

A Long Way to Euthanasia in Japan

(**change slides)

Good afternoon.

This is a story of a day almost six years ago when an incident occurred that dramatically and permanently changed the lives of my wife, Makiko, myself, and our entire family in a most tragic way.

On July 1st, 2006 around 8 pm, just as it was getting dark and rainy, Makiko was driving home after visiting her nephew's family in our home town of Toyama City, Japan. Suddenly, she was hit head-on by a car that crossed the center line into her lane. **The driver was a 19 year old boy who just got his driver's license a month prior. He had fallen asleep at the wheel when he collided into her car.

One month before the accident, we were in the U.S., visiting our daughter who had just given birth to our first grandchild--a baby girl.** We were so happy and enjoyed our short, three week stay with our granddaughter. Makiko went back to Japan, and I left for Las Vegas for a business convention.

Sadly, we didn't receive the bad news until more than 24 hours after the accident. My daughter, my son, and I flew immediately from three different locations in the U.S., and linked up in Japan. By the time we finally arrived at the hospital, it had already been 3 days since the accident. Makiko was in an ICU unit, connected to a respirator. Her doctor said "If she regains her consciousness, she would most likely be in a vegetative state, and that is if she is lucky."

She did regain her consciousness after a couple of weeks, but she was almost completely paralyzed. The only thing she could move were her eyelids—she could blink, and her mouth—she tried to talk, but her vocal cords were paralyzed too.

**Her doctor told us that she had probably lost memory of the accident and of a time period before and after the accident. We later learned that she did not even remember how happily she took care of her new, baby granddaughter, which was very sad. A month later, she was fitted with a feeding tube and had a diaphragm pacemaker implanted; both of which she still depends on to sustain her life.

**When she regained her consciousness, we tried to communicate. Since her hearing was not impaired, we told her to blink her eyes twice if the answer is YES, and to close her eyes if the answer is NO. While this meant that she could answer YES and NO questions, still she was not able to express herself.

**With her speech therapist, we experimented with a computerized communication aid, with no success. Then we tried one called “Let’s Chat” made by Panasonic. This device is more mechanical and easier to operate and follow, but very time consuming, having to pick out one letter at a time. However, we had no success with this device either, despite the speech therapist working with her for half an hour everyday for 8 months. It is designed for patients who can push the button themselves.

The doctors and therapists gave up all hope of her ever being able to use a communication device, but later on someone gave me an idea; “why not use her blinking as a signal ?” In other words, my wife gives me signals by blinking, and **I push the button for her. It worked!

**After 2 years and 9 months had passed since the day of the accident, Makiko was finally able to communicate and express herself, even only one or two sentences a day. I was thrilled, but the thought of her being trapped in her own body for 2 years and 9 months made me want to cry.

As soon as we started to communicate I decided to record everything she spelled out. **I now have 3 notebooks full of notes which I have titled, *MAKIKO NO KOTODAMA*, which translates to *A MESSAGE FROM MAKIKO’S SOUL*. “soul message” makes no sense... sorry, but I think a message from her soul makes better sense.

(The book titled *Makiko no Kotodama* was published 2 years ago by Mika Yanagihara)

Our ancestors believed that a language is not just a means to convey a message. It has a much deeper meaning with a spiritual power. It occurred to me that the words she spells out, which take so much time and intense concentration, are like a ray of light coming from far distance. To me, all those words are very deep and truly spiritual.

**Since we began our little communication, she has constructed the following sentences,

on more than one occasion:

I love you.

I am grateful to you.

I am alright because you are with me.

I love you more than anything in the whole world.

I want to be with you always.

Do you really, really love me?

**Makiko's other repeated messages have been quite depressing:

Kill me please.

I am determined to die.

***I want to die with you.*

To try to help her develop a more positive attitude, I told her:

**"I have a grave built for you and me right next to my ancestors' grave, which was built in 1850, more than 150 years ago. We will be together permanently, here and in the future life."

**I continue to visit and be with her almost every day as I have done for the last 6 years and will take care and protect her for as long as I can until her last moment. The thought of dying before her, leaving her all alone in this world, is unbearable. I am sure she feels the same way. Two years ago, this became a real possibility when I had surgery to remove pancreatic tumor. **I just wish that I could let my wife follow me to our grave when I die.

People who love the opera surely know Puccini's Madame Butterfly. Just before she sings her very last, heart breaking aria, she takes the dagger given by her father, holds it with both hands, kisses the blade, and then reads the words inscribed on the blade.

"He shall die with honor... who no longer can live his life with honor" (repeat)

Cio Cio San was a daughter of a SAMURAI. To die with honor and dignity was our tradition until one hundred fifty years ago. To die with dignity is not a new concept. However, in modern Japan, people have forgotten this. We must be reminded that to die with dignity is our heritage, our tradition, and our proud culture.

Naturally I am not advocating suicide. I am only emphasizing the spiritual aspect of how to live, how to age and eventually how to die in accordance with our tradition.

Today in Japan, there is nothing in our judicial system to support individual's choice to die with dignity. **As a start, this can be accomplished in Japan by introducing a law to make the Living Will a legal document. I hope all of you lend your support to this law.

Thank you.