

PROFILES

JUNE 24, 2013 ISSUE

LAST CALL

A Buddhist monk confronts Japan's suicide culture.

BY LARISSA MACFARQUHAR

Ittetsu Nemoto near his temple, in Gifu prefecture. Japan's suicide rate is nearly twice that of the United States.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC

From time to time, Ittetsu Nemoto gets a group of suicidal people together to visit popular suicide spots, of which there are many in Japan. The best known is Aokigahara forest, the Sea of Trees, at the foot of Mt. Fuji. The forest became associated with suicide in the nineteen-sixties, after the publication of two novels by Seicho Matsumoto, and even more so after Wataru Tsurumi's 1993 "Complete Manual of Suicide" declared it the perfect place to die. Because its trees grow so closely together that they block the wind, and because there are few animals or birds, the forest is unusually quiet. The Sea of Trees is large, fourteen square miles, so bodies can lie undiscovered for months; tourists photograph corpses and scavenge for abandoned possessions. Another common suicide destination is Tojinbo cliff, which overlooks the Sea of Japan. Visiting such a place turns out to be very different from picturing it. The sight of the sea from a cliff top can be a terrible thing.



At other times, Nemoto, a Buddhist priest, conducts death workshops for the suicidal at his temple. He tells attendees to imagine they've been given a diagnosis of cancer and have three months to live. He instructs them to write down what they want to do in those three months. Then he tells them to imagine they have one month left; then a week; then ten minutes. Most people start crying in the course of this exercise, Nemoto among them.

One man who came to a workshop had been talking to Nemoto for years about wanting to die. He was thirty-eight years old and had been institutionalized in a mental hospital off and on for a decade. During the writing exercise, he just sat and wept. When Nemoto came around to check on him, his paper was blank. The man explained that he had nothing to say in response to the questions because he had never considered them. All he had ever thought about was wanting to die; he had never thought about what he might want to do with his life. But if he had never really

lived, how could he want to die? This insight proved oddly liberating. The man returned to his job as a machinist in a factory. Previously, he had been so averse to human company that he had been able to function only in certain limited capacities, but now he was able to speak to people, and he got a promotion.

Sometimes Nemoto tells his attendees to put a white cloth over their face, as is customary with corpses in Japan, while he conducts a funeral ceremony. Afterward, he tells each to carry a lighted candle up a hill behind the temple and imagine that he is entering the world of the dead. This exercise, for reasons he doesn't understand, tends to produce not tears but a strange kind of exhilaration, as though the person were experiencing rebirth.

In the past, Nemoto organized outings whose main function was to get *hikikomori*—shut-ins, some of whom have barely left their rooms in years—to go outside. (There are hundreds of thousands of *hikikomori* in Japan, mostly young men; they play video games and surf the Web and are served meals on trays by their parents.) He led camping trips and karaoke evenings; he held soupmaking sessions and sat up all night talking. But, on the whole, these outings were unsatisfactory. *Hikikomori* were phobic, and suicidal people were disorganized; you couldn't rely on them to show up.

Nemoto believes in confronting death; he believes in cultivating a concentrated awareness of the functioning and fragility of the body; and he believes in suffering, because it shows you who you really are. When asked whether he believes that happy people are shallower than those who suffer, first he says that there are no such people, and then he thinks for a moment and says that his wife is one. Is she less profound as a consequence of her serenity? Yes, he says, perhaps she is.

E-mail to Nemoto:

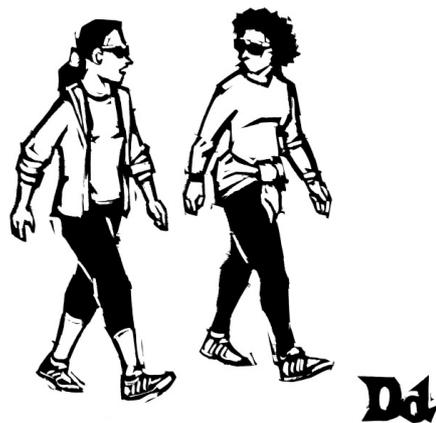
Date: 10/8/2009

Since I failed to pay my cellphone bill for a while, my cellphone service will be cut off tomorrow, so please reply to me as soon as possible. We are a couple . . . who are currently living in our car. We were living in the H. area . . . but since we couldn't find any jobs there we went to N. . . . We tried looking for jobs . . . while collecting cans, but our applications were always rejected because we were not local. . . . We gradually started feeling like we want to die. When we tried choking ourselves with a belt, we ended up loosening it when it became too painful. We also tried taking a lot of cold medicine at once, but we ended up waking up after a while, so we couldn't even die. That said, it's not that we really want to die. We do have a desire to find a job somehow. In this way, we're really undecided, and we can't find a way out alone.

Japan is famous for suicide. It owes this reputation partly to the spectacular deaths of kamikaze pilots in the Second World War, partly to the gruesome and anachronistic seppuku of the writer Yukio Mishima, in 1970. Seppuku—the slicing open of the stomach with a short blade, from left to right—is the form of suicide for which Japan is known. The ostensible reason for Mishima’s suicide was his failure to ignite a military coup, but he had been imagining his end for a long time. “The thing that ultimately saves the flesh from being ridiculous is the element of death,” he wrote. “How comic would one find the gaiety and elegance of the bullfighter were his trade entirely divorced from associations of death!”

“Whenever I meet somebody, I try and accept them for who I am.”

A high rate of suicide is usually taken to be a sign of deeply rooted national disease: when depression leads to suicide, it ceases to be psychiatric and becomes anthropological. So what is the matter with Japan? It’s true that there has never been a religious prohibition against suicide there, as there is in the West—no sense that to take one’s own life is to reject God’s grace, or to seize a power that belongs only to God. By tradition, suicide can absolve guilt and cancel debt, can restore honor and prove loyalty. “The heirs of Cain can never escape the eyes of God, even less in the next world than in this,” Maurice Pinguet wrote in his study “Voluntary Death in Japan.” “But in Japan you can hide in death, disappear into it entirely and mend the fault as you go.” In Japan, suicide can be a gesture of moral integrity and freedom, or an act of beauty. When the writer Eto Jun killed himself, in 1999, he was praised by intellectuals, and it was said that his act demonstrated “first-class aesthetics.” When a cabinet minister under investigation for financial impropriety killed himself, in 2007, the governor of Tokyo called him a true samurai for preserving his honor. When the anthropologist Junko Kitanaka was researching depression in Japan in the past decade, many psychiatrists told her that a person with no mental disorder has the right to choose his own death, and that they have no business intruding on this most weighty and private human decision.



Japan’s suicide rate is nearly twice that of the United States. From 1998 until 2011, there were more than thirty thousand suicides each year—one nearly every fifteen minutes. True, this has been a period of economic difficulty, but Greece is in much worse economic shape, and the Greek suicide rate is one-sixth that of Japan. People jump in front of Tokyo subways so often that when a train stops between stations many passengers assume that a suicide is the reason. Several bystanders have died after being hit by people leaping from buildings. Suicidal parents have killed their children, so as not to abandon them to an orphan’s life; by tradition, a mother who killed herself but not her children was thought to be truly wicked.

Thus the cultural theory of suicide in Japan. But for most of the past hundred years the Japanese suicide rate has been similar to the rates of most countries in the West. The latest statistics show Greenland to be the most suicidal country in the world, by an astonishing margin—Greenlanders currently kill themselves three times as often as the next most suicidal peoples, Lithuanians and South Koreans. Japan ranks ninth, behind Guyana, Kazakhstan, Belarus, China, and Slovenia, and is tied with Hungary. Sweden, notorious for its dark winters and dark souls, typically ranks in the low thirties, about the same as the United States. Moreover, suicide rates everywhere change greatly over time. They go down in wartime and go up again afterward. During the nineteen-fifties, suicide in Japan reached a peak, but then the rate went down. In the nineties, it spiked again, presumably because of economic distress. Some people worked so hard that they died of it. Others killed themselves because they had no work.

These are large changes, tracked over decades, but often the difference between death and life depends upon the difference between two o'clock and four o'clock—upon tiny infrastructural adjustments and barely perceptible shifts in situation. A suicidal person whose way off a bridge turns out to be blocked will generally not find another bridge; he will go home. Some Tokyo subway stations have installed bright-blue lights on their platforms to deter jumpers, and these, oddly, have proved quite effective. A few years ago, a suicide-prevention group, Lifelink, conducted a minute analysis of suicide in Japan: it was necessary to make strategies of prevention more precise, Lifelink believed—to know exactly who was committing suicide, in which streets, in which buildings, by what methods, and at which times of the day, as though with enough factors in place you could almost catch someone in the act. Home was the most common location for suicide, followed by tall buildings and bodies of water. The largest number of suicides were committed on Mondays, followed by Sundays and Tuesdays, between four and six in the morning. Suicidal women were likely to kill themselves between noon and two in the afternoon but unlikely to do so between two and four.

Date: 07/05/2008

Please forgive my rudeness of sending you an e-mail out of the blue. My name is T. . . . I saw your blog on the Internet, and I am writing an e-mail, hoping that you could give me some advice on my current situation. After I graduated from college, I was studying for the bar exam in order to become a lawyer, being supported by my parents. However, even though I tried six times, I couldn't pass. . . . I was diagnosed with "depression" from too much stress and too much work, so I've been taking a leave of absence. . . . As a result, all I have left is debt from student loans.

I felt the limits of my talents, so I decided to give up on becoming a lawyer, and started looking for a job. However, since I'm over thirty, and I only have worked part time before, it's extremely hard to find one. I lost myself, and I don't even have any ideas what I want to do, or in which direction I should proceed. I started being a *hikikomori* . . . and now I cannot go out except for going to see my psychotherapist once a week. I understand that I'm in such an irretrievable situation because of my own fault, and I myself have to solve the problem. However, I'm a weak, dependent person who was financially supported by my parents until after reaching thirty, so I'm too weak to find a way out of this situation myself. . . . Recently, I started thinking about suicide. Currently, my fear of death is so strong that I don't have enough courage to actually commit suicide. However, if this situation continues, I feel scared that I might lose control for some reason and actually kill myself.

Such is the situation I am in. I'm sorry that I rambled incoherently. I feel like I'm at a dead end and there's nothing else I can do. . . . I hope you can give me some advice if you have time. I'm sorry to ask you when you're so busy, but please help me out.

When Nemoto was a child, an uncle he was close to committed suicide. While he was in high school, in the late eighties, a friend from middle school killed herself. He went to her funeral and saw her body in its coffin, and saw that her mouth had been sewn shut to hide her tongue, which protruded, because she had hanged herself. Some years later, he heard that another friend had committed suicide, a girl he had been in a band with in high school. He went to her funeral, and found it even more disturbing than the previous one: this girl had also hanged herself, but she had starved herself, too, and her body was shockingly emaciated.

"I learned about the despotism at the same time you did."

When he was young, he often drank and got into brawls with kids from other schools. In high school, he read Nietzsche every day; he liked the strength and the power of it. After graduating, he took some philosophy correspondence courses at a university and worked on boats, testing for pollution in Tokyo Bay. He wasn't interested in pollution; he just liked boats. He worked as a marine tour guide in Okinawa for a while. He

didn't have any long-term plans; he was just doing whatever seemed fun. Then, when he was twenty-four, he got in a terrible motorcycle accident that left him unconscious for six hours and hospitalized for three months. He came to realize that life was precious and he had been wasting it. He wasn't going to figure out the meaning of life by reading. He had to do it through experience.

One day, his mother saw an advertisement in the newspaper: Buddhist monks wanted. She pointed it out to him because she thought it was hilarious to advertise for monks, but his curiosity was aroused. He already knew a little bit about Zen: he had studied karate after high school, and that had involved some basic austerities, like standing under an icy waterfall for an hour while chanting. His friends thought becoming a monk was a ridiculous idea, and even he had no very high opinion of monks, but he answered the advertisement. The job was entry-level monk work for people who hadn't any training—pet funerals, that sort of thing. After a while, it was too easy; he wanted to learn more. At the time, in his late twenties, he was living with Yukiko, a nurse-in-training whom he had met when he was in the hospital, and who later became his wife, but he decided that he wanted to enter a monastery.

He did his training in a Rinzai Zen monastery on a forested mountainside in Gifu prefecture, two hundred miles west of Tokyo. Long flights of stone steps lead up the mountain and end at a wooden gateway with a tiled roof. Through the gateway is a courtyard of raked gravel, some larger rocks and stunted pines, and several traditional buildings with curved tile roofs. When a candidate presents himself for training, he must prostrate himself and declare that he is willing to do anything that needs to be done to solve the great matter of life and death. By tradition, he is scowled at by the head monk, who orders him to leave. He persists, he continues to prostrate himself, and after two or three days he is taken in.

Apprentice monks are treated like slaves on a brutal plantation. They must follow orders and never say no. They sleep very little. They rise at four. Most of the time they eat only a small amount of rice and, occasionally, pickles (fresh vegetables and meat are forbidden). There is no heat, even though it can be very cold on the mountain, and the monks wear sandals and cotton robes. Junior monks are not permitted to read.

There are many menial tasks a monk must complete in a day (cooking, cleaning, cutting down trees, chopping wood, making brooms), and he is given very little time to do them. If he does not move fast enough, senior monks scream at him. There is very little talking—only bell ringing (to indicate a change in activity) and screaming. There is a correct way to do everything, which is vigorously enforced. When a monk wakes in the morning, he must not move until a bell is rung. When the bell rings, he must move very fast. He has about four minutes (until the next bell rings) to put up



his futon, open a window, run to the toilet, gargle with salt water, wash his face, put on his robes, and run to the meditation hall. At first, it is very hard to do all those things in four minutes, but gradually he develops techniques for increasing his speed. Because he is forced to develop these techniques, and because even with the techniques it is still difficult to move fast enough, he is intensely aware of everything he is doing.

He is always too slow, he is always afraid, and he is always being scrutinized. In the winter, he is cold, but if he looks cold he is screamed at. There is no solitude. The constant screaming and the running, along with chronic exhaustion, produce in him a state of low-level panic, which is also a state of acute focus. It is as if his thinking mind, his doubting and critical and interpreting mind, had shut down and been replaced by a simpler mechanism that serves the body. The idea is to throw away his self and, in so doing, find out who he is. A well-trained monk, it is said, lives as though he were already dead: free from attachment, from indecision, from confusion, he moves with no barrier between his will and his act.

Several times each year, the monks spend eight days walking long distances to beg for food; in the winter, they walk in sandals through snow. When they go begging, they wear broad conical straw hats to cover their faces. They do not talk to anyone, and, if someone asks, they may not say their names. When someone gives them food, they are obliged to eat everything they are given. This forced overeating can be the most physically painful part of the training.

Every day, each monk has an audience with his teacher about a koan that he is pondering. These audiences are a few minutes at the most, sometimes a few seconds. Occasionally, the teacher will make a comment; usually he says nothing at all. The koan is a mental version of the bodily brutalities of training: resistant, frustrating, impossible to assimilate, it is meant to shock the monk into sudden insight.

In January, the monks hold a weeklong retreat, during which they are not allowed to lie down or sleep. One January, Nemoto was cook; he had to prepare special pickles for the retreat, and he was driven so hard by the head monk that he did not sleep at all for a week before the retreat began. By the third day of the retreat, he was so exhausted that he could barely stand, but he had to carry a heavy pot full of rice. He stood holding the rice and thought, I cannot carry this pot any longer, I am going to die now. Just as he was on the point of collapse, he felt a great rush of energy: he felt as though everything around him were singing, and that he could do anything he had to do. He felt, too, that the person who had been on the point of collapse a moment before, and, indeed, the person who had been living his life until then, was not really him. That evening, he met with his teacher about his koan, and for the first time the teacher accepted his answer. This experience led him to believe that suffering produces insight, and that it is only at the point when suffering becomes nearly unbearable that transformation takes place.

There are very few monks in Japan now. Nemoto's monastery, whose training is particularly harsh, has only seven. Each year, new monks present themselves for training, and each year many of them run away. This year, five came and four ran away. The focus of Nemoto's Rinzai Zen sect is individual enlightenment; when a monk leaves with the intention of doing work in the world, the *rosbi* is disappointed.

Some years ago, a woman, R., contacted Nemoto through his Web site, and they also met in person several times.

Date: 01/17/2008

Actually, R. was almost dead yesterday LOL. I thought of taking pills for the first time in a long while. But I can't die no matter how many times I take pills, and stomach cleansing is suuuuper painful, you know, if you're conscious. It'd work if I can take pills well until I lose consciousness, but it's so hard to swallow several hundred pills LOL. . . . If I could die easily, I would have been dead! Now, R. has a reliable friend, you know, so I cried for about 2 hours and I calmed down, but to be the one who listens is also hard, right? I feel sympathy. I thought, you're going to be tired of R. someday, and I felt even more like dying, or not, LOL. It's hard. But living is hard. This is my conclusion. O.K., I'll go take a bath!

At a certain point, R. divorced her husband and moved in with her boyfriend, who had become a *hikikomori* after his father committed suicide. She sent Nemoto an essay her boyfriend had written, arguing that *hikikomori* and training priests are essentially the same:

Long ago, becoming a training priest was recognized as a way of living, and I think that considerable numbers of the priests were people who had troubles that prevented them from living in society—people who would be called depressed or neurotic in today's terms. . . . The basic rule was to leave the family and friends, discard all the relationships and renounce the world. . . . The old society accepted these training priests, although they were thought to be completely useless. Or rather, it treated them with respect, and supported them by giving offerings. . . . In very rare cases, some attained so-called "enlightenment," and those people could spread teachings that could possibly save people in society who had troubles. In other words, there were certain cases where training priests could be useful to society, and I think that is why society supported them. . . . I think that training priests and *hikikomori* are quite similar. First, neither of them can fit in to this society—while the training priests are secluded in mountains, *hikikomori* are secluded in their rooms. They both engage in the activity of facing the root of their problems alone. . . . However, nobody accepts this way of living anymore, and that's why *hikikomori* hide in their rooms. . . . But *hikikomori* are very important beings. *Hikikomori* cannot be cured by society; rather, it is society that has problems, and *hikikomori* may be able to solve them.

After four years in the monastery, Nemoto wanted to be out in the world again, but he wasn't sure what he wanted to do, so he moved back to Tokyo and went to work at a fast-food restaurant. After four years of rice and pickles, he found the idea of flipping burgers appealing. Sure enough, it was such easy work compared with his training that he felt happy all the time. People said hello to him, they told him he was doing a good job, they asked him if he was O.K. back there, was it too hot, did he want some water? It was incredible! Soon his cheerful demeanor began to attract attention. Nobody could understand why he was so happy flipping burgers; everyone else at the restaurant was miserable. People asked him what his secret was, and he told them about the monastery. They started talking to him about their troubles—some of them about how they had considered suicide—and he found he had a knack for helping unhappy people change the way they thought.

After a while, the son of one of his teachers got in touch with him and asked him what he was doing at the restaurant—their sect needed monks who could become abbots of temples. There was a temple in a small town called Seki, in Gifu prefecture, that would close if it couldn't find an abbot; Nemoto agreed to move there.

Seki was a collection of low-slung concrete apartment blocks and traditional-style two-story houses with pitched roofs and fluted tiles, surrounded by hills covered with scrubby bamboo. The temple was outside the town, also in a traditional style, surrounded by rice paddies, with a graveyard on one side. Inside the temple was a meditation hall in which the memorial tablets for the parish were kept, each containing a scroll on which were written the names of that family's ancestors, some dating to the seventeenth century. The rooms opened to the outside with sliding doors latticed with wooden slats and paper screens; the floors were covered with tatami mats. Nemoto had imagined the life of a country abbot as a peaceful one, but it turned out to be so much work that he rarely had time for himself. He conducted funerals for all the families in the parish, and then there were the two-week memorials, the three-week memorials, the four-week memorials, and all the ceremonies after that. He also planted and harvested rice in the temple fields and distributed some of it to his parishioners.

At least there were no more austerities: once monks have left the monastery and become priests, the restrictions of the monastic life fall away. Priests drink, they smoke, they marry. Buddhists from countries where customs are stricter are often shocked by the habits of Japanese priests, but Nemoto doesn't believe in putting a distance between himself and other people. (Another sect, a branch of the Pure Land Buddhists, takes this further—their priests don't even shave their heads. This is a gesture of humility: Pure Land priests consider that they are common idiots like everybody else.) When Nemoto is conducting a funeral ceremony, he wears his robes. Older people feel comforted by the sight of a priest in traditional dress. But when he leaves the temple he wears what he likes. He wears baggy jeans, old boots, a kerchief tied over his shaved head. This is not just a matter of reducing formality: in Japan, Buddhism has become so exclusively associated with funerals that a priest in robes appears to many like a herald of death.



Date: 04/22/2010

Dear Chief Priest of Daizenji Temple,

My recent life hasn't really changed much [since my husband committed suicide], but I still manage to continue living. I will ramble on about what I'm thinking now. Please forgive me that it's rather long. My mother was very devout. She never failed to put her palms together in prayer and chant a sutra in front of the Buddhist altar every morning and night. My father liked sake, and he acted violently ever since I could remember. I grew up, seeing my mother suffer for decades. However, my mother never complained. She worked very hard, and prayed for the happiness of our family single-mindedly and devoted herself to taking care of my father until he died. I couldn't understand my mother very much. All I thought was she was impressive. I hated my father all the time. . . .

After my father's death, my mother's health declined. She was finally released from troubles with him, but then I started giving her trouble. My marriage failed, and nothing went well in my life, and the older I got, the more I lost the meaning of life, and I just wanted to die. My heart was in a rough mood, and I started using violent words toward my mother. . . . Then she caught pneumonia and passed away. I was in despair. I felt like I was crushed by my severe regrets. I couldn't forgive myself, I felt so much pain, and I couldn't bear it anymore. I attempted suicide.

My mother suffered for decades because of my alcoholic father, and I made her suffer when she was finally released. In her entire life, she was never rewarded. Why did she, who was so devout, and sacrificed her own body and life, end up having a life so full of suffering? I know all I gave her was suffering. It was my fault. And yet I couldn't help myself. So, when I think about my mother, I feel rage, wondering if there are no gods or buddhas in this world, wondering how can such a good life be so unrewarded. I feel like I don't care anymore about anything, if you can't become happy by living virtuously. The last words my mother said after regaining consciousness were "I feel grateful." . . .

I'm alone. I know it's pathetic, since I'll be fifty in a few years. I work as a temporary employee. I can sustain my finances now, but I don't know what will happen in the future. I have absolutely no idea how to live. I feel extreme anxiety. I talk to my mother's picture every day. Every time I wake up in the morning, I feel disappointed at myself because I am still alive. I won't be able to go where my mother is when I die. That's what I think. Still, while I want to die, I also feel like finding a way to live. I have been looking for a job since the beginning of this year. Since I can't do anything but office work at this age, all I get is rejections. That's normal. So, in the end, I feel like I want to run away. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know if I want to live or die. I might be looking for a job to lie about the fact that I want to die. . . . At night, I think about my future and I think about my mother, and I can't help but cry.

It is hard to talk about wanting to die. Most people you talk to can't handle it; it's too disturbing. If you call a suicide hot line, the person can handle it, but he will be some stranger who knows nothing about you. There isn't much talk therapy in Japan—if you go to a psychiatrist, he will usually see you for just a few minutes and give you a prescription. Nemoto wanted to help suicidal people talk to each other without awkwardness, and so he created a suicide Web site. It was originally called “For those who want to die,” but then it was suggested to him that it might become a place where people went to find strangers to commit suicide with—that had become quite common in Japan—so he changed its name to “For those who do not want to die.” People communicated with one another on the site, and also they wrote to him.

He responded to everyone. He wrote back to all e-mails, and often, when he wrote, a reply would arrive within minutes, and he would reply to the reply. He answered all phone calls, day or night, and many came in the night. People would call and want to talk to him, but they didn't know what to say; they didn't know how to describe what was happening to them. What would come through the phone over hours of talking was an inarticulate, urgent, and bottomless anxiety that seeped into him and didn't go away when the phone call was over.

He tried to practice what he thought of as Zen listening—letting the words and emotions flow through him, taking up all the space in his mind so there was no room for any reaction of his own. He felt that in order to help people he had to feel what they felt—he had to feel that he wasn't an adviser but a fellow-sufferer, trying, as they were, to make sense out of life—but this affected him more and more, as their anxiety became his. He tried to meditate in order to purge himself of these emotions, but he could never purge himself completely. He thought about the suicidal people all the time. How could he help them? What could he do? He wasn't sleeping enough. It was gruelling, but his practice in the temple had been gruelling and he believed that this was a continuation of his practice.

After three years, he sensed that he was near a breakdown, and he started to think about ways to take care of himself. He took up karate again. He meditated more, did more chanting. But new people kept asking him for help, and the people from before kept calling, and few cases were ever resolved, and so he felt himself responsible for more and more people who wanted more and more from him.

In the fall of 2009, he began to feel a heaviness in his chest. He felt that his neck was constricting; he found it harder to breathe. When it got very bad, a few months later, he went to the hospital and received a diagnosis of unstable angina. Five arteries were blocked; his doctor told him he could die of a heart attack at any time. Over the next two years, he had four angioplasties. During this period, Nemoto's father became suicidal. Ten years before, the father had had a severe stroke and become partly paralyzed. By the time Nemoto was hospitalized, his father had lost the will to live. Then, a few months later, he died, of heart failure.

All this time, the e-mails and the phone calls kept coming, but for long periods Nemoto was too sick to respond. At first, he didn't say why he had gone silent. Then, as the weeks went by, he felt he had to explain. From the hospital, he wrote to his correspondents and told them he was sick. When he checked back in to see how they'd responded to his announcement, he was shocked. They didn't care that he was sick: they were sick, too, they said; they were in pain, and he had to take care of them.

"We've been together so long we can finish each other's divorce threats."

Lying in the hospital, he spent a week crying. He had spent seven years sacrificing himself, driving himself to the point of breakdown, nearly to death, trying to help these people, and they didn't care about him at all. What was the point? He knew that if you were suicidal it was difficult to understand other people's problems, but still—he had been talking to some of these people for years, and now here he was dying and nobody cared.



For a long time, his thoughts were too dark and agitated to sort out, but slowly the darkness receded, and what remained with him was a strong sense that he wanted to do the work anyway. He realized that, even if the people he spoke to felt nothing for him, he still wanted something from them. There was the intellectual excitement he felt when he succeeded in analyzing some problem a person had been stuck on. He wanted to know truths that ordinary people did not know, and in suffering it felt as though he were finding those truths. And then there was something harder to define, a kind of spiritual thrill in what felt to him, when it worked, like a bumping of souls. If this was what he was after, he would have to stop thinking of his work as something morally obligatory and freighted with significance. Helping people should be nothing special, like eating, he thought—just something that he did in the course of his life.

Having arrived at this conclusion, he went online to look at his Web site, and saw that there were some messages of support that he'd missed the first time in his shock at the others. That was a relief. But he still needed to make changes in his life. Clearly, he had been doing something wrong. He thought about all the e-mails and all the phone calls and how those conversations could go on and on for years in circles with no progress at all; and he also thought about how strange and disorienting it was to swallow into himself terrible emotions from people he had never even seen. He decided that from then on he would not communicate with people until he had met them. If they wanted his counsel, they first had to come to his temple. It would be difficult for many of them—his temple was in a remote place, far from the nearest city, quite far even from the local train station, and he had been talking to people all over Japan. It would cost them quite a bit of money to get to him. But this was the point. If they didn't want his help enough to get to the temple, it was unlikely that he could help them.

The new strategy reduced the number of people who came to him for help, and it also changed something for those who did. Was it meeting face to face, or was it the longer, more concentrated time he was able to give them? He wasn't sure. But after these meetings he often felt that he and they had achieved some kind of resolution. And this meant, too, that he didn't spend his life filled with anxiety, with the fear that any one of the many people he had spoken to or written to that week might be killing himself at any moment. As time went on, he developed other techniques. He started taking notes when he was listening to people, which helped him to maintain a certain distance from their despair. It also allowed him to remind them of things they had said before, to remind them of past happiness, and to help them construct a story that moved from one point to the next, rather than endlessly circling, and this allowed them, too, to view their suffering from a distance.

Once, a man walked for five hours to get to Nemoto's temple. The walk was a heroic journey for this man, because he had been living as a *hikikomori*, and now suddenly he was outside in the sun, sweating and feeling his body move. As he walked, he thought about what he was going to say. It had been so long since he had really spoken to anyone, and now he was going to be expected to explain his most intimate feelings to a stranger. He sweated and thought as he walked, and when at last, after five hours, he arrived at the temple he announced that he had achieved understanding and no longer needed Nemoto's help. He turned around and walked back home. ♦



Larissa MacFarquhar has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1998.