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My Hikikomori
Maria Santamaria

Dear God,

No doubt you will be surprised to be reading this from me. You must be wondering who I am, and why this letter all of a sudden. I will try to explain, but please understand that I am confused and at my wits' end.

As a child I worshipped you fervently but as the years passed our relationship became strained for various reasons. Gradually I shut you out of my life, not really intending to desert you. Unconsciously, I was letting you take a brief respite, in case I needed you again. A nun whom I met in Myanmar many years ago said, "Your faith was only taking a siesta."

I would like to talk to you about the "hikikomori", young Japanese adults, usually male, who withdraw from society. They live confined in the homes of their parents, are fully dependent on them for survival but have no emotional bonds with them. About one per cent of the Japanese population is estimated to behave as hikikomori. There are reports of hikikomori in other countries as well.

Defining the hikikomori is not easy, quantifying them is no easy matter either. Official statistics cannot give a definite number. Those living with a hikikomori know that they are condemned to live with the problem for longer than they wish or can imagine. The hikikomori possesses you and you feel that he is yours alone because, unfortunately, nobody wants a hikikomori, not even one's relatives; in Japanese culture if you show an interest in something you might feel duty bound to do something about it.

My involvement with a hikikomori began when I started taking an interest in the son of a dear friend. I had not seen either of them for a while. Each time I enquired about her son my friend always had an excuse: "He is busy drawing manga; he will show it to you when it is completed." Or, "These days he is busy with video games and computer games and spends long

hours in his room. I don't understand much about these things." She was always evasive.

One wintry day she showed me a photograph album. In one photo, she and her cute four-year-old son were in a park; he was holding a teddy bear on whose head he had placed his own hat. He looked happy and joyful. My friend was dressed in a kimono and looked very distinguished. I commented on her looks and their happiness. She interrupted me gently: "Yes, he was a cute baby and I was a young mother with great plans. This was perhaps the last picture of a happy time."

In the album there were photos of my friend at weddings, at art exhibitions, group excursions but there were no more photos of her son. She told me how much she wished to help her son follow his dream. "What dream?" I queried. "What about the manga drawings? He must be good by now after so many years of practice. What happened to the comic book he was preparing?" She replied, with a distant look on her face, that he had slowly lost interest in drawing. He liked music for a while; later he showed interest in computers. Finally, she said, he had lost interest in everything. He spent more and more time in his room and would come out only to eat. Gradually, he started eating alone and avoided his parents altogether. The only time they saw him was when he collected his monthly allowance. They were anxious about his future and wanted to help him within their means, but they dared not ask him about his plans. Wide-eyed, I queried: "You give him an allowance and you believe that you have no right to ask your son about what he would like to do in the future?"

My friend said sadly, "I know it is difficult for you to understand as this is one area where our cultures clash. We think he needs to have some income. Of course, it would be good if he worked and earned some. But as you know, it is not easy to find a job these days. It is a delicate matter. You probably think that we should tell him to go out and at least look for a part-time job."

I immediately jumped at this suggestion. "Yes, exactly! On my way here from the station I saw advertisements for jobs in restaurants, 24/7 supermarkets, petrol stations; they offer 900 yens an hour. He could at least try one of these jobs. He could also try talking to you from time to time. For example, he could thank you for the food, for cleaning his room, doing the laundry, or paying for the electricity; it would also not be a bad idea for him to thank you for the car that you so graciously allow him to use."

"This is his home, we can't throw him out!" she replied.

"You raise a good point," I said, wanting to reduce the tension of the conversation. "What is home? Is it the place where we belong? The place that we use by right without duty? And what is the sense of belonging? Can there be belonging without a relationship? What do we need to do to develop a relationship and a sense of belonging? I wonder how your son views his relationship with you and where he thinks he belongs."

"You could try asking him those questions yourself when you meet up with him next," she replied. "But, I'm not sure he'll want to meet with you, or anybody else. These days he gets angry with us when we try to tell him anything. The other day I told him that tobacco was bad for him, and he started shouting at me. You know, the neighbours are nearby, and this is a family matter."

I appreciated then how difficult it was to suggest a simple solution to a complex situation. It was clear to me that her son was causing my friend great distress. It was also clear that her disclosure of the situation was an invitation to me to do something, despite the differences she

saw in our cultures.

From that time onwards, my friend extended many invitations to her home. She always found interesting activities for us to do together and I happily accepted. For example, it would be the spring blossoms or gardening together or preparing *umeboshi* (dried Japanese plums). My friend would suggest picking the plums and preparing them on a certain day and then processing them on the next occasion we met.

Gradually, as I immersed myself in different aspects of Japanese culture, I began to understand the dilemma my friend was facing, and the difficulties brought about by her son's situation: the emotional trauma she suffered as a mother; her financial difficulties as her son's demands for more money increased; and last but not the least the social isolation. These experiences and frequent contacts strengthened our already strong friendship, and my sense of belonging to her family. And with this, came the sense of having a hikikomori in my life.

Dear God, you understand now why I want you in the forefront of my life again. During the last two years, my good friend and I have done everything to find a solution to this inexplicable and incomprehensible situation. We are at a loss. Our hikikomori has exhausted us.

At first, I did things on my own, until I gained my friend's confidence and convinced her that she needed to come out about her problem. When I met with other friends we chatted about our lives, sharing our happy moments and our worries. I told them – of course without mentioning any names – that the son of a dear friend was behaving like a hikikomori and that I was worried about the drain he was having on her, emotionally and economically. To my surprise, four of the nine friends with whom I had shared this news had a hikikomori under their own roof or in a close relative's home. I asked them how they coped with the situation. Only one had acted radically. A divorcee, she decided that she could no longer cope with the situation and consulted several specialists. Following their advice, she sold her home, moved to another area, and cut ties with her 56-year-old son. She still paid for his studio through a third party. This former hikikomori has now, for the first time in his life, taken a part-time job, and except for the rental support, he has a fully independent life and seems to have integrated well into society. The other three families continue to hope for change without themselves effecting any changes.

After I had spoken to these friends, whenever we met, one of our conversation topics would concern hikikomori. Some recommended that we go and consult the *minseiin* – the district's volunteer welfare worker – on how to approach the prefecture for support. Others recommended that we contact some non-profit organisations that try to bring the hikikomori back into society. One friend showed us an announcement of a conference by one of the most popular hikikomori gurus in Japan. We followed all these recommendations. As a result, my hikikomori universe expanded profoundly. I left no stone unturned: I networked with families facing the same problem, contacted administrative and prefectural authorities; I listened to those who know all about the hikikomori and also to those who claimed to know. It was like going round in circles.

Despite our efforts, he showed no interest in changing his way of life. I told myself that he was at least a man of principle!

My friend and I came to the conclusion that the main problem was not the elephant in the room but the room itself. The evidence in front of us prevented us from looking in another

direction.

We still wanted to believe that the son would change, so it came as a bit of a shock to realise that the first thing we needed to do was to dismantle what my dear friend had carefully built for the last forty-two years to ensure that her four-year-old son would remain cute forever. The first and most important thing to do was to stop trying to change the son and start changing the parents. They needed to confront the situation and speak to their son firmly but without anger. They should explain what exactly they were willing to do for him in future: unless he ate with them, they would stop cooking for him; they would stop cleaning his room, doing his laundry, washing his dishes, and paying for his mobile phone and car. They would stop his credit card.

My tasks were much easier. First, I should continue my intrusion – very carefully – into the son's life to encourage a minimum degree of interaction with the outside world. Second, I needed to bear in mind that the economic support I occasionally provided to the parents ultimately contributed to the son's daily subsistence, which included two packs of cigarettes and two big bottles of Coca-Cola.

Dear God, since you are a well-known performer of miracles, I need not tell you that what is being asked of my friend and her husband is equal to what your son Jesus did when he stilled the storm. This is the reason I am writing to you. I do not think that the family will be able to improve the situation unless you intervene.

My friend and her husband expect their son to change and pursue his dreams without their changing what everybody agrees is their overprotective behaviour. What is expected of them is a radical change in their interaction with their son. Our hikikomori expects an eternally subsidized life in calm solitude; they wish for him a life full of adventures, failures, and successes as a social being.

After visiting my friend's home several times, the *minseiin* and the staff at the prefecture probably have little expectation of things ever really changing. However, their efforts, presence and professionalism are certainly praiseworthy. If we had consulted them twenty years ago, you probably would not be reading this letter today!

I expect my dear friend and her husband to ultimately still their storm. But I must tell you that, although their health is fine, she is 79 years old and he will be 85 in a month's time.

Thank you sincerely for your intervention.

I salute you, dear God, and promise you a more prominent place in my life.

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