

共にあること

(著者の名前は留保します)

優しさとは、誰かの困っている状態を代わりに解決してあげることではない、と私達は知っています。私は祖父が去年亡くなってから生きる意欲をなくした祖母に関わって、その思いをより強くしました。

祖母は八十六歳ですが、結婚後も仕事を続け、心身ともに自立した人でした。それなのに祖父の死後、毎日どんよりして延々愚痴をこぼす姿には驚くばかりでした。食事を運んだり、遺品の片付けをしたり、身の回りの面倒を取り除き、また映画や旅行へ連れ出し気たり、趣味サークルを探したりしましたが、元気を出して貰えるどころか拒絶されることもあったからです。いわゆる優しさが一つも通用しなかったのです。

祖父の介護中は「自由になったらあれもこれもしたい」と希望や計画を話していた祖母なのに、なぜそんなに無気力になってしまったのか。思うに、祖母は介護をすることで、不自由を感じながらも実は生きる力を得ていて、今は生活の張りが無いのでしょう。人は自分の楽しみの為にだけ時間や労力を使うのでは、本当の満足は得られない生き物なのかもしれません。であれば、祖母の中に眠る、自分が必要とされている実感を得たい、という気持ちを満たすことが祖母への優しさではないかと思いました。

高齢者である祖母が、庇護を受けるばかりの立場ではない、ということをはっきりさせるにはいろんなアプローチが必要です。まず、ご近所で同じように近年配偶者を亡くされたばかりの女友達との定例のお茶会を催すことにしました。そして皆さんに、現況や今の思いを口にして分かち合ってもらいました。これは独り身になっても似たような仲間がいると感じてもらおうためのステップです。

回数を経て場がなごんだところで、次に聞き取りをしてみました。内容は、日本では高齢でも主に女性が介護を担っている実情、そして突然独り身になってどう思うか等です。高齢者が高齢者を看取るという大変な思いをされ、その経験を生かさないのは勿体ないと思ったのです。

例えば、夫の介護時には福祉の関係者が体調や精神面について配慮し、夫本人や妻も「気にかけて貰っている」という実感を得ることができます。でも夫が亡くなった途端、妻の体調どころか、生きていたかの確認さえ行政からはありません。親族が身近にいないと、孤独な生活がいきなり始まるのです。しかもこのことは社会的に認知されていません。私がそのように要約すると、皆さんに自分達の経験は人に伝える価値があると実感して貰えました。

それからは、この経験を記すブログ作りの説明です。元々SNSなどの交流手段は、体が思うようにならない方達にこそ役立つツールだと考えていたので、祖母のブログは数年前に開設してありました。その時は興味を示してくれませんでした。祖母の

庭のえんどう豆が実った写真や、シニアスイミングで新しい運動を始めた話題等、いつか見返した時に心がなごむよう作り溜めていました。今回見せてみると、自分の人生を振り返ると喜んだだけでなく、記事が知らない人に数千回も見て貰えていることや、コメントまであることに驚いていました。他の皆さんも、「返事のある壁新聞みたい」と興味津々になってくれました。そして思い出の記録だけでなく、「看取りの後の老人の現状を知ってもらおう」と、積極的に発信するアイデアが出始めました。どの顔も生き生きしています。

人は年齢や性別や環境で隔てられているようで、本当は少し立場が違うだけであり、優しくするもされるもありません。全てのことに「共にいるよ」と関わっていくことが大事なのでしょう。私はそれにもっと気づいて貰えるように、祖母とご近所のブログを作ることを今後精力的に進めたく思います。ネットの接続環境など課題はありますが、それを一緒にあれこれ考えるのも面白く、まさに「共にいるよ」という感覚を得られ、私にとって新しい優しさの定義となったからです。

Being in It Together

(author's name withheld)

We know that kindness means helping to resolve someone's difficult situation. I felt this all the more strongly in relation to my grandmother, who lost her will to live after my grandfather died last year.

My grandmother is eighty-six years old. After getting married, she continued working, and she remained independent both mentally and physically. But despite this, I was surprised to see that, after my grandfather died, she became very gloomy and was complaining all the time. We brought her meals, helped her to deal with my grandfather's things and take care of her daily needs, took her out to the movies and on excursions, and looked for hobby groups that she could join. But far from accepting these things cheerfully, she often rejected them. Our attempts at kindness didn't work on her at all.

While she was taking care of my grandfather, my grandmother talked about her hopes and plans, saying, "When I'm free, I want to do this and that." So, why did she become so listless? My view is that when she was caring for my grandfather, even though she felt restricted, it gave her energy for living. Now, she no longer had that energy and willpower. Perhaps human beings cannot be truly content when they spend their time and effort only for their own enjoyment. If so, I thought, then maybe the kindness I can give to my grandmother is to fulfill her inner desire to feel needed by others.

It takes several steps to make an elderly person like my grandmother realize that she is more than someone who needs to be cared for. First, I began holding regular gatherings with other women in the neighborhood who had recently lost their husbands. They would share their feelings and talk about how they were doing at present. The purpose was to make them feel that, even though they were living alone, they had friends in the same situation.

After a few gatherings, the atmosphere became more relaxed, and I asked a question of the group: In Japan, even in old age women are the primary caregivers, so how does it feel when you suddenly find yourselves alone? It is quite a hardship for an elderly person to care for and lose another elderly person, so it would be a waste, I thought, not to draw on their experiences.

For example, when a woman is caring for her elderly husband, someone from social services comes to check on their physical condition and mental state, and both the husband and wife can feel that people are concerned about them. But as soon as the husband passes away, no one even makes sure that the wife is alive, let alone looks after her condition. If she doesn't have any relatives nearby, then she suddenly finds herself all alone. And yet, this issue is not well recognized in society. When I explained it in this way, everyone was able to feel that there is value in sharing their experiences.

After that, I explained how to post these experiences on an online blog. I have always thought that social media and other networking tools are especially useful for people

who are physically disabled or constrained in some way, and it was with this in mind that I had created 'Grandma's Blog' a few years earlier. At that time, although my grandmother didn't show much interest in it, I posted pictures of the green peas ripening in her garden, and wrote about topics like new exercises at her seniors' swimming class. Over time, I had created a collection of posts that were heartwarming to look back on. Now, when I showed them to my grandmother, she not only felt joy in looking back at her life, she was also surprised to see that people she did not know personally had viewed the blog posts thousands of times, and sometimes even left comments. The other women in the group were also keenly interested in it, and said it was like a big wall poster that people can read and write responses. Then, they put forth the idea to make the blog not just a record of past memories, but a way to share what it's like for elderly people after they have cared for and lost a loved one. Everyone's face came alive!

Human beings may seem separated by differences in age, gender, and circumstance, but in reality, it is just that our situations are a little bit different, and there is no distinction between givers and receivers of kindness. In everything, I think, it's important to get involved, remembering that 'we are all in it together.' In order for more people to realize this, I want to enthusiastically recommend creating a blog to share the experiences of our grandmothers and our elderly neighbors. There are some issues to consider, such as connecting to the internet, but it is interesting to think about these issues together. It gives us a real sense of being in it together, and for me, that is a new definition of kindness.

Translated by David W. Edelstein