

WTE column of Oct 4, 2014. Editor's headline: "Praying for a twelve-year-old"

CST column of Sept 29, 2014. Editor's headline: "A simple request: houghts and prayers, please"

An email arrived from Japan. "This is sudden. Kyoko is undergoing artificial heart surgery," wrote her dad. "She is suffering a dilated cardiomyopathy. Prayers please."

Kyoko is twelve years old, the age of my granddaughter. As an infant, with her parents in Mitchell, South Dakota, and my own grandchildren a thousand miles away, she was something of a surrogate grandbaby to me.

"So sorry to hear of your daughter's challenges," I return-emailed Shimpei. "How sad to have to undergo surgery at such a young age! And what a worry for you! My thoughts and prayers are with you. Know that you and Noriko, and of course, Kyoko, have had a special place in my heart all along. I treasure the pictures you've sent over the years."

I asked where the surgery was taking place, what her prognosis was, and how long she'd be confined.

"You write of 'artificial' heart surgery. Does this mean she is being outfitted with a device like a pacemaker? Please keep me posted. Your parents and in-laws must be worried sick."

Eighteen months ago, when I visited the Miwas in Japan, school was out and Kyoko was on vacation. Her heart condition was unknown then. One rainy day she and I played checkers. Once we got bored with the game, we started to build towers with the pieces. It thrilled Kyoko when they tumbled. Another day Noriko and Kyoko took me to visit a famous Buddhist temple. Buddhism arrived as the Country of Eight Islands practiced Shinto, a prehistoric tradition of venerating nature. Even today Japanese Buddhism is infused with Shinto ideas.

Six months after I visited, the Miwas informed me of Kyoko's newly-discovered ailment. In Japan, when students enter sixth grade, their physical check-up includes an electrocardiogram. That's when her heart condition became apparent. All at once she could no longer walk to school or participate in cheerleading, much less climb the two flights to her classroom. Her teacher or her mother had to carry her up. Some months later came a report that her condition seemed stable.

"The surgery started about five hours ago and is continuing. Her own heart is just too weak so she needs heart support and it is an external pump machine. She will need to stay in hospital; the machine is too big to carry around," her dad emailed with cc to his wife.

“To be hooked to a machine that big doesn’t sound good. Does this mean she’ll be confined indefinitely? That would be a terrible life for a young person,” I emailed both of them. “Will she qualify for a heart transplant?”

“The 7-hour surgery went well,” Shimpei replied. “The pump she is hooked on now is big but she will have several more surgeries to fit a smaller one she can carry around to go home. Eventually she will need a heart transplant as the pump will not last forever. Usually one needs to wait for two years for a heart donor. In any case we are glad she overcame the first major surgery.”

I replied that I was happy Kyoko got through her ordeal and wondered how she was feeling. “It’s good that the doctors believe she’ll qualify for a heart transplant. Would she have to be a certain age?”

Shimpei and Noriko did not answer the question of age; perhaps they don’t know themselves. I try to picture the parents’ pain. Imagine a heart transplant for your twelve-year-old! What an overwhelming prospect.

Back when I visited, Shimpei worked late hours every day: Japanese culture makes this the norm. Typically, Kyoko was asleep when her dad got home, also when he left in the morning for his one-hour train ride to Toshiba headquarters in downtown Tokyo. He saw his daughter only on weekends. What a contrast with his job in Mitchell, where he managed his company’s US plant.

Noriko, like many Japanese women, gave up her career when she started a family. When she showed me her daughter’s schoolwork, I marveled at the patience with which small hands must draw the intricate characters as they learn to write Japanese. School children also practice Chinese symbols, Noriko explained, adding that Japanese is an ancient variant of Chinese.

Kyoko is an only child, and the only grandchild of Noriko’s parents. “Prayers, please,” her dad, a secularist, emailed me. “My thoughts and prayers are with you,” I answered. An atheist myself, I nonetheless believe in the power of prayer—though not the kind a football team (or military squad) might offer, desiring to vanquish an opponent. Rather, I believe that, when humans share one another’s sorrows in small ways, it’s a form of prayer that can have remarkable results.

To be atheist doesn’t mean “churchless.” In fact, I sing in the choir at UUCC, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Cheyenne. It’s just, I don’t believe in an entity that will punish (or reward) people after death along purely human criteria.