

〈翻 訳〉

‘Responding Appropriately’¹ by Koda Aya

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(Received on October 11, 2007)

I have a fond recollection going back 30 long years. On this day the weather was extremely nice and father² and I were standing in the middle of the garden. The reason for this was we were both looking up at the sky. All of a sudden father said,

“Look here, you know about what goes on between men and women, don’t you?”

“What?”

“How much do you know, then?” As he looked upwards, he appeared to be smiling.

I was taken aback. A feeling of shyness came upon me, however I was not a sweet, submissive child who would bow her head in shame.

“Don’t know.”

We live in an age in which there are many convenient words in common use. ‘Don’t know’ can be understood in many ways. In school our teacher only tells us the first and obvious meaning. However at some point children become fully aware of the power of this crafty phrase. It was obvious that I was trying to cover something up.

“Nonsense. How can that be? You’ve seen birds, you’ve seen dogs. All of them do it, don’t they? To start with, not long ago you learnt about

1 ‘A more literal translation might be ‘A Hen’s and her Unhatched Chick’s Cooperation in Breaking Open its Shell’.

2 Koda Rohan (1867-1947) Novelist and poet.

male and female rape blossoms, didn't you?"

He had put his finger on it. We had learnt about the pollination of flowers in science. But that was plants. In particular I had not woken up to the idea that there was a direct connection between this and human sexual desire. I understood very well about both birds and dogs. If we say that rape blossoms are colourless, dogs would be monochrome. The ludicrous posture of one dog on top of another was mostly what drew my attention and I felt some kind of peculiar feeling as well but I thought that such animal behaviour was completely unrelated to human beings. I tended to think that what happened between male and female animals did not belong to the human world. Even if humans also have similar ways of mating to animals, although I overheard things now and then, I have never had the awful experience of seeing people do it since I was not raised in terrible times like the present with people having to share the same accommodation because of the housing shortage. If you say you know this, if you already know only this much, it is a lie to say 'I don't know'. These words which I casually uttered were like a match. I shrank back a little from shock at the hiss of combustion but a flash in some form was distinctly revealed to me. It was probably the perfect time for him to tell me and for me to be told. He said, "Observe things carefully without being affected by preconceived ideas. You shouldn't tell lies or make mistakes all the time like this. From now on I'll tell you only once. I have never known a chatterbox do any good. Without saying anything, pay attention to what is happening around you".

My home was close to Flowering Willow Street in Koume town. The Jewel's Well Brothel was not far away. On the evening of festivals and suchlike I often caught sight of the figures of women carrying mats along lanes. Consequently it was not unusual for there to be rubber articles

lying on the road. There was also the factory where these things were produced. Among my friend's mothers and elder sisters were some who worked there. When I too received one and played with it, without warning, I was slapped on the wrists, seized by the scruff of my neck, marched off to the bathroom, made to wash my hands and was given a good scolding. I was told that I hadn't observed carefully and was scolded but it was entirely incomprehensible to me. I only remember being told "Don't forget if you don't know you will be told off."

In the spring of my first year in a girl's secondary school I was summoned to his study and he pointed to a thick encyclopedia open on his desk and said "Read this." There was an illustration of a woman's body with explanations but they were terribly difficult to understand. I tried as hard as I could to understand them without success. I laid the book face down, went outside, and as I was lingering under some pear blossom I thought about how much time had passed since ancient times. If I try and explain this, what I mean is I felt a sense of wonder at both the fact that women have been giving birth since time immemorial as well as the fact that the biology of reproduction is so intricate. After this in the summer, the toilet became dotted with red from the chemical changes occurring when the paper reacted with the contents of the toilet. Mother misunderstood this as the onset of my periods and questioned me about it but her manner was very unpleasant. It was strange that, vis-a-vis this matter, father felt it was a mysterious thing and expressed his appreciation but for my mother it was merely something unpleasant and filthy.

Since the land east of the river was at risk of flood damage, it would be true to say that maintenance work on the bank of the Sumida River was carried out successively to the point that it became constant. An inevitable accompaniment to labourers working was their horsing around with women

going along the embankment. Going to and from school or on errands I was also unable to evade the lewd comments, which they hurled out. I became angry and when I complained to mother, father was listening behind her and cornered me saying, “Being floored by such a small thing! If you had to reply now, what on earth would you say?”

If you reply to an indecent comment with another indecent remark, there will be no end to it and since finally it will become the cause of trouble, you have to choose your words carefully. I was taught that this was the key and was assigned a copy of the *Kojiki*³ as a textbook. Furthermore since this edition of the *Kojiki* was none other than the one annotated by Uncle Shigetomo⁴, I was a little surprised. Subsequently, sure enough, it proved helpful. I turned on the labourers and said to them, “Please don’t use such inappropriate words. Kindly speak more politely. Say ‘sleep together’, not ‘fuck’.”

Astonished faces looked scornfully at me and I quickly turned aside. “What! Do you say such things because you don’t even understand the *Kojiki*? Good-bye!”

Father laughed a lot at my story but when he heard that I had learned nothing but a single word from the *Kojiki*, he really laughed his head off.

After this, from time to time he told me some dirty stories. Mother, who was formerly in charge of my education, was completely opposed to my father’s way of teaching and they argued while I was squeezed between them listening to both of their opinions. Mother said that a home in which parents let their children listen to such things will not maintain its sanctity. The atmosphere will degenerate. First and foremost a young girl will lose

3 *Kojiki* translated as *Records of Ancient Matters* (1906). The oldest existing account of historical events in Japan from the mythical ages up to the 7th century.

4 Koda Shigetomo (1873-1954) Historian.

her bashfulness and become shameless. Father said something to the effect that there was nothing so dangerous as raw bashfulness and that if it's the kind of bashfulness, which vanishes after listening to a dirty story, it would be better to remove it and then the offensiveness will disappear. He also said something like real bashfulness arises from a deep place in the heart and that it was a beautiful thing. Since he boasted that you cannot find more acceptable dirty stories than those told to you by your parents, mother fell silent with a sigh.

I could imagine that marriage was like a succession of enjoyment of episodes of bashfulness. Bashfulness is added even to the pleasure of offering someone a bowl of tea. I supposed that, even if men tell dirty stories, things like the disappearance of bashfulness between the sexes wouldn't happen. I amazed people by keeping my composure and not turning red at the vulgar remarks which were said to me just like greetings straight after I had married. I tried not to let other people peep inside the boundary which should separate a couple from others. Nevertheless, all of a sudden I was tripped up by vulgar things, which people said but which father had never talked about, became angry and made a blunder, which caused a rush of blood to my head. Raw bashfulness has this kind of danger. I regretted the fact that I had not listened more to what father said.

I have one daughter. For the most part she grew up during the war. Since her father was one of those who had been to America, he approved of sex education. However my daughter's fate was to be separated from her father and to live together with her grandfather and mother. I thought that I would like to hand over the education which was being conducted by myself, but I didn't know whether or not I would be able to inspire in my daughter the same feeling of trust, which my father had inspired in me as

a child. Very disheartened, I felt ashamed at my helplessness. However grandfather did not act towards his granddaughter in the same way as he had to me as a child. He said that the observation of living things like dragonflies as well as praying mantises should be secondary, above all making sure that a child is both mentally and physically strong should be the first step in these troubled times. He gave directions that I should let her read whatever she liked.

In those days, children in the fifth grade were fond of reading Soseki's⁵ 'Cat'⁶. Grandfather said, "That's fine." One day my child and I were crossing over Azuma Bridge in a bus. My small child, with her hair done in a pageboy style, in the school uniform of a sailor suit suddenly said,

"Mummy, this is the Bridge of Love, isn't it? It was on this bridge that Mr. Wintermoon⁷ fell in love and went mad, wasn't it?"

A college student beside her burst out laughing. My daughter was also laughing. It was only me who lost my composure and became hot.

On another day she said, "Every morning there is a man waiting for me on my way to school. He is extremely kind. He is good at putting me on a crowded train and however much we are shoved, he holds me safe in his arms. On rainy days and such like I think it's nice that he waits for me." She said that he had a head full of hair and wore glasses. I felt uneasy and asked my daughter roughly how old he was. She replied,

"You don't need to worry. He is not a person suitable to be my sweetheart. He is old enough to be someone's father."

Grandfather, who appeared amused listening to his granddaughter said, "Your mummy should get a better grip on herself, shouldn't she" and

5 Natsume Soseki (1867~1916) Novelist and scholar of English literature.

6 *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (1905) translated as *I am a Cat* (1961).

7 *Kangetsu-san* (Mr. Wintermoon). A character in *I am a Cat*.

laughed at me.

Before long the war became more intense and reached a point where soldiers came to stay on the roof of her elementary school. Rumours had begun to spread. It was said that, not caring about the efforts of their teachers, senior male and female students were enjoying themselves in the air raid shelters after school. In the past when I saw dogs and birds mating I felt it was a funny and extraordinary sight. I was taken aback when I learned that my daughter was hearing from her friends about the same kind of activities, which her seniors were involved in. And I thought that now was the time that I should teach her about sex.

With the mobilization of labour, the girl's school was made into an airfield. At this time he assigned me love stories⁸ and Edo period tales for adults⁹ and made me read them rapidly, but he ordered me to put away 'A Plum-blossom Almanac'¹⁰. He narrated things like the works of Saikaku¹¹ in a way that I could easily understand. Even his granddaughter ended up enjoying listening to things such as the passage in which an amorous woman who has grown old thinks of all of the 500 Buddha's disciples who attained Nirvana as her lovers. In the factory young love and lust whirled around. Reckless actions, which occurred in proportion to the horrors of the air raids, seemed to be thrust before us and even if they were unpleasant, shook our eyes and ears. However since the things we read and which were narrated to us were all of a higher beauty than what went on in

8 *Ninjobon* A type of erotic novel popular from around 1830s & 1840s, but eventually prohibited by the government.

9 *Kibyoshi* Edo period illustrated tales for adults written on yellow paper.

10 *Shunshoku Umegoyomi* (1832) (*Spring Love: A Plum-blossom Almanac*) is one of the best known works of Tamenaga Shunsui (1789~1842), who was the most famous exponent of *Ninjobon*.

11 Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693) Poet and novelist.

the factory, fortunately we reached the end of the war without experiencing that degree of stimulation ourselves.

Like an epidemic, things which were called obscene spread. I never kept such things secret at all. Reading one thing after another, my daughter looking grave and troubled asked me,

“Is the real thing like this?”

I replied that everyone’s heart was different and that the following things were important. Learning is something you should do yourself. Protecting you from harmful influences should be your elders’ role. Having been passed down from father to child, and then from child to grandchild, what is still useful today to both my daughter and myself is to observe things carefully without being affected by preconceived ideas and for parents and children to talk with each other without hiding anything.

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