

Thoughts on Individualism and Commitment

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MURAKAMI HARUKI I just returned to Japan a few months ago after living in the United States for four and half years. And the thing that has struck me the most since I've been back is how much my own perception of issues differs from what it was before I left.

To give an example, when I was living in Japan, I felt a strong need to be my own man. I always felt I had to be running, running to escape the controls of society or the group or the organization or rules and regulations so that I could be an individual. I didn't take a regular job when I graduated from college, and later, when I started writing, I didn't like the idea of being part of a literary circle, so I just wrote on my own. Then I lived in Europe for three years and came back to Japan for one. After that I went to America, and by the time I had been there three year's or so, I was thinking more in terms of fulfilling my social responsibilities.

But what occurred to me in particular while I was in the United States was that there wasn't any need for me to run away in order to be an individual, because in America everyone is expected to live his or her own life as an individual. Consequently, what I'd been searching for lost its meaning.

KAWAI HAYAO That's interesting. In Japanese classrooms these days you often see slogans like "Value the Individual" and "Encourage Individuality" posted in big letters. But as I often tell Japanese educators, in American schools it's not written down anywhere. They're always amazed to hear that. "Don't Americans value individuality?" they ask me. I explain to them that in America the importance of the individual is taken for granted. There's no need to spell it out.

In Japan, the school principal announces, "We must encourage individuality," and everyone says, "Yessir! OK everyone, all together now, let's encourage individuality!" Without even realizing it, they're acting as a group. That's how difficult the concept of individuality is for the Japanese.

COMMITMENT AND CONFORMISM

MURAKAMI Also, I've been thinking a lot about commitment lately. In my writing, too, the notion of commitment has become very important. Before, detachment was the important thing to me.

KAWAI Yes, I know what you mean.

MURAKAMI At some point that started to change bit by bit. I have a feeling that living overseas had a lot to do with it. But then the big question is to *what* one should commit oneself.

I think I gave a lot of thought to the question of what I should commit myself to and how I should pursue that commitment. And yet, having come back here to Japan, I still don't know how to go about getting involved. It's really a big problem. When you think about it, there aren't any guidelines here for becoming involved in a cause.

KAWAI I agree. If you're not careful here, you can wind up an outcast if you commit yourself to a cause in the Western sense.

MURAKAMI That's right. Or else it sucks you in deeper and deeper like quicksand.

In retrospect, the question of what I should commit myself to individually was a big issue for me

back in 1968 and 1969, when the radical student movement was at its height here, I didn't have very definite political ideas then, but I wanted to be involved in some way. Yet when it came to pursuing that commitment, the options were extremely limited. That strikes me as rather tragic.

For our generation, that was the era of commitment. But inevitably it got beaten out of us, and in no time commitment gave way to detachment. I think that applies not just to me but to the entire generation.

KAWAI The tendency toward detachment is very strong among young people today. I'd go so far as to say that they regard committed types as jerks. They think detachment is cool.

MURAKAMI But then came the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo terrorist attack in 1995. Both incidents raised the issue of commitment.

KAWAI Yes, and there's been a huge reaction. Ordinarily detached youngsters suddenly became very involved. Everyone was surprised by the number of young people who volunteered their services after the quake. My guess is that deep down inside, many young Japanese wanted to get involved in something if they could, but those feelings were submerged. Then, with the earthquake and the Aum incident, they came rushing to the surface.

MURAKAMI They were both such bizarre events. I guess it took extraordinary circumstances to bring those impulses to the surface.

KAWAI I would be interested to know what similarities and differences exist between the kind of volunteer activity that young people here became involved in after the Kobe earthquake and the volunteerism common in America. I think that's a topic worthy of a bit more study. In Japan, for example, once people do commit themselves to a cause, they tend to get tightly bound up with each other in a monolithic group.

MURAKAMI That's certainly how the student movement was.

KAWAI That's why I often poked fun at the student radicals in those days, telling them that even though they fancied they were doing something new, the basic structure of their movement was very old. The way they managed the group was terribly old-fashioned. I find that really interesting—for example, the way someone is branded “antisocial” if they miss a group activity. Individual freedom is curtailed. Those who stick with the group in everything are considered fine upstanding people, while those who try to act individually are heathen.

In the West, though, people commit themselves as individuals. They come when they want to, and if they don't, that's OK.

MURAKAMI Everyone who volunteers time has different constraints. Some are able to volunteer three times a week, while others can only volunteer once a week. In Japan, you always find someone who's able to volunteer three times lording it over the others.

KAWAI There's always one like that.

THE ABILITY TO SUFFER ALONE

MURAKAMI Have you been doing psychiatric counseling in Kobe?

KAWAI Yes I've done quite a bit. We also setup a hot Line, and more people have called in than we expected. That's one way in which things have changed in recent years.

Overall, the incidence of PTSD is lower than in the West, but I predicted that from the outset.

MURAKAMI What's PTSD?

KAWAI Post-traumatic stress disorder. Someone who's experienced a major shock will function normally for a while, but then, after some time has passed, symptoms of Stress will suddenly appear. It's quite common in the United States. I had heard about outbreaks of PTSD after the Northridge earthquake of 1994 from friends in Los Angeles. Of course, it occurs in Japan too to some degree, but Japanese deal with trauma as a group instead of individually. So the stress is more likely to express itself in the form of family quarrels or the like. It's less common for individuals to manifest clear-cut neurotic symptoms.

For awhile I was somewhat relieved by this low incidence, but it can be seen in negative as well as positive terms. That people don't display symptoms could be taken to mean that they don't have the ability to accept the blow and feel the pain as individuals.

MURAKAMI In other words, they can't deal with the trauma within themselves? They can't give it form?

KAWAI That's it. Of course, usually the reason stress symptoms develop is that one has attempted to cope with the trauma in one's own fashion and failed. Here, though, people share the pain with everyone around them instead of dealing with it internally, so they end up grumbling and carping at each other.

MURAKAMI I imagine that relates to the issue of responsibility.

KAWAI That's right. There's individual responsibility and group responsibility. Japan focuses on the responsibility of the group or the "field." So the earthquake that struck Kobe is seen somehow as a matter to be dealt with by Kobe as a whole. In the West, on the other hand, responsibility always lies with the individual, so people who take the brunt of it can have trouble coping and develop neuroses.

MURAKAMI But people who manage to get through it are all the stronger as a result.

KAWAI That's right. I've traveled to the United States to help promote sand-play therapy there. In America, I've seen a lot of really dreadful cases of children abandoned and neglected and shuffled around by parents and stepparents. They stop talking and become violent. But they do improve. Their resilience is amazing.

Among Japanese patients, you see a lot who just cry all the time, saying "Why me, why me?" They never seem to realize that in the final analysis they have to overcome their problems by themselves. They have a hard time getting better, because they expect everybody else to fix things for them.

THE LIMITS OF VERBALIZATION

MURAKAMI Do Americans show real improvement with sand-play therapy?

KAWAI Amazing improvement. It's a sight to see.

MURAKAMI Would you say the recovery process follows a more logical path in their case?

KAWAI No, I don't think you could necessarily say that. I wouldn't call it logical. Their experiences are buried very deep. They dig up those deep experiences for themselves. The hurt that they experienced as a result is also very deep, but they have the strength to begin the healing process with the deepest hurt.

In Japan, people generally get help or support from somewhere before they can be hurt that deeply. There aren't nearly as many extreme cases. In America, you see recovery among people who have been so abused that they would be considered beyond help in Japan.

Sand-play therapy has made great inroads in Japan largely because it deals with nonverbal imagery, which makes it very accessible to the Japanese. I'd like to share the fruits of our work with people in Europe, where the technique was originally developed, and I'm also working to see it more widely practiced in the United States. The point that I always stress to Americans is that it doesn't make sense to insist that everything has to be verbalized and analyzed before it can be cured. In fact, if you do a bad job of verbal analysis, you can make things even worse.

For example, let's say someone complains of a choking feeling. The American analyst or therapist will say, "There's something you want to talk about. Go ahead, spit it out." Then suppose the patient says, "The truth is. I want to kill my father." In verbalizing that, the patient hurts himself. Even though he never consciously thought he wanted to kill his father, he's going to suffer all the more from the realization that he's had those parricidal impulses.

In sand-play therapy, this process is expressed symbolically in the patient's miniature landscape. The technique lies midway between the concept of total verbal analysis and the idea that people can recover without ever verbalizing anything. I would really like to see Westerners give the method a try, and I'm working toward that goal.

Verbal analysis is an easy method to use when the source of the problem is close to the level of everyday consciousness. But when the problem lies very deep, verbal analysis can sometimes just make the hurt deeper and actually make it harder for the patient to recover. My thinking is that you have to adjust your method to the type of problem.

MURAKAMI Aren't there people who just won't open up no matter what? I mean, people who have a problem but keep it to themselves.

KAWAI People who know they have a problem but keep it to themselves are rather extraordinary. I always make a big point of letting them know that they don't have to talk about it if they don't want to. I've seen people who managed to keep a problem to themselves for about three years, after which they made a full recovery.

MURAKAMI That's amazing,

KAWAI I can tell that they have something they're refusing to talk about. Sometimes they tell me at the end of treatment. Some of them will tell me, "In the end, I managed to get through it all without ever talking about it,"

ESCAPE AND RETURN

MURAKAMI When I began writing fiction, I didn't have any models among earlier novelists that I wanted to emulate. Instead, I thought that for starters I'd try doing exactly the opposite of what was expected of a typical novelist. I went to bed early and rose early, exercised, and got fit. And I had nothing to do with literary circles. I refused to write novels to order. I made all those little decisions in my own mind and worked accordingly. And things went pretty well for me. But even so, after awhile one reaches an impasse in this society. That was my situation before I left Japan. I had thought that being a writer was a highly individual thing. You wrote whatever you wanted to write, took it to someone, sold it, and got money to live on. You didn't have to hobnob with anyone. But that's not the way it is. The literary world is actually a microcosm of Japanese society, but I didn't know it until I became a writer. I was very surprised and puzzled to discover that.

It became extremely trying for me to write in this Japanese social and cultural climate. I found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on my work, partly because there were so many meaningless duties and petty complications to worry about. So, I thought I'd go overseas to write. Until recently, I was in the United States, and as I said earlier, after you've lived in a completely different cultural climate for two or three years, your thinking—your outlook on things—begins to change bit by bit.

I'm not sure why, but after I finished *Nejimakidori kuronikuru* [1994-5, The Windup-Bird Chronicles], I began to think, "It's about time to go back." By the end, I really couldn't wait to get back home. I wasn't especially homesick for anything, and it wasn't a matter of rediscovering Japanese culture. I just felt that Japan was where I belonged as a novelist. Because if you're writing in Japanese, then the Japanese language shapes your system of thought. The Japanese language is a product of Japan; the two are inseparable. And however you look at it, I can't write my stories in English. That struck me as an inescapable reality.

KAWAI Maybe a little essay or something of that sort, but not a novel, one wouldn't think.

MURAKAMI There are people who have defected from their own countries and written in a foreign tongue—South American writers who live in the United States and write in English, for example. Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov both wrote novels in English, which was an adopted language for them. More recently, there was the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky. But in my case, I felt that I really needed to get back to Japan and write in Japanese.

KAWAI That's because the structure of Japanese is so different from that of English and the European languages. Our thought patterns are different. That's why I think it was very meaningful for you to leave Japan because of your concerns about individuality and write in Japanese from a foreign country. Yet for your next move, it was probably inevitable that you decide to come back to Japan and continue writing in Japanese.

MURAKAMI That's right. The truth is, back when I left the country, I couldn't stand the way the language had been used in modern Japanese novels. There was this feeling of the author's unobjectified ego pressing up against you. Especially in the realm of *junbungaku* ["pure literature"], and the "I-novel," the author's ego seemed to cling to everything. I was desperate to escape that influence. But these days I get the feeling that the use of language in Japanese literature is gradually changing. The way young people write has certainly changed. This represents a major transition in my opinion. And this change in linguistic patterns naturally goes hand in hand with a shift in thought patterns. I began to feel that in the context of these new currents, it would be possible for me to write in Japan after all.

Also, when I conversed and socialized with American writers, I found that there were things I just couldn't communicate. Of course, my imperfect grasp of English was part of the problem, but there was more to it than that. There were things relating to my understanding of and response to novels in general that I couldn't get across. There's a fundamental gap in our perception of literature, and while I found that refreshing at first, after a while frustration began to take over. It was pretty trying, and that was another reason I began to think it was time to go home.

INDIVIDUALITY EAST AND WEST

KAWAI When you're in Japan, the Western concept of the individual is terribly hard to grasp, don't you think?

MURAKAMI Yes, it is.

KAWAI You mentioned the I-novel, but the “I” of the Japanese I-novel is completely different from the ego as Westerners understand it. In order to address the issue of individuality in the Western sense, you really need to go abroad. And the friction that occurs when trying to translate Western works into Japanese, and the extent to which it’s possible to convey the Western concept of the individual to Japanese readers—these were very important issues for you. But now you’re past that, I think.

Perhaps this is a little presumptuous of me, but I feel very much the same way. I love individualism, and I admired Western society and culture and lived overseas. But lately get the feeling that the individuality you and I are really concerned with is something different from the Western concept of the individual.

You may have changed in the sense that you saw that you didn’t necessarily have to use the Western framework of individuality to write effectively about individuality in a novel—or that, being Japanese, you could abandon that framework and still write about individuality.

That was the impression I got when I read the *Windup-Bird Chronicles*. In the novel, the protagonist goes into a well that reaches very deep and is also connected to Nomonhan*. A Westerner, as an individual, wouldn’t think in those terms. To Westerners, history is a logical progression of events. But when I read your book, I felt, “Nomonhan is happening now. Everything is happening now.” The individual that regards history in that way is certainly different from the individual of Western individualism.

(Note: * Site of a confrontation near the Manchurian-Mogolian border in which Japanese troops were routed by Russian forces in 1939.)

MURAKAMI I realized that to get to the root of the individual in Japan, you had to refer to history. Because, when you try to portray another contemporary individual, it seems the definition of an individual in Japan is awfully vague. But for some reason I had the feeling that by introducing the vertical thread of history, I made it easier to grasp the individual character of someone living in this country.

KAWAI In the West, history is grasped in terms of what happened in what month of what year, with events arranged in order on a time line. But the Japanese seem to take it all in as an amorphous whole. For example, they’re content to say, ‘This is the ancestral plot:’ without particularly trying to learn the names of the people buried in it or the order in which they were buried. When you used the term “vertical thread of history” it suggested to me that perhaps by bringing this view of history into play, you might be able to illuminate the Japanese individual from a new angle.

MURAKAMI Several of my books have been published in English translation, but in speaking to American students who have read them, I sense we’re not always on the same wavelength. Sometimes I’m surprised at the things that impressed or amused them. But readers from other parts of East Asia generally react as Japanese readers do.

KAWAI Reading the English translation?

MURAKAMI English or Chinese or Korean. And the interesting thing is, what they read after is the detachment. What they see is, my novels is an individual daring to place himself apart from the rest of society or from his parents, and to some extent, they identify.

Recently I gave interviews for a South Korean newspaper and magazine, and the interviewers asked me about almost nothing but that. But as far as I’m concerned, I’ve dealt with that already, and frankly I’m not too interested in it anymore. So, I felt bad that I wasn’t able to answer them better.

KAWAI That’s interesting. I think detachment is going to be a major issue for the Chinese and South

Koreans in the coming years. Family and clan ties are extremely important in South Korea and China, and disengaging oneself from those is an extremely perilous challenge.

KAWAI Do you think it's going to become a big problem, a psychiatric or pathological standpoint?

MURAKAMI I think it's going to be a very big problem.

This is digressing a bit, but one Korean I know says that compared with Japan, South Korea has westernized too rapidly, and now everyone is totally self-interested. He says individualism has gone too far, that people think only about their own profit, not about the good of the whole. He told me that the Japanese, despite their rapid westernization, still think about the welfare of the group to a surprising degree, and that the South Koreans need to emulate the Japanese in that regard.

I told him I thought he was wrong. I said I thought that in Korea, identity resided in the family, not the individual; they have what you call "family." That's not the same as Western individualism, which has developed in conjunction with a constant awareness of how one individual relates to another and the dangers of such relationships. But in Korea, once you leave the confines of the family ego, then you get genuine egoism, and that's probably where the problem lies.

In Japan, we have "field identity," which is different from family ego. The fascinating thing about the Japanese character is that one's identity changes according to the situation. Sometimes the field is the company, sometimes it's the family, and so forth; a person adapts to the situation at hand. So, a Korean who feels the pull of genuine individualism will want to disengage from the family. Breaking away requires a tremendous initial thrust. No doubt people with such concerns were affected by what they read as a theme of detachment in your books.

FICTION AS THERAPY

MURAKAMI The reason I began writing novels—well, actually I'm not sure why, I just all of a sudden wanted to one day. In retrospect, though, it seems to have been a step in a long process of self-therapy.

When I was in my twenties, I just worked furiously, without thinking about anything, and somehow got by. But at age twenty-nine, I found myself at a place like a landing in a set of stairs. Writing was a bit like sand-play therapy for me: I wanted to use the novel form to present ideas and feelings that I couldn't easily talk about or explain. It really just came to me quite suddenly one day. Until then, it had never once occurred to me to write a novel. I was just working away, and then all of a sudden one day I thought, "That's it, I'll write a novel." So I went out and bought a fountain pen and some writing paper, and every night, when I got home from work, I'd write any for an hour or two in the kitchen, and it really made me happy. To express ideas one can't explain in the form of a novel is awfully hard work, and I had to rewrite it over and over until I developed my own style. But when I was finished, I felt that a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders. And the result, in terms of style, had an aphoristic and detached quality that was totally unlike any of the Japanese novels I had read. I couldn't express what I wanted to express using the existing literary style of the Japanese novel. Developing my own style is what took so much time, I think.

But I realized perfectly well that this style alone would not be enough for me to make it as a novelist. So I gradually shifted my focus from detachment and pithiness to the story element. The first novel in

that phase was the long work *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* [1982; tr. *A Wild Sheep Chase*, 1989]. In my case, the novels got longer and longer. For me, a story requires a long format to develop.

Also, the story has to develop spontaneously. As far as I'm concerned, there's no point in plotting it out consciously from the beginning—first this happens, then that...I have to write spontaneously, not even knowing myself what's going to happen next, until finally a conclusion comes—because without a conclusion, it's not a novel. I begin writing without any sort of outline or blueprint. I just get involved in the act of writing. People say, "How do you arrive at a conclusion, then?" Well, I am a professional writer, after all, and a conclusion always comes to me. And that conclusion brings a kind of catharsis. When you compose a story by that process, it keeps getting longer and longer. That's the technique I used up through *Sekai no owari to hādoboirudo wandārando* [1985; tr. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, 1991].

After that, to expand myself further, I decided I had to master a realistic writing style, and that was when I wrote *Noruwei no mori* [1987; tr. *Norwegian Wood*, 1989]. That was the first full-length novel I wrote outside of Japan.

The Windup-Bird Chronicles represented a real turning point for me. Before that, I had been content just to see the story develop. That was probably my second step as a novelist. *Windup Bird* represented the third step. First there was the detached and aphoristic quality, then the telling of a story, and eventually I realized that that wasn't enough either. I haven't fully worked it out in my mind, but I think that's probably when I began to realize the importance of commitment. Commitment, I think, is all about relationships between people. This time it wasn't, "I understand you, I understand what you're saying. So, let's get together." This time I was extremely drawn by the idea that if you dig a well, and dig and dig and dig, eventually you can cross the wall that seemed to make any connection impossible, and be joined.

First I moved from a detachment phase to a storytelling phase, and now I've moved on again. Of course, I'm still going to continue to pursue the storytelling angle, but storytelling by itself doesn't hold the same interest for me anymore. I wonder what that means...

KAWAI In order for a story to work, it's absolutely got to have some sort of image behind it. And if you have a very private image and want to present it to others, you have to make a story out of it. But my guess is that during the stage that you call your storytelling phase, you became a little too enamored with storytelling per se, and the connection between the story and your image grew a bit tenuous. Storytelling by itself doesn't retain its interest for very long. So it became necessary to recapture the connection between the story and the image—digging a well, as it were—and the idea of committing yourself to the image became, major issue with you. Because unless you *live* the image and the story, they lose their impact.

MURAKAMI Until recently a kind of Holy Grail theme ran through my novels: The hero is searching for something, but in the end the object of the search proves elusive. But in *Wind up Bird* the idea of regaining what one has lost takes on tremendous importance. I think this must signal some change inside me.

KAWAI With part 3, I think one can say that *Windup Bird* achieves a kind of completion. I've heard a lot of young people say that they felt a great sense of relief and release when part 3 was published.

MURAKAMI Well, this might sound awfully arrogant, but my feeling is that it's going to take some time for *Windup Bird* to be fully understood. There are novels that are appreciated immediately and others that require more time. It took a while for people to appreciate *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The*

End of the World. A Wild Sheep Chase, on the other hand, was accepted right away. And *Norwegia Wood* was an overnight success. I think *Windup Bird* is one of those novels that take time. I say that because I myself get the feeling that my novels have gotten ahead of me. I think I'm even now chasing after that book's image.

KAWAI After which you have to make it something real.

MURAKAMI Yes. But that's a tremendously difficult task.

KAWAI Especially in Japan.

MARRIAE AND RESPONSIBILITY

MURAKAMI There's something I wanted to ask you: Do you think marriage is, in a sense, kind of mutual therapy?

KAWAI Oh, definitely. That's also why it can be so painful. If one really wants to understand one's spouse, it isn't enough to discuss things rationally. You have to dig well, as it were.

MURAKAMI I've been married 24 or 25 years, and I really feel that to be true. But until recently, I've felt it was something too close to me, too personal, to write about. Almost all the characters in my novels have been single. People's parents never made an appearance. Nobody's children ever came up. And in most cases, no one's wife appeared either. The secondary characters were mostly friends, sometimes prostitutes and so forth. It was only in *Windup Bird* that I was finally able to write about a married couple.

KAWAI As a portrayal of marriage, I think it's a brilliant work. It happens that I'm also writing something about marriage at the moment. As I see it, it's ridiculous to think that two people who fall in love and get married are then going to live happily ever after. People get depressed after they get married because they marry on that assumption. My belief is that you get married to suffer—to dig a well. It isn't any fun to dig a well. So, sometimes I wonder if people should bother.

MURAKAMI That's an important perspective.

KAWAI That's right. If you're going to complain about being miserable and make others miserable as well, then one option is to get divorced.

MURAKAMI Some people get married and divorced over and over, three or four times.

KAWAI Generally speaking, people like that balk at digging a well. They find it painful, so instead of digging they keep looking for new people. But usually they end up with the same sort of person.

MURAKAMI I've heard of people who divorce and marry someone else, but then end up remarrying the first person.

KAWAI That's right, they're just repeating the same pattern over and over.

In the old days, marriage was just two people cooperating. If they did that until they died, then it was considered to have been a good marriage. These days, people want to understand one another, not simply work together. But if you want to understand one another, you have to dig a well.

MURAKAMI When I started to write *Windup Bird*, the image in the back of my mind was that of the couple in [Natsume] Sō seki's novel *Mon* [1910, *The Gate*; tr. *Mon*, 1972]. In the end, the husband enters a Buddhist monastery.

KAWAI He enters a monastery, but then he comes back to her. One can't come to understand one's

spouse simply by entering the priesthood in the conventional sense, the way Sō seki's hero does. You really have to dig a well.

There are plenty of cases in which a wife, for example, tries to understand her husband but ultimately decides that she simply can't. Sometimes, after living together a long time on the assumption that she understands him, she'll all of a sudden realize that she doesn't. To start over and try to understand him again is very hard. In most cases, she'll just criticize him, saying he doesn't understand anything or concluding that all men are worthless.

MURAKAMI What really strikes me about American couples is that as long as they stay together, they're really intimate and inseparable. Some of them hold hands wherever they go. But when they break up, it's all over, just like that. You almost never see couples who stay together even though they don't love each other, for the children's sake or whatever, as in Japan.

KAWAI Also, I think many American couples have trouble believing in the reality of their relationship.

MURAKAMI What do you mean?

KAWAI They feel compelled to fawn over each other because they always have to be making sure they're really in love. Otherwise they feel very insecure. And if they fail to confirm their love, then they break up, just like that.

In Japan, to put it in a favorable light, the husband and wife somehow sympathize with one another even without needing to reassure one another. I happen to think that's a more interesting kind of marriage.

MURAKAMI Because there are more facets to the relationship?

KAWAI That's right. In the West, there's always this premise of romantic love. Romantic love doesn't last very long. If you want to sustain romantic love for any length of time, you can't have sexual relations. In my view, it's impossible to sustain romantic love for a long period of time while engaging in sexual relations. So if you want to maintain the marital relationship, you have to be willing to move it to a different dimension,

MURAKAMI But the sexual relationship also has a therapeutic function, right? At some point, though, you have to switch to a different type of therapy, I suppose. Is that when the well digging becomes necessary?

KAWAI Right. When you're young, the sexual relationship is terribly important, and it's also therapeutic, but after a while, that's not enough any more.

MURAKAMI And people who can't switch to well digging at that point will try to find sex therapy elsewhere, I guess.

KAWAI That's right, they look elsewhere and become involved in another sexual relationship. In Japan, they may have what's known as a "live-in divorce," where the couple are emotionally divorced but continue to live under one roof as a married couple.

The other thing you often see in Japan is people who simply abandon the idea of expanding their world through relations with the opposite sex. They channel their eros into something else. Someone might become a scholar and conduct exhaustive research into a particular subject. If you direct your eros toward a woman, you're dealing with a living human being, which raises all kinds of complications. So, instead, you direct it toward, say, old historical documents. You wax passionate about them: "Oh, this part is worm-eaten... Now, what could this character be?" It's much less risky.

MURAKAMI Or else you work like crazy at the office.

KAWAI That's right. There are an awful lot of people who direct their eros to something other than a

living human being.

MURAKAMI But you can't really say that one way is better for everyone.

KAWAI No, you can't. In the final analysis, it's a matter of how you yourself want to live. It may be that only a minority of people are capable of investing a great deal in marriage, I personally think it's a terrifically interesting way to live. In fact, I can't think of anything more interesting.

I also think that for us Japanese, marriage can offer a pathway to understanding religion.

MURAKAMI I feel that's something I have to wrestle with myself.

KAWAI Really? It seems to me that in marriage people realize there's no perfect answer, and that there are things and emotions that are beyond their control, and in that sense the marital relationship can open the door to religious feeling. Of course, it's not the only way.

MURAKAMI If you enjoy researching old documents, why not, right?

KAWAI Except that the man might get all his pleasure from examining old documents, while his wife seeks a meaningful marital relationship. If you're not careful, the results maybe be tragic. If, on the other hand, the wife lays aside her views on marriage and pours all her energy into raising the kids, or making pickles or whatever, then it's possible for things to go along more or less on an even keel.

In other words, there are any numbers of possible variations, and I don't think it's possible anymore to say which is the best. But I do think it's important for people to have a clearheaded awareness of what they're doing. We also have to think of others. If the husband is studying documents while the wife is getting her pleasure from taking care of the kids, then, as I said, the situation is likely to be stable. But if the wife seeks a meaningful relationship with her husband, then what he's doing is causing her tremendous harm. My view is, you have to think about who might be hurt by what you're doing. Call me westernized if you will, but for me, it's a question of individual responsibility.

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