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Mourning My Miscarriage

By Peggy Orenstein

I heard the bells before I saw them, following the sound across the courtyard of Zozo-ji, a Buddhist temple in Tokyo. There they were, lining a shady path: dozens of small statues of infants, each wearing a red crocheted cap and a red cloth bib, each with a bright-colored pinwheel spinning merrily in the breeze. Some had stone vases beside them filled with flowers or smoking sticks of incense. A few were surrounded by juice boxes or sweets. A cap had slipped off one tiny head. Before replacing it, I stroked the bald stone skull, which felt surprisingly like a newborn's.

The statues were offerings to Jizo, a bodhisattva, or enlightened being, who (among other tasks) watches over miscarried and aborted fetuses. With their hands clasped in prayer, their closed eyes and serene faces, they are both child and monk, both human and deity. I had seen Jizo shrines many times before. They're all over Japan, festive and not a little creepy. But this was different. I hadn't come as a tourist. I was here as a supplicant, my purse filled with toys, ready to make an offering on behalf of my own lost dream.

I was in Tokyo for three months reporting on Japan's rapidly declining birth rate. I hadn't expected to be pregnant, though I had long hoped to be (and appreciated the coincidence, not to mention the humiliation, of succumbing to morning sickness midway through an interview on the new childlessness). I called my husband, Steven, across the Pacific, eager to share the news. We agreed that I would stay and find an English-speaking doctor. After all, we reasoned, Japanese women have babies, too. He would come in about a month to visit as planned. I imagined a sweet reunion.

Steven's response, however, was more guarded. I'd already had one miscarriage, more than a year earlier, and he was wary of giving way to excitement before that first, tentative trimester had passed. I knew he was right, but couldn't share that cautiousness -- nor, I suppose, did I really try. I found myself engaged in a running conversation with the growing embryo, narrating the details of daily life in Tokyo, telling it stories of our home back in California. The connection I felt was unanticipated, electric: as if a frail, silvery thread ran between us. That link was the first thing I checked for when I woke up, the last thing I focused on when drifting to sleep.

Then, in my eighth week, walking to the subway, I felt it snap. Just like that. It's over, I thought. Is that possible? Could I have truly known? Of course there are concrete indicators that things have gone amiss -- nausea abates, breast pain dwindles -- but those had not yet occurred. It could have been my
imagination, a momentary blip that in a viable pregnancy would have been forgotten. Or maybe the bond itself was a product of wishful thinking. I can't say.

Either way, I could never conjure the connection again. I tried not to think about it. I tried to convince myself that I was being superstitious and absurd. But I was not surprised at my next prenatal exam when the doctor looked at the wavy lines of the ultrasound and intoned, "Egg sac is empty." I just slipped further into the numbness of medical emergency. Steven caught a plane to Tokyo, and we faced the D. and C. procedure together, grimly, with little incident. A week later, I decided to stay and finish my work. Steven flew home. And it was over.

Or at least it was supposed to be. There's little acknowledgment in Western culture of miscarriage, no ritual to cleanse the grief. My own religion, Judaism, despite its meticulous attention to the details of daily life, has traditionally been silent on pregnancy loss -- on most matters of pregnancy and childbirth, in fact. (At the urging of female rabbis, the Conservative movement in which I grew up has, for the first time, included prayers to mark miscarriage and some abortions in its most recent rabbis' manual.) Christianity, too, has largely overlooked miscarriage.

Without form, there is no content. So even in this era of compulsive confession, women don't speak publicly of their loss. It is only if your pregnancy is among the unlucky ones that fail that you begin to hear the stories, spoken in confidence, almost whispered. Your aunt. Your grandmother. Your friends. Your colleagues. Women you have known for years -- sometimes your whole life -- who have had this happen, sometimes over and over and over again. They tell only if you become one of them.

Women today may feel the disappointment of early miscarriage especially acutely. In my mother's generation, for instance, a woman waited until she had skipped two periods before visiting the doctor to see if she was pregnant. If she didn't make it that long, she was simply "late." It was less tempting, then, to inflate early suspicions into full-blown fantasies -- women often didn't even tell their husbands until the proverbial rabbit died.

Now, according to Linda Layne, an anthropologist who is the author of the coming book "Motherhood Lost," new technologies and better medical care encourage us to confer "social personhood" on the fetus with greater intensity, and at an ever-earlier stage. Prenatal care -- including watching every milligram of caffeine, every glass of wine, every morsel of food, as well as choking down that daily horse pill of a prenatal vitamin -- begins before we have even conceived. Meanwhile, drugstore kits can detect a rise in key hormones three days prior to a missed period, increasing our knowledge but also the possibility of dashed hopes. Web sites ply the newly pregnant with due-date calculators, "expecting clubs" and photographs of "your baby's" development. Ultrasounds reveal a nearly imperceptible heartbeat at six weeks of gestation. Women confide in family and friends and begin to sort through names. In an era of vastly reduced infant mortality, they assume all will go well. When it doesn't, Layne says, "the very people participating with us in the construction of this new social person -- your mother-in-law or your friend or whoever was saying, 'Everything you do is important to the health of the baby, and every cup of coffee matters' -- they suddenly revoke that personhood. It's like nothing ever happened."
There are so many reasons that discussion of miscarriage is squelched. Americans don’t like unhappy endings. We recoil from death. Some women also may be reacting against a newly punitive atmosphere toward older mothers. Miscarriage rates increase with maternal age, and those of us who have pushed our attempts at childbearing to the furthest frontiers of time worry that we’ll be blamed for our losses, that we’ll be harshly judged for "waiting too long." Sometimes we feel that judgment toward ourselves. But for me, there is another uncomfortable truth: my own pro-abortion-rights politics defy me. Social personhood may be distinct from biological and legal personhood, yet the zing of connection between me and my embryo felt startlingly real, and at direct odds with everything I believe about when life begins. Nor have those beliefs -- a complicated calculus of science, politics and ethics -- changed. I tell myself that this wasn't a person. It wasn't a child. At the same time, I can't deny that it was something. How can I mourn what I don't believe existed? The debate over abortion has become so polarized that exploring such contradictions feels too risky. In the political discussion, there has been no vocabulary of nuance.

For days after the miscarriage, I walked around in a gray haze, not knowing what to do with my sadness. I did my work, I went out with friends, but my movements felt mechanical, my voice muffled. Then I remembered Jizo. I phoned the mother of a Japanese friend to ask where I might make an offering. "I can't tell you," she responded. "You'll have to find the temple that is your en -- your destiny."

Eventually, a Japanese-American friend back home told me that Zozo-ji, a 14th-century temple where the Tokugawa clan once worshiped, was a common spot to make offerings to Jizo. As it happened, the temple was a few blocks from Tokyo Tower, just a short walk from where I was living. On my way, I stopped at a toy store to buy an offering. What do you get for a child who will never be? I considered a plush Hello Kitty ball, then a rattle shaped like a tambourine, then a squeaky rubber An-pan Man -- a popular superhero whose head is made of a sweet bean-filled pastry. This was no time to skimp, I decided, and scooped up all three.

"Presen-to?" the sales clerk asked, reaching for some wrapping paper. I hesitated. Was it a gift? Not exactly.

"Is it for you?" she asked. I didn't know what to say.

"It's O.K.," I finally said. "I'll just take them like that."

There are few street names in Tokyo, which makes navigating a continual challenge, so I kept my eye on Tokyo Tower, a red-and-white copy of the Eiffel Tower, as I triangulated the winding side streets. The neighborhood was unusually quiet, full of low-slung old-fashioned buildings. I caught glimpses of dark interiors: an elderly woman selling bamboo shoots, something that looked like a homemade still, a motorbike parked inside a murky restaurant.

Finally, I came across a temple gate and, assuming I’d arrived, stepped into a courtyard. Down a garden path I could see a contemporary marble statue holding a baby in one arm, a staff in the other.
Two naked infants, their tushes lovingly carved, clutched the robes at its feet, glancing over their shoulders. At the base of the statue, someone had left a Kewpie doll.

"Is this Zozo-ji?" I asked an old woman who was sweeping up leaves. My Japanese is good enough to ask a question but not to understand the response. She motioned for me to wait, then fetched a monk, gray-haired in black robes. I was in the wrong place, he explained politely in reasonably good English, then offered directions. For a moment I thought, Why not just do it here? But I had my mind set on Zozo-ji. As I left, I felt the tug of missed opportunity.

I had never previously considered that there is no word in English for a miscarried or aborted fetus. In Japanese it is mizuko, which is typically translated as "water child." Historically, Japanese Buddhists believed that existence flowed into a being slowly, like liquid. Children solidified only gradually over time and weren't considered to be fully in our world until they reached the age of 7. Similarly, leaving this world -- returning to the primordial waters -- was seen as a process that began at 60 with the celebration of a symbolic second birth. According to Paula K.R. Arai, author of "Women Living Zen" and one of several authorities I later turned to for help in understanding the ritual, the mizuko lies somewhere along the continuum, in that liminal space between life and death but belonging to neither. True to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation, it was expected (and still is today) that Jizo would eventually help the mizuko find another pathway into being. "You're trying to send the mizuko off, wishing it well in the life that it will have to come," Arai says. "Because there's always a sense that it will live at another time."

Jizo rituals were originally developed and practiced by women.

According to William R. LaFleur, author of "Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan," there is evidence of centuries-old roadside shrines marking miscarriages, abortions, stillbirths and the deaths of young children (particularly by infanticide, which was once widespread in Japan). But it wasn't until the late 1970's, when abortion rates peaked, that mizuko kuyo, the ritual of apology and remembrance, with its rows of Jizo statues, became commonplace. Abortion was legalized in Japan after World War II; it is viewed, in that country, as a regrettable necessity. Rates remain high -- perhaps twice as high as the officially reported figure of 22 per 1,000 women, which is the same as the rate in the United States. The high incidence of abortion is partly a result of the fact that access to the pill was restricted until 1999 because of fears about its safety and its impact on the environment, concerns that it would encourage promiscuity and disease and, not incidentally, because of pressure from doctors for whom abortion is lucrative.

Even so, the procedure itself has been neither particularly controversial nor politicized. There is no real equivalent in Japan to our "pro-life" movement. The Japanese tend to accept both the existence of abortion and the idea that the mizuko is a form of life. I wondered how they could reconcile what seem to me such mutually exclusive viewpoints. But maybe that's the wrong question: maybe I should wonder why we can't.

LaFleur estimates that about half of Japanese women perform mizuko kuyo after aborting. They may
participate in a formal service, with a priest officiating, or make an informal offering. A woman may light a candle and say a prayer at a local temple. She may leave a handwritten message of apology on a wooden tablet. She may make an offering of food, drink, flowers, incense or toys. The ritual may be a one-time act or it may be repeated monthly or annually. She may purchase her own Jizo statue (costing an average of about $500) or toss a few hundred yen into a coin box at a roadside shrine. Sometimes couples perform mizuko kuyo together. If they already have children, LaFleur says, they may bring them along to honor what is considered, in some sense, a departed sibling: the occasion becomes as much a reunion as a time to grieve. Mizuko kuyo contains elements that would both satisfy and disturb Westerners on either side of the abortion debate: there is public recognition and spiritual acknowledgment that a potential life has been lost, remorse is expressed, yet there is no shame over having performed the act.

There was no mistaking Zozo-ji. It was a huge complex of epic buildings with a football-field-size courtyard. I walked among the rows of mizuko Jizos searching for a spot to place my toys. Some of the babies' caps, which women crochet by hand, had rotted with age to just a few discolored strands. It was dank and gloomy under the trees. A black cat eyed me from a ledge. It seemed a bad omen.

I wouldn't find out until months later, when I returned to America, that there is another, darker side to mizuko kuyo. Over the past few decades, temples dedicated solely to the ritual have sprung up all over Japan, luring disciples by stressing the malevolent potential of the fetus: whether miscarried or aborted, it could become angry over being sent back. If not properly placated, it could seek revenge. In the mid-80's, when mizuko kuyo was at its peak, some entrepreneurial temples placed ominous advertisements in magazines: Are your existing children doing poorly in school? Are you falling ill more easily than before? Has your family suffered a financial setback? That's because you've neglected your mizuko.

Given the price tag on a Jizo statue, preying on women's fears is big business. At the Purple Cloud Temple, for instance, Japan's most famous modern mizuko kuyo site, thousands of Jizos dot the hillside. Such extortion was troubling. Could something so coercive still offer consolation? "One way of looking at this is that all these women are duped or manipulated into doing this," Elizabeth G. Harrison, a professor at the University of Arizona who studies mizuko kuyo, would tell me. "But what is that saying about women in Japan? So you have to look at the other side: there are women who get something out of this." Perhaps like the practice itself, in which conflicting realities exist without contradiction, both readings are true.

Standing amid the scores of Jizos at Zozo-ji that afternoon, I considered: maybe I had found that little temple earlier for a reason. In retrospect, the garden had been cozy, the monk had been kind. There were no rows of statues, no decomposing bonnets. It promised hope as well as comfort. I wanted to return but suddenly feared that the temple had been some kind of chimera, a Brigadoon that had already receded into the mists. More practically, I wasn't sure, without street names, how to find my way back.

Somehow I did, through a vague hunch and a good deal of blundering. The monk was dusting off a
late-model Mercedes with two ostrich feather dusters. So much for the mendicant's life, I thought. For certain Buddhists, cleaning is enlightenment. Paula Arai writes that polishing a wooden temple floor is like polishing the heart. I wondered if spiffing up a Mercedes counted.

He saw me and smiled. "Did you find it?"

"Yes," I said, "but I liked it here better. Is it O.K. if I stay awhile?"

"Do as you wish," he said. And I thought, I'm trying.

As it turned out, the statue at the temple was not Jizo; it was Kannon, goddess of compassion, to whom mizuko kuyo offerings are also sometimes made. Her androgynous face was tranquil but not warm. The expressions of the chubby stone babies at her feet were difficult to read. Had I surprised them? Distracted them? Was their backward glance a reminder that even as they played happily with the mother goddess, they would never forget the women whose bodies had been their hosts? Were they sad? Or was I projecting my own sorrow, now a gnawing presence in my stomach, onto them? I focused on the reassuring image of the Kewpie doll that had been placed there, the happy and dimpled Western baby. It seemed less ambivalent.

As I arranged my offering at Kannon's feet, a distant bell tinkled, similar to the sound of the pinwheels. I looked up, startled. It stopped a second later and didn't start again. I am a cynic by nature with a journalist's skeptical heart. But increasingly, I was in the mood to believe.

My toys looked right surrounding Kewpie, the whole place a little cheerier. I liked them there. I liked the delicate lavender bushes surrounding me in the garden, the wild irises with their ruffled edges, the azaleas, the fleabane and camellias. They were the same plants as in my garden back home. Crows cawed -- the constant soundtrack of Tokyo -- and traffic passed in a steady hum. Still, for that city it was a meditative spot. I relaxed, at last. Maybe my en was finally back on track.

Twilight was falling, and the garden turned cold, but I wasn't yet ready to go. I prayed for a moment for things that are too tender to tell. Then I clapped my hands three times as I'd seen done at other shrines and backed away, gazing once more at the impassive marble face. Was there compassion there?

The temple grounds were empty. The monk in his Mercedes, the lady sweeping leaves were both gone. I rummaged in my purse for an envelope and 5,000 yen -- about $40. "To the monk I met at 5 p.m. from the foreign woman looking for Zozo-ji," I wrote. "Could you please chant a lotus sutra for me and my miscarried fetus? Thank you."

I slipped it under the door. I don't know whether it was appropriate or whether he even did it. But there were so many things I couldn't know. Maybe learning to live with the question marks -- recognizing that "closure" does not always occur -- is all I really needed to do. I hadn't expected, coming from a world that fights to see life's beginnings in black and white, to be so comforted by a shade of gray. Yet the notion of the water child made sense to me. What I'd experienced had not been a
full life, nor was it a full death, but it was a real loss. Maybe my mizuko will come back to me more fully another time, or maybe it will find someone else. Surprisingly, even that thought was solace.

I wasn't exactly at peace as I left the temple -- grief is not so simply dispensed with -- but I felt a little easier. I had done something to commemorate this event; I'd said goodbye. I'm grateful to have had that opportunity. As I was walking home, the sky deepened from peach to salmon to lavender, and motorists flipped on their headlights. The bittersweet smell of fish grilled with soy sauce permeated the air. I breathed it in deeply and felt a little lighter. I decided to try a new route through the unnamed back streets, not sure of the direction, but trusting that eventually I would find a way home.

Photo: An offering to Jizo, who watches over miscarried fetuses.; Zozo-ji is a popular temple for performing Jizo rituals. (Photographs by Tony Law)
Miscarriage was sandwiched somewhere between a bad haircut and chronic nosebleeds. Obviously Iâ€™m exaggerating, but having only four of my eight pregnancies produce a live baby, I bristle at the flippant attitude towards miscarriage. (And while Iâ€™m on one, can we stop attempting to rank suffering? At least if someone dies you get a socially acceptable mourning period. With a miscarriage, you are mourning someone you never saw, and often people didnâ€™t even know you were pregnant.)