

Kozo Hattori:  
A Brief and Long Friendship, in Glimpses

1.

On Sunday afternoon, February 21, 2021, my husband, David, and I drove from Berkeley to Livermore, California, to see my dear friend Kozo. This visit was to be brief. It was to say goodbye.

“I’ve never known you to feel so connected to someone,” David said, dropping me off. “I mean, someone you’ve never met before.”

It felt strange to me, too—that this last time with Kozo would also be my first.

2.

*Hattori* was engraved on the brass door knocker. This was the home of Kozo’s younger brother, Doug, and his wife, Stacy, where Kozo had moved some six weeks earlier, to receive more support, more rest. A respite for his deeper healing to occur.

When Kozo had finally settled in, he texted me: I am now in Livermore.

*Liver*, I reflected, as in, *someone who lives*. I texted: You’re a liver more!

A few weeks later, Kozo’s condition further diminished. He emailed me that his weight was plummeting. 144. 135. 129. I gently suggested he stop weighing himself.

The following week: It appears I moved here not to heal, but to prepare to die.

3.

Doug and two burly dogs greeted me, the trio escorting me down the hall, then to the right. In Kozo’s room eight friends were gathered around him, socially distanced in a half-circle and masked. I’d met many of them online, like Kozo, through a community called ServiceSpace and began placing virtual names with physical bodies. There were many words. Much laughter. Some tears. A vase of red tulips. Sports jerseys framed on the wall. An oxygen tank. A yellow floral comforter. A dartboard. All of it reverent, a sanctuary, the opposite of fluffy—plain ordinary.

“I wish you could see what I see,” Kozo remarked. “You all look like angels.”

I would’ve forgotten that Kozo and I had never met in the flesh had he not blurted out with an unexpected force, “You’re tall, Cynthia!”

I smiled. “I told you I was tall.”

4.

*May 2020.* Kozo had been bedridden for seven days with an acute respiratory illness. My dear friend and mentor Michael Lerner asked if I might offer a medical consultation for him. Kozo and I had crossed paths a couple of months earlier when I was a guest on Awakin Calls (a podcast series of ServiceSpace), where Kozo was the host. While Kozo had gleaned a lot of details about my life from the conversation, I knew very little about him. And because it was conducted by phone, I didn't even know what he looked like.

Michael gave me the pertinent medical background: this was Kozo's second Covid scare within a couple of months. Although his tests, thankfully, were negative for the SARS-CoV-2 virus, his overall system was weakened by a recurrence of colon cancer. Whatever this was, it didn't seem to be letting up.

"Of course," I said. "Is there anything else that's useful for me to know?"

Michael told me Kozo had bad prior experiences with doctors and conventional therapies, and was therefore highly skeptical of them. If it hadn't been Michael requesting this, I would've asked, "Are you sure I'm a good fit for him?" Instead, I went on trust.

My clinical judgment was that Kozo had a bacterial infection and needed a course of antibiotics. "I haven't taken antibiotics in over 20 years," he said. So I gave him a brief explanation, and he accepted the prescription along with a cocktail of immune-boosting vitamins and antioxidants. "I trust Michael with my life," he said, wrapping up the call. "*For some reason, I trust you, too.*"

(We couldn't have known that the very next day, after just the first dose, he'd be back on his feet.)

5.

*For some reason.* This phrase captures my friendship with Kozo. Though we tried, neither he nor I could explain the whys.

Why I felt called to offer weekly medical support after his acute respiratory illness resolved, so long as it served him, spring, summer, fall, winter, 'til January something, when he was too weak to talk or text.

Why I accessed the intuitive realm during our consultations instead of beforehand, like I did with all my other patients, the latter seeming too unscientific or downright weird.

Why he gave me a sudden recommendation for a very esoteric book, *Anna: Grandmother of Jesus*, and why I not only read it, but used it as a field guide for deepening in wisdom and healing traditions.

Why he plunged into qigong, a moving meditation I'd practiced for several years and recommended to him, even though he had many other contemplative practices, as well as many

prior introductions to qigong, the father of his former wife having been a master of sorts and showing him firsthand a physical illumination of qi energy.

Why I knew he would receive my sentiments in the spirit in which they were offered, at the level of the soul, like sister to beloved brother, sentiments society might distort or judge or misuse.

Perhaps Kozo and I communicated with an authenticity and vulnerability many deemed risky. We seemed to implicitly agree that it was risky *not* to. Come to think of it, we related in a manner most often reserved for deathbeds.

From time to time, when feeling moved, I would text: I love you, Kozo.

To a man I knew very little about.

6.

Kozo had tried many times in the past to share various details of his life. “There are a lot of stories you don’t know,” he said, as though I should know certain things to judge him in earnest.

He’d written blogs about his personal journey. He’d written a book, too. I chose not to read them. At least not then (and I still haven’t). I could sense the places he’d been hardened and broken and softened again, as they mirrored many of my own. The less I knew *about* him, the more I felt I could truly see him.

Once, when he apologized for what his Japanese ancestors did to my Chinese ancestors, I saw the load he was needlessly carrying. One of the lessons I’d learned on my healing journey was how unconditional love doesn’t mean forgiving again and again and again. It means seeing the other as beyond the need to forgive. I shared this with him and hoped he would lighten his load. By a million-fold.

“For some reason,” he said, “you seem to see me.”

*For some reason*, I realized, allowed us to embrace uncertainty, open to wonder, and also rest in a curious certainty.

7.

Now as I beheld his physical form, his hair looked blacker and fuller, eyes more prominent. When he lowered his mask to speak more clearly, his teeth looked large and long, disproportionate to his other features. His head was propped up against the hospital bed, a low-level buzzing from the air mattress pump.

“I’ve not eaten in six days,” he said to the group. Then turning toward me, reporting in with a hint of humor, “Doctor, did you hear that? I’ve not eaten or had much to drink for six days!”

8.

45 minutes had passed. Kozo was tired. We arranged ourselves around his bed, at once distanced and connected. *Snap*. Again, *snap*. Several group photos.

I asked if I might snap a quick selfie with Kozo. He motioned for me to come closer. I kneeled at his bedside. But after the photo, my thighs stubbornly wouldn't move, urging me to stay put. I don't know which came first—my saying "I used the alcohol sanitizer before I came in," or Kozo simply moving his hand toward mine—but we held hands, all four, one stacked upon another: his, mine, his, mine.

We exchanged words that will remain unrecorded.

Eight angels in the room bore silent witness.

After the sparing words altogether ceased, I gazed into his eyes. His pupils were pinpoint from the pain medications. The membranes lacked moisture. The whites of his eyes reflected his deep inner peace, granting me permission to draw my vision beyond what was in front of me into the expansive cosmos itself.

9.

Last fall, I read *The Order of Time*, by physicist Carlo Rovelli.

"We inhabit time as fish live in water," he wrote. "Our being is being in time.... The universe unfolds into the future, dragged by time, and exists according to the order of time."

But time, I learned, only seems this way. From what we can directly or indirectly measure, there may be no single time. Rather, vast multitudes of it. What's more, time doesn't appear to have direction. The difference between past and future doesn't exist in the time-space information structures of the universe. While things indeed happen, the "flow" of time is illusory, similar to how the sun seems to our limited perceptions to rise and set every day. Reality is much more grand, dynamic, and circular.

"I don't know how it works," I said to Kozo, "but if there is a next time, or a parallel time, I hope we meet up more than once."

Does reality in fact split into an infinite number of possibilities? Do alternate worlds play out in parallel? Perhaps this was why a singular visit with Kozo stood still and touched infinity—because there is no definitive first or last time.

10.

Kozo, may you know mercy and abundance beyond your wildest imagination. I miss you.