

Lessons from a flower

By Miriam Davis

In October 2003 I received a copy of an article written by a friend after she had been to see the autumnal 'higanbana', a red flower often seen in cemeteries around the time of 'higan' or the autumnal equinox, on September 23rd. She began as follows:

花期はもう終わりと
言われていたが、9月末、彼岸花の
群生地に行ってみた。墓に植
えられていて、毒々しい
(gaudy) 赤色のこの花は、
子供の頃から近づきがたい
ものがあつた。河の向こう岸
を意味するこの彼岸という
ことばを聞くと、河を渡りた
くもなつた。毎年の事である。
特に高校生の頃は連れて行
かれるような気もして
いた。
去年はホームページで
きれいなこの花をたくさん
見て、足を川につけたい
心境だつた。この夏ふと、
受動的に見るのではなく、
美しい花を

写すという視点に立ったら

私の心は変わるだろうか

と考えた。

So off she went to look at the flowers and take pictures. She finished the article with her thoughts on how she felt looking at each picture she had scanned into her computer.

一枚一枚写真を見ていても、
今までのように「河の向こうに

行こう」という感情は起きな

かつた。今日で私は「彼岸」を
乗り越えられたのだろうか。

'Miriam, what do you think about what I've written?' asked my friend. I checked on the meaning of 'higan' before replying. My electronic Kojien dictionary informed me that 'higan' means literally 'the other side'. It is the boundary between life and death, the crossing of the sea to the world of enlightenment. (生死の海を渡

って到達する終局・悟り
の世界。)

Then I wrote:

"Your article reminded me of a Bible verse - Ecclesiastes 3:11. 'God has set eternity in the hearts of men.'" In my mind I had equated my own longings for the eternal, that deep ache in the heart I feel when I see something beautiful, with my friend's feelings. I interpreted her

feeling of wanting to 'pass over the river' as a desire for 'a better world' than this. I went on to say, "I felt a bit sad that you no longer seem to have the same longings you had as a child." It did not take long to find out how wrong I was in my interpretation. My friend was soon on the phone.

“「河の向こう岸に行きたい」

means that I simply wanted to die. Now I am glad because I no longer feel I can't bear life anymore." My friend does not believe in Buddhist ideas of an afterlife.

It was a salutary, if embarrassing, reminder to me of how easily we can be influenced by our own backgrounds and experience in interpreting what people say, especially in cross cultural ministry in Japan where religious ideas are rarely clearly formulated. Whether the context is teaching the Bible or learning about Japanese religion, the question we must always ask is "What do you **understand** when you hear or use that word?"