

Life and death

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Ever since I started writing fiction, when I was young, the subject of death has been a constant theme in my writing owing to the hopeless contradiction between thought and reality. But the reality of my own life was that I had no moments of despair, no longing for death. On the contrary, I was insensible to adversity, fundamentally optimistic, and not at all afraid of being alone.

When the calendar page turned to the second day of 2002, I went through a period of being technically, theoretically, dead. But I walked through the valley of the shadow of death and returned to the world of light and life.

I had been suffering from atrial fibrillation for over ten years. Thanks to regular medication, this condition did not interfere with the quality of my life and work. But in the last year or two, my heartbeat had grown increasingly irregular. After careful thought, I decided to follow the advice of a doctor whose expertise in this area was well known both in Taiwan and abroad, and undergo a kind of heart operation called “catheter radiofrequency ablation.”

Under local anesthesia I could hear the conversation between the cardiologist and his assistant. I had gone into the operation knowing that it should last about three hours. Today all I can remember from their conversation is this:

“If we still can’t get the catheter in this time, we should just give it up.”

Then my mind went blank, as in a deep sleep.

The next time I heard someone’s voice, it was my wife. I was faintly aware that I was lying on my back on a hospital bed being wheeled at high speed. “The operation is over ... Now they are sending you for

another operation.” My wife whispered in my ears. “Stay strong! All your effort! ...”

I opened my eyes and saw her encouraging smile. I tried to raise my hand to touch her face, but try as I might I could not reach her. She bent down as she walked, so that my hand could touch her cheek. After that, I confusedly felt my bed being wheeled into an elevator, then out. I heard my wife whisper again and again: “All your effort! I’ll be waiting right outside.”

Once again my mind went blank, for some ten days. There was no pain; it was like a deep and even comfortable sleep in a dark room.

Two weeks later I was out of the intensive care unit, and moved into an ordinary one-person hospital room. My wife began to tell me, in bits and pieces, about my return “from death to life” over the past two weeks.

Even the safest operations involve various kinds of risk, even the risk of death. According to the cardiologist, the structure of my heart was different from that of other people, so that the first operation took an extra three hours. The cardiologist then called my wife in and told her that the operation was completed but my blood pressure was dropping fast. The doctors suspected internal bleeding, and were in the process of testing. I might need emergency open-heart surgery.

In a few moments, the doctor called my wife back to Cardiology and told her that there were complications from the operation. Open-heart surgery was necessary. He asked a surgeon to explain the situation to her.

My wife recalled: “The surgeon briefly told me, ‘Mr. Chen is in critical condition, and needs emergency surgery immediately.

This surgery is dangerous, but it must be done—do you understand?” She paused a moment in thought. “I answered, ‘Yes I understand.’ ‘OK,’ said the surgeon, ‘I’ll get ready; we’ll send him to the third-floor operating room right now.’ He hurried off.”

“I begged the cardiologist to let me say a few words to you before the operation. The cardiologist hurried back to the operating room. After a short time I heard a big nervous commotion among the doctors, nurses and technicians inside the OR,” my wife recalled. She said she looked into the room. “I saw that they had already inserted breathing tubes, and a doctor was using a small flashlight to check your pupils. There were many people hovering around you, just like the scenes on TV when a patient is near death.”

She said her legs went weak, and only by leaning hard against the wall did she avoid collapsing on the floor. A female technician saw her, and asked her to leave the cardiology section to wait outside.

“I was afraid my infirmity might divert the doctors’ attention from you. So I pulled myself together, walked out of the cardiology section, and sat down on a bench directly across from the operating room. I was trembling all over, eyes wide, seeing nothing but the surgery department’s cold and empty long white hallway.”

The cardiologist came out of the operating room. “I went to the operating table and was about to tell Mr. Chen that you wanted to speak to him, but his blood pressure unexpectedly plummeted, and his breathing and heartbeat stopped,” he said to her. “We have now brought him back, and we’re going to send him for surgery. You can go in to talk to him. He’ll probably be able to hear you, but he has a breathing tube inserted and won’t be able to answer.”

It was midwinter. One could sense a chill in the air even in the heated hospital room. My wife whispered the events that happened after ten days. I remembered the moment when I was wheeled out of the cardiology room, when I opened my eyes and saw her encouraging smile, when she bent forward to let me touch her face and softly

told me to stay strong. That moment was my first step away from death; it was also the moment after my wife had waited for a heart-piercing, agonizing, and terrifying six hours.

From the time I entered the surgery room, my mind was empty and my memory remains a blank. But my chest was opened, my atrial appendage was stitched up, I was given a large blood transfusion, and I was sent to the intensive care unit, where for five or six days I had a high fever from a dangerous infection. Every day outside the ICU, my wife, along with many relatives and friends who had come to visit me and comfort her, waited anxiously in the cold and humidity. Because my high fever continued, my wife had to refuse all the visitors’ requests to visit me. Even today, whenever I think of this I feel apologetic. The hospital’s overnight guest rooms for patients’ relatives were unheated even in winter; but my wife, her brother, and her young friend Xiao Lin kept vigil there for the whole two weeks: every day and every night.

But I, in my sickroom, remained in deep sleep, aware of nothing. After I woke up and heard the nightmarish story from my wife, I was stunned and alarmed, and felt grateful to her as never before. The miracle of medical science saved me, but in a sense it had also almost cast me into the abyss of death. I felt that it was my toiling companion of nearly 25 years, refusing to leave my side, straining to her last drop of strength, who had pulled me back firmly from the edge of death.

“Why did it take you so long to tell me this?” I said, holding her hand tightly and gazing at her thinning face.

“I did not want to frighten you.”

“Now that I know, yes, I am shaken and frightened ...”

She said that even after I had, with great difficulty recovered enough to leave the intensive care unit, she was still deeply anxious and unsettled. “There was another patient who had heart surgery. He recovered quickly and well; his cheeks had a healthy glow,” my wife said. “He sometimes came over from his room on the same floor as the intensive care unit, to chat and encourage

the people visiting other patients." She said, "On the day when you were moved out of intensive care, we heard that he died suddenly in his room."

I silently gripped her hand.

"I watched the expression on your face very closely every day, and listened carefully to what the doctors said in their rounds." She smiled. "And now it looks like all the nightmares are over ..."

But my wife's smile could hardly hide her exhaustion. To rid my feet of swelling, the doctor prescribed diuretics to make me urinate often. Weakened from the surgery, I lacked the strength to go to the bathroom on my own, and to get the bedpan I had to ring a buzzer to wake my wife from her sound sleep five or six times a night. She herself had a painful spinal condition. Seeing her labor day and night over my sickness, I finally understood that taking care of the sick is a far greater hardship than the sickness itself; and I came to a deep appreciation of the strength and truth of love behind a couple's sharing of life and fate.

My wife said that after the surgery the doctor told her, "Some people recover full mental functioning after this kind of surgery, but some people display a certain impairment." As I gradually recovered my strength, had occasional interviews with journalists, and began to write essays, my wife joyfully said, "You are proving each time that your brain has escaped damage. We should thank the doctors. Should we perhaps also thank God?"

Influenced by my father, I was a pious Christian in my youth. Even to the present day, the entire families of my older sister, my third and fourth younger brothers, and my little sister are all devout Christians. When I fell ill, they and their congregations prayed for me daily. And I remember that when my brother-in-law came to see me in intensive care, he held my hand and prayed for my recovery.

In the general patients' ward, as I listened to my wife's recounting of the course of my illness, I began to ponder the experience and the significance of my passage "from death to life." When breathing ends

and the heart stops beating: is that not death? Why did I not have that experience that everyone reads about, that people who pass through momentary "death" speak of—like a light at the end of a dark tunnel, or seeing weeping relatives gathered around one's body? Why was the border between life and death for me nothing but a deep sleep in a dark room? If the emergency surgery had failed, would my life simply have ended, like the extinguishing of a light? If there is a God, who let me walk through the valley of the shadow of death to emerge back into life, then what was the purpose? What was the goal?

So it was that I who believed philosophically in historical materialism began to say halting prayers to God, in my sickroom, every night before going to sleep. I repented my sins; I gave praise; I gave thanks. I thought of the cruel torment Jesus had suffered, the insult and beatings, as he bore the cross on that long walk to the place of Golgotha. That innocent man suffered flogging and degradation in my place, to redeem my sin. To let me live on, such a weak and low creature: what is Your purpose? My dim-witted mind could not comprehend this; but I persisted in asking.

The reply that came to me, however, was always and only a boundless silence. There was no blazing fire from the Holy Spirit. There was no answer at all.

I recalled that while theoretically I believed in Marxist historical materialism, in religion I believed in discarding any societal institution, any organized Church; instead, one should try to hear God's will and teaching direction, by reading the Bible (even in Greek) and praying. That was my "non-church" religion. I thought of Yanaihara Tadao, a leading figure in Japan's non-church movement. On the one hand he used Marxist economics to show how the sugar industry in Taiwan was a tool of Japanese imperialism. On the other hand, he promoted the "enlightened" colonial policy of the Japanese Empire. His contributions are riddled with contradictions and limitations, both scholarly and religious. I also thought of the different stages of capitalism, from

mercantilism to the free market, and of how the Church has historically been an accomplice to Western colonial expansion, exploitation, and slaughter.

“Lord, I am so slow. How can I ask you to take me into your embrace once again?” I helplessly whispered and pleaded. But the only answer was that same deep and boundless silence.

I also thought of Mr. Dai Guohui.

If my memory is correct, Mr. Dai Guohui passed away on January 3, 2001. Had I not been brought back to life on January 2, 2002, our memorial anniversaries would have been just one day apart. During his final year I met with him several times, and we spoke over tea. He had already come to see that had been deceived by the state machine. During his illness he hastened to publish his talks with Mr. Wang Zuorong.² In the end, Mr. Dai died with a heavy heart, full of regret.

Naturally, I have neither the deep knowledge nor the high aspirations of the venerable Mr. Dai. But after my serious illness it is all too clear to me that life is short. Understanding the brevity of life, and lacking great scholarly ambition, I now wish to do as much as I can and as much as I should, and to be a companion to my wife as we cherish the remainder of our days.

—Written in Shenzhen on July 4, 2004

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Notes

1. Note on spelling: all the Asian names in the text are presented in the Asian order: last name first.
2. See Dai and Wang (2001).

References

- Dai, Guohui, and Wang Zuorong [戴國輝, 王作榮]. 2001. *Love and Hate Li Denghui: Dialogues between Dai Guohui and Wang Zuorong* [愛憎李登輝: 戴國輝與王作榮對話錄]. Taipei: Tianxia wenhua [天下文化].

Author's biography

Chen Yongshan [陳永善] was born in 1937 in Taiwan. Chen Yingzhen [陳映真] is his literary pen name, whereas the pen name Xu Nancun [許南村] is used for his review articles. He started writing literary works in 1959, and was incarcerated for seven years in 1968. After his release from prison, he continued writing and involved himself in various leftist social practices. His writings and deeds remain among the most important resources for leftist thoughts and practices in Taiwan.

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