

Mourning My Late Husband Hidehiro Okada

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My most beloved husband, Hidehiro Okada, passed away at home in the wee hours of Thursday, May 25th, 2017, at the age of 86 years and 4 months. He was diagnosed with congestive heart failure.

(Picture: Junko Miyawaki with her husband Hidehiro Okada, at Ohdai Jikido Restaurant, Taisho University, on Jan. 22nd, 2017)



18 years ago, at the age of 68, he had suffered a stroke causing aphasia, and as a result he did not really go out to meet anybody anymore. 10 years ago, he underwent thorax surgery after a myocardial infarction, receiving five bypasses and a mitral valve ring implant. Five years ago, a combination of severe cardiac and renal insufficiency forced him to stay in hospital for a prolonged period. After the implant of a cardiac defibrillator he could return home, though now needing care at nursing level 4. Travel became impossible and he had to endure increasingly severe dietary restrictions, yet a year later his condition improved to nursing level 2, and three years later, he achieved nursing level 1. In June 2016, that is last year, during a symposium and party celebrating the completion of his

Collected Works in Eight Volumes (Fujiwara Shoten), he impressed everybody with his good and healthy spirit.

In January of this year, we invited his younger brother and his wife as well as friends to

our home, treating them to home-made *Osechi*, or New Year delicacies, and *Zoni*, soup with rice balls and vegetable especially served at New Year. On January 22nd, we were joined by the administrator of our mansion and his wife, and went by taxi to the Ohdai Jikido Restaurant of Taisho University in Nishi Sugamo where he could enjoy his beloved meat dishes.

In February, he began to suffer from severe swellings again, rapidly gaining body weight, and on February 9th he was hospitalized with cardiac decompensation at the Nippon Medical School Hospital in Sendagi, the very same hospital that we are indebted to as they had taken care of his stroke 18 years ago. He also suffered from several bouts of inhalation pneumonia, yet with the help of new medication he could leave the hospital after 40 days, on March 20. Again he fell to nursing level 4, and while it had been his profound desire to return home, he was forced back after ten days to hospital by colonic diverticulitis and heavy bleeding on March 31st.

Finally, as he preferred to be taken care of at home, arrangements had been made with doctors and nurses to conduct visits and rehabilitation measures at home on a regular basis since summer last year. At Nippon Medical School Hospital, the nurses responsible for home care support undertook great efforts for his treatment and care at home, yet despite numerous consultations, he suffered from even worse recurrences of cardiac decompensation and aspiration, and a discharge from hospital was out of question. At one point, I had even given up going home and squeezed myself for the night into the same single-bed room. Yet, his desire to return home was so strong that he endured the most painful treatments with truly unbreakable spirit, and finally, after 50 days, on May 24 at 11 o'clock a.m., he made it home.

During the day, the visiting nurse came over and fed him with pudding-style nutritious *Enjoy! Jelly*, making sure that he really took a good portion. In the afternoon, the visiting medical team, home care nurses, helpers and care managers gathered around him, discussing the care guideline for the time to come, during which, he fell into a deep sleep on his bed which could automatically turn his body while being asleep. After everybody else had withdrawn, he was still awake, and I talked to him as I had been doing accompanying him in hospital, prepared something to eat and took a bath. As he was breathing oxygen, he shook his head when I asked him whether he felt any pain or discomfort. However, he nodded when I asked him whether I should stay next to him. When I told him that I wanted to drink a glass of wine, he nodded again. With a glass of *shochu*, diluted with hot water, in my hand, I sat next to him, holding his hand, and after about half an hour, when I had finished my glass, he had gently fallen asleep. I slept in the room next door. During the night, I woke up three times and went over to see him, yet he slept in the same posture on his bed, rocking in his sleep.

The very next morning, May 25 at 06:30 a.m., I went to his bed again, put my hand on his forehead and found him cold. Immediately, I phoned the 24-hour standby service of the nursing agency and the visiting nurse. Before 7 o'clock, the very same nurse as usual hastened to our home. Together, we cleaned his body, and feeling that he was still warm, we realized that he had taken his last breath right before dawn. Moments later, the doctor came in a hurry, and after listening with a stethoscope immediately wrote the death certificate. Above all, I did not see any need to contact either police or hospital. I had lain in a distance so close that I could hear his breath, yet he had not raised his voice during the night, so I assume that he passed away in his sleep without further suffering.

Actually, just in January of this year we had bought a tomb at the Jotoku-ji Temple of the *Jodo Shu*, or Pure Land Buddhism, situated in Hon-Komagome San-chome, about 15 minutes in walking distance from our home. Since we have no children, I had originally considered to find a burial place at the Jotoku-ji Temple (same pronunciation, different kanji) of the *Jodo Shinshu*, or Shin Buddhism, in Wakayama, the city of my parents' family. My younger brother who happened to be the deputy head of the temple considered it a good idea to have bought a tomb in Tokyo, and my friends also thought that a tomb in Wakayama was too far away, being too inconvenient for visits. Last year, when joining the funerals of the late husbands of two friends of mine, I seriously thought about ourselves for the first time, and found a grave via a newspaper ad. At first, I went to the temple alone. Immediately after that, I went together with my husband and had a meeting with the abbot, upon which we became parishioners, while my husband himself selected the tombstone and its inscription. Unfortunately he was hospitalized thereafter, and in his ward he complained bitterly that he did not have a chance to see the finished tomb. So I asked the abbot to visit him in the hospital and to chant an Amida Buddha prayer for him. My husband rejoiced the fact that, the tomb being so near to our home, I could always go and see him.

18 years into the stroke, late sequelae had left a lasting impact on Hidehiro's language ability, but his mind was unbroken and up to the very last moments his conscience was as clear as ever, his power of judgment absolutely unimpeded. He had become a member of the Japanese Society for a Dignified Death, and upon being hospitalized he conveyed his wish to the doctor that neither a PEG tube for feeding nor any life-prolonging measure should be applied. Even though he sometimes raised his voice when he could not make himself heard, he was, up to his last moments, in fact the very soft-spoken and gentle person who always cared about the one he would leave behind.

In the hospital, I spent many hours sitting at his bed, and he said: "I truly didn't want this to happen", or "can I bother you to do it this or that way", and he was always worried about the impact of the situation on my work. Once he said: "Too sad that there is no turn for the better in the medical condition", or "sorry for presenting myself in such a

manner to you.” “It his hard for both of us,” he said, with the kindest consideration for the one he would leave behind, knowing that he would die before me, and he uttered:”I wish we were together forever.” His ability to produce appropriate speech being severely impaired, he could only mutter a few syllables now and then over several hours. I had to make sure that I understood him correctly, and he would give a seemingly satisfied nod when I had read his intentions right. Finally, he responded with a “no” when I asked him if he wanted to say something.

During the whole 90 days at the Nippon Medical School Hospital, the nurses spoke about us saying that there was rarely ever a couple being so considerate to each other. All nurses truly went to great lengths in their efforts. Both doctors and nurses revealed a degree of humane consideration well exceeding the usual professional scope, prompting me to think anew what a wonderful country Japan is.

My husband had the profound determination to return home, yet he did not want to inflict any burden on me, and so he finished his life the way he had foreseen it, staying the elegant gentleman up to the last moment, leaving me with the deepest respect for the strength of his willpower.

After being rested for four days on his bed at home until May 29th, he was finally placed in his coffin under the watchful eyes of the neighbours and friends. We kept the wake of the 29th and held the obsequies and farewell ceremony at Machiya funeral hall on May 30th. As we had held back the news from the media, only my husband’s immediate friends and relatives came to see him off. With a line of around 40 flower arrangements, I felt relieved that he did not have a lonely departure to his last journey.

When we met each other nearly 40 years ago, he already been suffering from high blood pressure and was apparently not poised for a long life. Since he was 21 years my senior, I was always prepared to see him off, and I stayed with him as often as possible in order not to regret any moment. I was really happy to see that he passed the age of sixty successfully; then he became 70, and when he approached 80, I realized that we had been together much longer since our first encounter than we had ever imagined, for which I will always be grateful.

Now that the person with whom I spent about two thirds of my life has gone, I am facing the greatest crisis ever. My late husband’s generous love towards me laid the foundation for me to make it my mission to continue and develop his scientific heritage, that is Okada’s historical scholarship. Regardless of how much remains of my life, I am set to spend it in such a manner that I shall never regret.

Praying for him, Junko Miyawaki-Okada.

(Translated from Japanese into English by Oliver Corff)