

A Dialogue with Life

Lin Fang-ju

Translated by Dan Bauer

In 1990 a 19 year old Chinese university student by the name of Lin Fang-ju discovered she had cancer of the liver. She lived for another five years. In her final months as a patient at the National Taiwan University Hospital, she wrote a diary of reflections which ended with an essay which could be termed a dialogue with life. In this translation by Dan Bauer, Lin Fang-ju speaks for the first time in an English voice.¹

I took a course in Buddhism one semester when I was a university student. The emphasis was on life and living, and the Professor made an observation that we should not slavishly follow the views of others, but with freshness and vigor, act according to our own personal views in judging people, the material world, and various other issues.

This is the reason I am trying to let my persona and my life speak here. My words are surely not those of a disinterested by-stander making some critical comments about life; even less so are they a study of a topic or an issue. Rather, it is as if I have no choice in the matter; I am compelled by events to look back over the story of my life in all its twists and turns and various labrinths; and with all my heart and mind to face up ever more closely to the world that is *my* life; to confront it and, speaking figuratively, to splash about in its waters. By looking at all this with a certain degree of distance, perhaps I can penetrate beyond the confusion and darkness. I want to look unflinchingly at life; at what it means to be human; and at the appearance of the world we live in.

I want to allow life itself to speak; to allow my very existence to throw open its doors. Even more so, I want to listen with every drop of attention I can muster. In this way I will grasp at the chance to discover the deepest implications and wherefore of my life.

For a while my heart and mind were often full of distress and deep anxiety. During those days I would think of Beethoven's "Symphony of Fate." Today, two hundred years after he composed that music, we are still moved by his notes as they convey life's stubborn urge to resist fate. If we

¹ From 我不能死, 因為我還沒有找到我的遺囑 (I Cannot Die Because I Haven't Yet Found My Last Will and Testimony), published by Living Psychology Publishers, Taipei, Taiwan, 1995. Translation and publication rights courtesy of Living Psychology Publishers

consider Vincent Van Gogh, we see that his paintings soar in glory precisely because they rise from the burning strength of his life. But for a very ordinary and miniscule life like mine however, well there seems to be no way to release the flames that are locked deep inside the center of my being; no way to give form to a life force that roars in my ears and begs for expression. Then again, here I am, a completely ordinary and simple individual. Who am I to imagine I could have anything of particular importance to remark on or claim about life? How could this be possible when for me every day is but a routine matter of eating, walking around, seeing, hearing, talking, and sleeping?

One day I could no longer stand the tepid air or humdrum life of the hospital, or the doctors' strict orders to stay locked up inside. On that day, like a thief, I crept quietly away and went to visit my alma mater, the National Taiwan Political University.

As I made my way there, it suddenly seemed to me that everything was just as it used to be; the bubbly sounds of that tranquil stream we called "Drunken Dream Creek," and the rays of the sun which splashed so dimly upon the surface of the hills and caressed my arms so tenderly, making them cozy and warm. I climbed up the mountain very slowly and it seemed as if my mind could contemplate everything. My heart felt so full I thought it might brim over at any moment. Yet, just as suddenly, my mind became empty.

Inside me, all was very dark, very murky. It was like a valley completely filled with autumn reeds, so many I wouldn't know how to count them individually; and they swayed in the wind; they danced to and fro. Just at that moment, as I put my foot down, I suddenly sensed a very different sort of feeling. Like a beam of light, a line of words actually sprang into my head: "This is the way it is!" Yes. This is the way it is.

No longer would I refuse to shoulder the weight of time. More than anything else, never again would I rebel against joy, or anger, or sorrow, or happiness. Nor would I deny the bitterness, or the inexplicability of my trials.

That was it! Now I finally had it figured out. This life of mine is important in itself, it has its own purpose. What I must do is grasp life itself, make being alive its own purpose. It isn't at all a question of searching for what may be important "out there" in order to explain anything, or of putting a label on some goal to pursue, for that, in the end, would be simply aimless, off-the-track wandering. When all is said and done, it really isn't possible to sum up a person's life, or to bundle everything in it up into a neatly arranged package. Life as a thing in itself, together with the very act of living, already has its own importance, its own purpose.

There was a doctor with cancer who was told he had only one year left to live. After getting the news, he began to look at the world (a world rich

and abundant) in ways he had never looked at it before. The very way his wife stood or moved around the kitchen when she was cooking actually took on a special beauty for him! I can pretty much feel that doctor's feeling, because I myself have cancer of the liver.

Four years ago my liver developed a tumor thirteen centimeters in size. While I was in the hospital the doctor said to me: "There is a 20% chance you will survive the operation. however, if you don't opt for surgery, I'd say you've got about six months left" Right then I made up my mind on the surgery question—I wasn't about to let even the tiniest hope or chance slip away. There was a period of two weeks when I had to wait for test results, and during that time the freshness of life leapt up before my eyes. All the beautiful things of past days really came alive in my memory! It was like a parade sequence on 35mm film, one framed scene after another welling up in my head; the sound of the rain falling late at night; the sunlight etching its way across the window pane during the day; and even the hustle and bustle of Taipei's endless, gnarled lines of trucks, cars, buses and motorcycles—all somehow became living things, attracting me with their own special charm.

The reason was very simple: I was standing face to face with death. No longer did I make living or life itself into a mere means for some given purpose or other. Now the situation was that there was another *me*, a *me* with nothing to hide behind; a *me* that began to treat even the very smallest of things differently, things I had once so often taken for granted. Everything became acutely and sharply focused in my eyes, and nothing seemed any longer like a mere object only. I could sense even the smallest of things happening around me, including the taste of the air, its distinctive aromas, and every nuance in how it changed throughout the course of a day.

Often someone will say they are able to gaze at truth with utter objectivity, with total purity. They have the capacity to actually transcend the dust and trivialities of our world and all matters and relations with the human. But what about me?

Many times it is especially the very people who have returned from walking along the borders of death who see the world with an incomparable sense of passion.

Everything in the world is the starting point of my fragility, and yet it is precisely the world and how I feel about it that at the same time sustains me and gives the strength that has kept me going.

After being wheeled into the preparation room for surgery, as I waited out the last minutes before being put on the operating table, a nurse asked me if I felt afraid. What I should do if I was afraid, she said, was to recite the name of Holy Buddha, *Ah Mi Tuo Fo*, or the Chinese name for Jesus

Christ, *Yeh su Chi-tu*. But the strange thing was I did not feel afraid. I was simply completely filled with an awareness of everything that had happened to me in my whole life.

It seemed as if I was running through the sum total of all the feelings I had ever possessed. It was true that in those minutes none of my loved ones or friends was by my side, and I was left all alone and by myself, a person with nothing to hide behind; alone and marching forward to meet that impasse face to face. Yet in those very same moments, all of the serious things that had occurred along my life's journey, and all the people I had experienced, and the things and objects, all of it welled up inside my heart. It was not a matter of accomplishing anything, and still less of feeling any special honor about it, but rather a feeling of tremendous devotion and fidelity. The sorrows and the joys were all so wonderfully abundant, they just ran over the brim, and all of these emotions were like a giant boulder that no one could move, and looking at death straight in the face as I was, that boulder gave me the meaning of my life, gave me the power to face dying!

I consider myself as someone intensely in love with life, a person with a very deep attachment to our world. It is my deep emotions that I feel most unwilling to let go of. This quality in me truly is the root and source of my weakness as well as my strength.

After I became ill, this stubbornness of mine became even stronger. Stubbornness is what sets a person apart and gives a person what we might describe as a certain flavor!

I have never been one to anticipate or expect very much of the future, or to ponder questions of another life ahead, or the Paradise of Buddha, or a heaven, or a crossing over into a state of Nirvana. The call I have heard so often in my heart is simply the call to be an ordinary person. If someone were to ask me now, "Do you have a special desire, or an ideal, or an aspiration"? I would answer, "I just want to be a human being, a human being with flesh and blood, and emotions and love, a person who can be sad, a person who can be happy, too. I want to be earnest about these days that are passing by me now; I want to savor ever so carefully all of the tastes and flavors of my life.

Thus for me the mythological story and literary work *The Myth of Sisyphus* has changed in its meaning and become attractive; it is not merely a tragic story. My view changed when I saw that this myth teems with a profound respect for the human, and that it is not in the least absurd. Isn't pouring every drop of one's life into the present moment the same thing as Sisyphus does when he devotes all of his strength to pushing that boulder up the side of the mountain?

Intelligent people often want to measure results by means of what they can see with their own eyes. So when they know it is necessary for the boulder to roll back down the side of the mountain again after it is pushed to the top, and that there is no way in the world to achieve that goal, they then regard Sisyphus as a pitiful, tragic figure. In my eyes however, what appeals to me in Sisyphus, and what shows us his wisdom, is precisely the fact that he does not comprehend the act of measuring, or this concern about whether or not he reaches his goal. Every act of pushing against a boulder is a revelation of life, and every last step up that mountain path is a definition of his life. This is the fiercest struggle in becoming truly human.

People always seem to reject the significance of the Chinese mythological hero *Kua Fu*. They consider his life as only one of useless toil and sweat; defeat, really, because he can never achieve his goal of catching the sun. But the fundamental point is that *Kua Fu* is *Kua Fu*, and this 'Kua Fu-ness' is completely and irrevocably contained in his stubborn running after the sun. If *Kua Fu* stops chasing that sun, *Kua Fu* stops being *Kua Fu*!

Whenever I look at every individual person's place on the stage of life, with all the troubles of each of the roles, the suffering, the joys, the laughter, I sense very deeply the flow of a human story.

I have always felt deeply affected emotionally by the most ordinary of people, by the wide expanse of their small sufferings and small joys, and the living out of their lives in the dust of our earth, affected by the rise and fall of their fortunes. There is a quality of the intimate and the beautiful in all of this. A line of Tang dynasty poetry advises, "Feel no regret that the band around my waist shows how thin I've become. For the sake of the one I love, I have become exhausted and near to skin and bones." That sort of attitude is stubborn, actually insane; but in the very heart and nature of the human person there dwells a spark of warm and shining light, and is it not in the enduring resolve of every little individual person that we find a sharing of a light, a radiant glow that is truly an affirmation of life itself?

Perhaps some people would consider this sort of life as far too insignificant to be given even a second thought, or maybe they'd term it "tragic." But I strongly feel that this is what it means to be human.

Speaking personally, this kind of stubborn resolve is in fact a form of deep fidelity to oneself, something that dwells far within the self, and it requires tremendous personal effort. But more than that, it is also a form of involvement, an interaction with our world that calls for a boundless love. It is like being a player upon the stage of life, and therefore necessarily sharing in the spirit of a self-forgetting fool like *Kua Fu*. The players throw themselves heart, mind and body into their performances to fulfill their parts. They perform their roles so well that they may even forget they only

play a part in a work of drama. It is as if they lose their senses in a drunken daze and surrender themselves totally to their roles. Thus it happens that the tears they shed actually become real tears, and their laughter expresses the sound of real life. To empty oneself and enter into a role in life is to embrace a role that is not merely assigned; for such a person truly overflows with life, drawing as they do from its source.

A glass that is filled with water and a glass that is empty look very much alike, and yet, forgetting yourself and falling into a state in which you are senselessly intoxicated in possibly the hardest of all realities to hide in life. The question of whether the ancient Chinese philosopher, *Chuang-tze*, dreams that he is a butterfly, or whether the butterfly dreams it is *Chuang-tze* is actually very difficult to assess. If human life is only a state of illusion, and if one mistakenly confuses the fleeting quickness of the dream world for the truth of reality, then we ought to live with every final drop of our being, live with all that is fire and all that is cold, with all that is sweet, and all that is bitter.

If we suppose that life is in a state of constant change, we cannot then search for anything or hold onto anything, and as a result we ought to put our strength into the present moment! Pay no mind to the vain and frantic pursuit of some far off distant future. Do your utmost to partake in the flow of every niche and corner, every twinkling of the eye in the movement of change, whether it be distress, or anger, or failure, or frustration, or intense delight, or confusion and delusion ... Change in our lives makes it possible for us to experience a sense of our unlimited potential and vitality. There are freedoms and turning points beyond all counting that are available to us. We can enter and unveil the far flung, unlimited horizons of life's significance.

Speaking honestly, to go on living is so much more difficult than to just die. To want, in the deep recesses of one's mind, to greet those final moments when life must give way to death is relatively easy. But to grasp onto every individual sparkle of life, and to be open-hearted and completely alert to everything around you is, I am afraid, an extremely hard thing to do. A person can try with all of their heart, but still not be able to preserve a spirit that is simple and pure. The ordinary realities of daily life, however—just caring about the very basics for the table for example, the rice, the cooking oil, a pinch of salt—such concerns of daily life so very easily drown a person. There is deep meaning in the saying: “To grandly offer your life for public glory is easy, but to wait for death calmly is difficult.”

The most extraordinary of all waitings is the waiting of *waiting to die*. Yet to wait really means to live. Living means we confront choices, we accept responsibilities. Among the twenty-four hours of every day, every last minute and second can in no way be filled with importance and packed

with lively, interesting things. Most of our time seems to be spent doing boring little commonplace matters. All day long we run around like blind people; confused. Then what happens is that people gradually begin to weaken; and after weakening, they compromise; and when the compromises sufficiently numb their human sensitivities, there is no avoiding a collapse. In the end what is truly human simply drowns.

In other words, isn't it true that the miniscule dash of respect and greatness that makes a person really human unfolds itself from just this starting point? Although the support or struggle may be as slender as a silken thread, this is still what marks the true glow of the human being. Even if the light cast is dim, it does not disappear in the distant beyond, for it exists in the very midst of all the nitty gritty details of life.

This is why, although it is not perfect, I am keenly drawn to life in our world and always will be.

I remember a book in which the character *Na Cha* dies and pleads with *Tai I Chen-jen* to let him turn into a divinity. The passage reads:

Although the person that I am in these seconds is lighter than a fleck of dust and thinner than the wings of a butterfly, I journey from one end of the universe to the other and find no place to rest...But Master, if you could but listen and hear, I am still crying. My tears I cannot hold back, and they prompt my wishes to enter that less than beautiful place called the human world. I feel this can be considered a heart-felt poetic reflection!

Ushered into the centerpoint of the entire universe, a person is as insignificant as a speck of dust or a puff of smoke. This is even more true of the nature of time. When people are confined to narrow and small places, the smallness of their tight quarters is a restriction, and everything it is possible for them to know and to do can only happen within the scope of that area. In their hearts they may harbor mighty aspirations, and their lives may radiate a charisma that seems blessed from on high. But in the end they cannot avoid their limitations, and they must bow their head in defeat. However, it is the limitations and restrictions themselves that push them to develop their uniqueness. Nothing can take the place of a person's life. People can throw themselves into the world in their own particular way; in the end it is that which makes them uniquely different that in fact will shape and mold, and "complete" themselves and their life.

It can happen that some people forget completely the most fundamental and important proposition about their life: what it means to be human. Ceaselessly they run here, run there; they chase after matters which the deepest capacities in that proposition surpass many times over. Such people thus twist askew the way life is in its outward appearances, and they lose a sense of what is truly valuable. In the end people may even look,

but fail to see the proposition itself—this question of the human being, which is the reason itself, and the purpose for our being here.

Having come this far, I can't help but contemplate some of the words written by the French writer Albert Camus in his notebooks:

No matter what I do, all my actions connect in some way with the world, and even my emotions and affections touch on humankind Except for mentioning my passionate love for life, I will say nothing at all. I will use my own way to tell the story of this kind of love.

Magnanimity of spirit such as this surely affects peoples' hearts. It cries out night and day; it goes before us on journeys of life that leap and explode with desire. Little wonder then that Chan Buddhist scholars express the notion: "A whole life poured into this present moment." Little wonder that Sisyphus can push his great boulder up the side of his mountain with nary a word of complaint or sorrow, or that *K'ua Fu* willingly and without regret goes charging off after the sun! *For the story they are telling us is about this kind of love*, and every single thing they do, whether it be high in the clouds or utterly asinine, everything is intimately bound together with our world and the story of what it means to be human.

In my mind, probably all a person can ultimately do is offer everything they have, making a gift of all that they are. With heart and mind completely free, I love the world and my life, and my life and I love each other. Mine is to be one together with everything that the world and my life bring to me. Who in the end is so wise that they are able to give perfect expression to all that life means? Or who can put words to the marvelous value of life? Let us trace our steps back to life itself, and allow life to speak its own mind. Let us allow our involvements with life and our collisions with it unveil its very being to us. May life allow us to see all that is common and mundane in our world, all that we have, and all that we do not have.

Today for example, there dwells in my body a vigorous and turbulent surge of life that cannot be repressed. At the same time however, deadly destructive cells of cancer leap and dance about, and I am caught between life and death, caught in the throes of a seesaw battle, a struggle with a knife at my throat.

Still, I must be faithful to my life; must hold on tightly to the bundle that I carry along as a travel companion; all the hurt, the sweet, the sour, the searing. For my promises are at one with my mind and heart; and they are sincere; and they have meaning and value for me. Of course the road is quite difficult now, and so interminably long. Sometimes my heart is easily sad and easily happy, easily sensitive and easily wounded, like a young girl in love for the very first time, and walking beside her Romeo— but this is

my life. My life has its risings; it has its falls. This my life—a journey to a land where there are no more mountains, and where the well holds no more water.

Note from the translator - Philosophical texts in most languages are notoriously challenging to translate, and this essay is no exception. I have consulted with several Chinese friends for understanding and interpretations of several key terms and expressions, and am grateful to Joanna Hsu and Judy Peng for valued assistance. I am particularly thankful for the contribution made here by Jessica Yao (Yao Hui-mei), friend and colleague at Chung-shan University, who reviewed the entire manuscript and offered important suggestions. Errors are my responsibility alone.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation to the family of author Lin Fang-ju, especially Lin Mama and Lau Ma, who encouraged me to pursue this project. D.B.

About the translator: Father Daniel J. Bauer is an associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei, Taiwan, ROC. He is a member of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), an international Catholic missionary brotherhood. His translations have appeared in *The Chinese Pen* and *The Free China Review*.