

October 9, 2016

Acceptance of Family Death

By Jackson Ito

Question No. 11 of Youth Leaders Seminar: *“When you lost your wife, if you don’t mind, please tell us how you accepted the loss of your wife and how you got over it (including your remarriage).”*

I will answer a more general question regarding death of family members. I understand that the most devastating loss and grief results from losing a child. Fortunately for me, I have not experienced this grief, but I know a number of relatives and friends who have. The reason this loss is so difficult is because everyone assumes that the older generation should die before the children. We are particularly grief stricken because we feel it is unfair, and our children never had the chance to fulfill their life’s destiny.

Losing a spouse, which was the question asked of me, is second. It is difficult because when we were married, we had expected to spend the rest of our entire lives together. When half of the partnership ends early, the survivor is at a loss and feels incomplete. But I know that my mother-in-law felt the loss even more than I did. She kept repeating that she wished that she could have died instead, so that her daughter might have lived longer. I told her that we cannot trade lives with God and each of us have to live to our own destiny.

Personally, when my wife died, my first reaction was that I wanted to die, too, so that I could be together with her spiritually. Then, I realized that I was being selfish and only thinking of myself. My children (one son and one daughter) were also grieving, because they had just lost their mother. If I died too, they would become orphans and grieve twice as much for losing both their mother AND father. Therefore, I resolved that it was my responsibility to my children to fulfill the role of both father and mother.

Next in order of grieving would be loss of siblings {brother(s) and sister(s)}. Although some siblings do not get along, especially if there has been rivalry growing up or disputes over inheritances following the death of parents. Fortunately, that has not been the case in my family. My three brothers and one sister are still living, and we all get along well together.

Other losses of relatives include grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. Other losses include friends, church members, co-workers, neighbors and others.

I am deeply grateful for the six weeks I had with my wife between the time we recognized her illness and when she died. It was sufficient time for her to discuss her wishes for the rest of my life after her death. On the other hand, it did not unnecessarily prolong her period of pain and suffering resulting from her illness preceding her inevitable death. On the day she died, she told me that she had made her peace with God. I was very relieved and grateful that she could make that statement.

My wife’s instruction for me was to continue living the rest of my life as normally as possible and to continue doing everything that we would have done together. She said that she

knew I could never be as happy living alone as we were while we were married. She said although she may have been jealous of other women while she was alive, she wanted me to remarry after she was gone. At the time, I could not imagine that I could find another wife to love as much as I loved her. I had no interest in finding another wife, and I was determined to be content with living with our memories for the rest of my life. However, I did heed her advice to continue activities we had been sharing together. She said that I was only scientific and technical and needed to increase my cultural awareness. She signed us up for season tickets to travelling Broadway plays, musical theater, symphonies, etc., for over 15 to 20 years. So I continued to renew my season tickets for two and took her mother to accompany me or asked her sister to take her mother using my tickets.

My wife and I had been taking one or two vacations per year with Caltech for the last 10 to 12 years before she died. In October 2001, Caltech had planned a trip to China. I knew that if she had still been living, she would have wanted to go on that trip, so I signed up to go. It was during this trip that I met my second wife who was an orthopedic hand surgeon. Since she was 13 years younger than me and had never been married, I didn't think she would ever have any interest in me. We toured a number of Buddhist caves in China, in which Buddhist monks had built temples to bless the safety and prosperity of the merchants along Marco Polo's Spice Trail. After one of these tours she asked me if I knew anything about Buddhism and whether I had any literature she could read. I told her that I had very little on Buddhism itself, but that I had read a book written by a Jewish author which summarized my view on religion (including Gedatsu). She is an avid reader of all subjects, so she said she would like to read it and asked me for a reference. I told her it was home in Sacramento, so I would send her the reference if she would give me her email address. It was only after we both returned to California that our friendship and relationship developed, and we were married in 2004.