

ing without sacrificing his pride. When the phone rang he answered it with unusual promptness and, waving off my wife's attempts to take it from him, brought me the receiver after announcing who it was with uncustomary precision. Next, he brought me the evening paper. Then, when one of my friends made an appearance in some television program, he watched carefully to see if I had noticed. Rightly enough, though, he gave no sign that he was prepared to apologize for sulking about the crossing incident. It wasn't long, however, before I was overcome with shame at the way I'd been acting and began looking for my own ways of making up—though without damaging my own parental dignity. . . . I can imagine how hard it must have been for the rest of the family not to laugh out loud at our little comedy.

3

To my mind, the poet Shiki Masaoka is one of the few people who has ever been able to write honestly and accurately about the feelings that develop between a sick or handicapped person and the family taking care of him, and do so in a manner that has a universal bearing. As a boy from Ehime prefecture (on the southern island of Shikoku which was also Shiki's home), I was familiar with this late nineteenth-century poet from quite an early age. But it wasn't only his poetry that interested me; I was also fascinated by the fact that Shiki, who spent years confined to a sickbed, had seen fit to record his irritation with the quality of his sister's care and to give his opinions on everything ✓

from nursing to women's education.

There are undoubtedly a number of troubling points in the behavior of this poet who accomplished so much of his most important work while a virtual invalid. His relationship with his neighbor and patron Katsunan Kuga, for example, was sometimes less than admirable. Kuga, it seems, used to dress up his young daughter in a beautiful kimono and bring her to visit Shiki, to cheer him up, without Shiki apparently giving any thought to the danger of infection from his tuberculosis. Likewise, Shiki's relationship with his mother and sister, who cared for him devotedly to the very end, is problematic. But perhaps most disturbing of all are the complaints he has to make about his sister Ritsu in his final diary, "Random Thoughts While Lying Flat on My Back."



Ritsu is a stern, pragmatic woman, as cold and unfeeling as a stone. She nurses me out of a sense of duty, but she offers no compassion or comfort. She will do anything I ask of her directly, but refuses to understand when I hint at my needs. From time to time I expound to her on the subject of compassion and fellow feeling yet it seems to fall on deaf ears, for there is no explaining a feeling to one who lacks any such thing. Unfortunate as it is, this leaves me little choice but to abandon the attempt. . . .

More petulantly, he writes:


At times she seems to be utterly indifferent to my

wishes, even when I express them quite openly by saying, for example, that I would dearly like some dumplings. A person of any consideration, hearing that an invalid wanted to eat a particular kind of food, would immediately go out to buy it, but not Ritsu, who has never once done anything of the sort. Thus I am forced to give direct orders: "Go and get me some dumplings." When told to do something explicitly, at least, she never refuses.

As a definition of Shiki's "compassion," I would propose something to the effect of "an active yet almost automatic ability to enter into the feelings of another person." This comes very close to "imagination," reminding me of what Rousseau says in *Emile* on the subject of education: that "only the imagination can teach us another's pain." So, despite the subjective tone of his comments on his sister's style of nursing (which one assumes were influenced by his concern over her failed marriage and rather independent character), the point he is making is nevertheless a fundamental one.

He was also writing an essay as he was keeping this diary, and in it he wonders aloud whether there might be some way of instilling in Japanese women the kind of spontaneous compassion that would allow them to nurse people as he would have them do it, or, as Rousseau would put it, a way to get them to "imagine" other people's suffering. The argument he makes follows a "logical" pattern until he reaches a point where he seems to feel a certain embarrassment at what

he must, from the beginning, have known to be an unjust sentiment, the venting of an invalid's anger and frustration; for he comes out in favor generally of women's education, seeing it as necessary anyway. And indeed, after nursing him to the end of his long illness, Ritsu completed her education, becoming a teacher and, though she never had a family of her own, living a productive, independent life. Thus his essay, which he probably had no reason to think she would read when it was published in a newspaper, can be seen as his admittedly obscure attempt at an apology. I like to think that in later years, when time had provided sufficient distance, she became one of his more understanding and sympathetic readers—and if I am right in supposing this, one can imagine her satisfaction at being reconciled with her dead brother.

I find, however, that these notions of “active compassion” and the exercise of the imagination take on a special meaning in the case of mentally handicapped children and the families, doctors, nurses, and therapists who look after them. How, practically speaking, can these “patients” communicate their needs and wants when they don't fully understand them themselves? Hikari, for example, particularly when he was younger, never expressed a desire for anything, not even something as simple as Shiki's dumplings. And realizing this only increases my admiration for my wife's patience and compassion in the task of imagining his needs—above all, his need for music. 

To a certain extent, Shiki was probably reveling in the gloom and boredom of his sickroom; yet I also feel he tried

to dispel that atmosphere and generally raise his spirits, using not only his diary but sketches of flowers to do so. I sometimes wonder what his mother and sister must have felt when they saw those sketches. For many years now, while she was raising Hikari, my wife, too, has been drawing plants and flowers, and although they may not be the equal of Shiki's in a purely artistic sense, whenever I sit down to look through her sketchbooks my head is filled with thoughts of the complicated ties that bind a sick person and his family together, the sufferer and his comforter.

