillary experienced reverses, I seemed alternately to live in the stratosphere and in the lithosphere.

My relations with those who have experienced something like "this thing" have been the easiest. As with Oë, the shared adversity is usually unspoken. It is realized in a giving that takes another form and shape. To Oë, I was a perfect stranger, and yet, he opened up, uncharacteristically. He grappled with cerebral issues about modern Japan until I ran out of questions.

As time passes, I remember less what I wrote coming out of that session than what he had written about grappling with the fate that is handed to him and then affirming life with action.

"All I want," says the main character in Oë's book, "is to stop being a man who continually runs away from responsibility." ■



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