

Sermons

July - A Visit to a Grave by Issho Fujita

When I was eleven years old, my father was offered a job transfer to Osaka city, the third largest city by population in Japan. At that time our family lived in a provincial part of another prefecture, where my father worked for a local branch of a big construction company. For him, this offer meant a promotion in his career. One day at dinnertime, he brought up the move. Upon hearing about it, my grandmother on my father's side, who was then living with us, said in a loud voice, "Absolutely not! Who will take care of our ancestors' tomb? I will never leave here, even if all of you move out!"



We were very surprised by her flat refusal because she was usually very quiet and even-tempered. My father was her only child (all his brothers and sisters were dead); he could not leave her alone and go to a far place. So he had no choice but to give up his special chance to get promoted.

As soon as I started writing about "a visit to a grave," this memory popped up in my mind. Even though it was a long time ago, I still remember that scene very vividly. At that time, I could not understand why she insisted so strongly, but now I can understand that for her, as a descendant, it was a very important duty to make regular visits to our family's graveyard.

She often went to the graveyard—sometimes with us, sometimes by herself. In front of the tombs she put her hands together and spoke some words, maybe a kind of greeting. Then she swept the ground with a broom, picked up trash, and washed the tombs. After cleaning up, she offered flowers, incense, candles, sweets and fruits. She poured water over the tombs and put her hands together again, lowered her head, and spoke: "I am here, again," "It gets warmer these days," "We are all fine so don't worry," "My grandson just entered a junior high school," and so on. She talked as if somebody was really there in front of her.

The dictionary definition of a tomb is "a monument to the memory of a dead person" under which his/her skeletal remains were buried. In this context it is pointless to argue about the existence of the dead in a scientific sense. People go there to cherish the memory of the deceased. We humans have an amazing ability to visualize non-existing beings in our mind's eye, relying on our memories. We can tangibly feel the presence of the deceased and can even have a dialogue with him or her. In this way we can communicate with someone who already passed away.

Please try to call to mind the most significant person in your life who has already passed away. As vividly as you can, picture the details of a scene in which you and that person are interacting. What is happening there? How do you feel about it? You might have some strong emotions welling up in your body. Or, through this exercise, you might be surprised to find out something new about that person, something that was unknown to you before. In this exercise you are not talking with a ghost, but to a person who has been alive in your heart.

A grave is a kind of tool which makes it easier for us to do such an exercise in our mind. By making an occasional visit to a grave beneath which our ancestors or close friends sleep, we are reconnecting ourselves with those significant people in our lives. It is very meaningful and important for us to commemorate someone's death and to include him/her within our own life so that we can fully live, connected with those who have come before us.