

Contributing My Rediscovered Self to the Providence, Part II

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My mother-in-law underwent dialysis once every other day and had a high fever during the process. When the fever went down, symptoms of dementia appeared. For dialysis, one must have access to an artery or a vein. In my mother-in-law's case, this was not possible through her arm and had to be done through her chest. However, because of dementia, one day she pulled out the lines by herself. Shocked, I immediately took her to the hospital but her blood vessels were no longer viable for dialysis. All I could do was to bring her home. As a nurse, I had some knowledge so I knew when a patient needing dialysis was unable to have dialysis. The patient would usually die within twenty-four hours or as toxin accumulated in the body. I made up my mind to be by her side until her final moment. My mother-in-law held on for a month and a few days.

That last month was tough. I cleared away anything that could be dangerous because she had serious dementia; she might even eat cat food by mistake. I could not leave her home alone because she would try to crawl out of the house, although she could not walk. In the end, she suffered aphasia. I cooked her porridge and fed her because she could not eat regular cooked rice due to loss of muscle function. Both my husband and I lost sleep having to look after her.

My mother-in-law passed away in 2009. Yet that was not the end of the story. We had some debts, so my husband borrowed money from various places to pay them off. In the autumn of 2014, however, we became insolvent. Debt collectors came to our house, insistent text messages came to our cell phones and many registered letters came from the court. In the end, debt collectors auctioned off our house. Only last October, we had settled everything. Finally, we cleared our debt with the money earned from the auction and moved into a new place. We may have lost our house, but I feel much better because we do not have to meet debt collectors or receive phone calls and demand notices anymore.

I knew I had lost my ability to write when I began having conflicted feelings about my father. How could I write with anger and discord within me? This was why I could not write even after I came to Korea.

One day, though, from reading a passage in a book I gained a bit of insight into my father's heart. Later, I learned a new side of him by talking by phone with my sister-in-law's impression of my father, I realized that I had been merely looking at an isolated part of him and not his real nature.

Moved to tears

After my mother-in-law died, I started learning Korean at a community welfare center. Since I had not formally studied Korean before, I was unable to write Korean. I could converse, but having learned them from my mother-in-law who used strange dialects, I often made people laugh, which hurt my feelings.

The aim of the Korean class was passing the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK). Soon after we started learning, we were writing short essays. The teacher had us write our impressions of particular sentences. After submitting the assignment, the teacher neatly corrected the errors with a red pen. In this way, I learned how to express myself in Korean. Since they were essays, I was required to state an opinion and then explain and support that opinion. I learned a lot from that course.

With trial and error, I started to build up a natural feeling for Korean as I repeatedly wrote essays. At the same time, I started to develop confidence in myself. Gradually, I learned to read Korean books. I also managed to pass the TOPIK. I appreciated that my efforts resulted in an actual outcome.

As a Japanese living in Korea, I am a minority. I used to struggle with this fact. Often my thoughts were tinged with a sense of victimization, "How I wish I could see, think and speak like them." At one point, though, I realized, "Now that I've come this far, I would not be fully Japanese even if I went back to Japan, but that does not mean I could become fully Korean even if I stay in Korea." At that moment, I felt that I should write. After some time passed, I felt that I must write. Still later, I wondered, "I do want to write, but how should I write this in Korean?"

About that time, I ran across a community course, "Composition Exercises," a short course, only four sessions. However, a famous poet taught two of them. When he began, the poet said, "The reason you cannot write well is because you try to write nice, well-written sentences. You should write your story as it is. The fact that you write is precious in itself. You can put your ideas in order if you start writing in that state of mind." With this in mind, I began writing without concern for the results. At first, I did not produce well-written stories. I pushed myself nonetheless because the poet had said, "You can write

whatever you want.” Then I found I could not write through tears. Thinking to myself, “I can write at last!” I could not stop crying from happiness.

At the end of the course, the students turned in a composition for evaluation. I turned in a composition written in my poor Korean, but it received the grand prize.

After the poet’s first lecture, I began to think, “I suffered because I could not be in the majority, but perhaps opinions of minorities are also important.”



Mrs. Oshima’s writing has appeared in these published collections of short stories and poems

Two years, six awards

In 2014, a composition I submitted to a multi-cultural writing contest on the theme, Thinking of the Yellow Ribbons, (which refers indirectly to Korea’s April 16, 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster) won the grand prize. A few months later, I submitted five poems and won a prize. Next, I wrote an essay and won an honorable mention.

These results gave me the motivation to keep writing in 2015. I have never thought my writing would win prizes. I would only think, “I hope it would be selected.” Fortunately, I was able to win prizes for all three compositions I entered last year.

Actually, I started submitting my work to contests because of something one sister in the church said. “You have to write. Please write to show people that even Japanese can write and that such a Japanese exists in Korea.” As I listened, I got a strange feeling that perhaps it was not her who was speaking but God who was speaking through her.

Furthermore, since the church leader was pleased when I won a prize the first time, I showed him the poems I had written for the next contest and asked him to advise me on the Korean. As he read them, he said, “You must write,” which moved me.

Through such experiences, I came to think, “Perhaps I can live my own life now. How happy I would be if I could do something that is unique to me,” and concluded that writing could be that.

I was unable to write from the age of fifteen and only began writing again two years ago. The thirty “blank” years are longer than the period when I could write. Yet I have always wanted to write and have always thought I would regret not writing. I do not know how much I will be able to write in the future, how I will write and how things will turn out, but since I can write again, I want to continue writing, expressing my thoughts and feelings.

The times have changed. I am grateful for having met somebody like our church leader. I am also grateful that the time has come when people can acknowledge differences in one another, in their way of life and many other things.

Until then, I was not an active member of the church. I felt guilty about not being able to witness despite my heavy responsibility as a tribal messiah. However, recently, I have come to realize that that was because I had not lived my own life. I have also realized that if I live my own life with all my strength, many people in Korea who would recognize my efforts. Consequently, I feel that the best shortcut to contribute to the providence is to live one’s own life, so I wish to keep writing into the future.

I usually write about nature and life, but recently, I am planning to write about people whom others may not recognize as national figures but who have contributed to the development of their local community.

The Korean language is difficult and I feel the need to study harder. When I submit my work to competitions, I realize that my ability to express myself in Korean is still poor. If what I long to write were 100, the other prizewinners may have written 120, 130 or even more. Meanwhile, I can only manage 80 with my present Korean skills. I have to study harder in order to express at least “100” out of 100, and someday reach the level of expressing 110 or 120. I want to work hard so I can someday win the grand prize.