

The Eco Duo

Written by Chen Shi-hui
Thursday, 28 April 2011 15:49



Sitting across from 52-year-old Qu Su-min (屈素敏), I stretched my neck to get a closer look at her sightless eyes. Then I closed my eyes and tried to mimic what she was doing—folding newspapers. "How hard could it be?" I thought, as I began to fumble with the papers.

As it happens, folding newspapers without the benefit of sight turned out to be much more difficult than I had imagined. Try as I might, I couldn't fold the newspapers into the same neat, tidy piles that Qu had accomplished. My piles of newspapers always looked more crumpled than folded, a far cry from her perfectly aligned and neatly piled stacks.

Qu said that other volunteers at the recycling station had taught her how to fold newspapers, take cassette tapes apart, and do other tasks. She demonstrated for me just how adept she is at tasks that seem impossible for someone without the benefit of sight. For example, she showed me how she sorted bottles by type. She picked up an empty beer bottle and moved her fingers over it, feeling the cap, the body, the label, and the bottom. Then she rendered her verdict: "This is a Taiwan Beer bottle; it has a bigger label." She repeated the same procedure with a few more bottles and explained her judgments by turns: "This one has a rounder bottom, so it's a Tsingtao Beer bottle; this one, with a longer shape, is a Kirin Ichiban bottle; and the rounder curvature of this one indicates a..."—she paused for effect—"Heineken." I was amazed when she was done—she was right each time.

Though Qu does not drink beer, she can beat heavy drinkers at their own game when naming a bottle. She displayed a broad smile at the conclusion of her demonstration. Her obvious happiness and contentedness made it hard to imagine that until she began volunteering at the recycling station eight years ago, she had been living under thick clouds that made her world even darker.



Doing recycling has transformed Qu from a deeply depressed person to one who has rediscovered her worth. "In my life there are numerous people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. But where recycling is concerned, I must first thank Wu Xiu-yu [吴秀玉]," Qu said, gesturing at the petite woman sitting beside her. "She helped me break out of my self-imposed isolation at home, and she introduced me to the world of recycling."

Qu is a Korean of Chinese descent. She used to live in Incheon, Korea, but now is a resident of Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan. A high fever during childhood, nearly fatal, severely damaged her optic nerves. At first, though her eyesight was impaired, she could still make out shapes and colors. She could still see that the sky was blue, the grass green, and that flowers were colorful. She could distinguish between insects, fish, and birds. But gradually the images became more and more blurred, the colors darker and darker. She was completely blind by the time she was 27 years old.

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The plunge into total blindness devastated her. "All I wanted to do was die," Qu said, her smile instantly replaced by a look of sadness. "The hurt was just beyond description." She repeated this statement almost ten times. Compared with those who are born blind and who do not know what they are missing, Qu's loss had been much harder to swallow. She had seen the beauty of the world before it had been taken from her forever. The terrible loss gnawed at her unceasingly and mercilessly.

As her sight went, so did her ability to do most everyday things. "The toilet in my home in Incheon was in the traditional Asian style, where one squatted over an opening in the floor instead of sitting on a toilet seat," Qu said. "That fixture presented a challenge for me—I couldn't see it, and so I could easily step into it." This was but one example of the inconvenience her blindness brought her. She had to learn from scratch to do just about everything else, too. Tasks as mundane as eating, drinking, or getting dressed suddenly became complicated and frustrating.

Qu had always prided herself on her self-reliance, but now she had to depend on others for almost every need. Her frustration and loss of self-esteem deepened her depression and brought her to the brink of collapse. Feeling intensely for her dear daughter's loss, her mother took her to doctors for treatment, only to be disappointed over and over again when they told her there was nothing to be done.

In 1990, when Qu was 31 years old, a relative introduced her to a man in Taiwan, a veteran 34 years her senior, who later became her husband. Though he was so much older, he cherished her. Qu gave birth to their only child two years later.

On the surface, Qu seemed an adequate mother and wife. She was able to cook for the family, do the laundry, and tend to her son's needs. But deep down, she bore a heavy cross. The sad realization that she would never see her son weighed down on her. "I love my son very much," Qu observed. "My greatest desire was to look at him, but when I faced the fact that my hope was next to impossible, I became even more depressed than ever before."

As her son grew, she became concerned that being seen with him in public would cause him to become a laughingstock among his peers. To protect his self-esteem, she kept herself secluded in her house. Her home became her prison.

"Before I met Xiu-yu, I often thought that it was just as well that I lived on the sixth floor," Qu said. When I asked her why, her answer caught me completely by surprise: "So I could just jump out the window and end all my agony."

Fortunately, as the saying goes, "Heaven will always leave a door open." Just around that time, when Qu was at her lowest, she met Wu Xiu-yu.

Neighbors and friends

Qu and Wu met as neighbors; they both lived in Zuoying, Kaohsiung, in the largest housing

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community for naval personnel in southern Taiwan. They had seen each other around long before they officially met.



"I thought Su-min was stuck-up, because she rarely responded to me when I said 'hi' to her," Wu said. "Only later did I realize that she couldn't see."

Likewise, Qu did not initially think highly of Wu. Qu thought she wasn't a good mother because she never stayed at the poolside to accompany her child during swimming lessons. When the two finally got to know each other better, Qu, a straight talker, asked Wu the reason. In lieu of an answer, Wu took Qu's hand and guided it to touch her legs and back. Qu then realized that Wu's legs were atrophied and her back severely hunched—and that was why Wu never opted to stay by the pool. It was then that they began to empathize with each other.

Typical of the people in her hometown region, Qu wasn't hesitant to speak her mind. Wu, on the other hand, was more reserved. Not until Qu had talked and lightened up their conversation did Wu begin to tell her story.

Wu said that she, of the same age as Qu, was born in 1959, a time when Taiwan was mired in a polio epidemic. Wu was infected when she was about two years old. The disease left her body deformed and crippled. She dreaded school because her schoolmates called her names. They even threw stones at her. Because of that, and also because commuting was not easy for her, she refused to continue school after she had graduated from elementary school. "Only recently did I learn that I was a victim of what is now called campus bullying," she said, referring to some recent high-profile cases of bullying in schools.

As she talked about her past, she occasionally broke off and alerted Qu, who was folding and piling up newspapers, to some details that a blind person could miss. It would have been much easier for Wu to talk to me in Taiwanese, her mother tongue, but she insisted on using Mandarin to ensure that Qu could understand her.

There is a song by Xiao Huang-qi (萧黄琪), a sight-impaired Taiwanese singer, called "You Are My Eyes," that might capture something of how Qu relies on Wu:

You are my eyes, helping me perceive the changing seasons.
You are my eyes, taking me in and out of crowds.
You are my eyes, reading me seas of books.
Because you are my eyes,
I see the world right in front of my eyes.

Wu may not read Qu seas of books, and she may not help her perceive the beauty of the

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changing seasons, but she does lead her through crowds and open her world by taking her to do recycling, which she still does three days a week.

"Su-min had no idea what recycling was when I first invited her to participate," Wu said. "She also had a great sense of insecurity due to her lack of sight. She wasn't too keen on going at first." But Wu kept encouraging her, and curiosity and a drive to learn new things helped Qu to take the first step forward. She finally agreed to give recycling a try.

It is not particularly easy for either of them to move around by herself, but together they get around better. Wu leads the way, and Qu helps to steady her.

The journey

One morning, like most Monday, Thursday, and Friday mornings, Qu answered a phone call—it was Wu calling to let Qu know she was waiting for her downstairs. Qu then groped her way from the sofa out through her front door and took the elevator down to the first floor. A few moments later, when she emerged from the door of the apartment building, Wu began calling out directions, telling her how to proceed to her scooter: "Step forward... More... Stop! Back up a little... Now you can get on." When Qu had mounted the scooter, Wu started moving—and then began a more challenging part of their journey.



Advancing at less than 20 miles per hour, Wu kept the scooter near the edge of the road to stay out of the way of other motorists. Still, some of the drivers passing the duo honked their horns impatiently. The piercing din kept the two on edge most of the way. They were relieved when they finally reached the Tzu Chi recycling station on Nanping Road.

Wu gently directed Qu to get off before she pushed herself off the four-wheeled vehicle. It took the two of them a little while to dismount. Then Wu, leaning on her crutch, took Qu's arm for added support as they walked forward together. Under Wu's guidance, the pair inched forward until they came to their positions among small mountains of discarded items in the recycling station. It wasn't until they were settled comfortably in their seats that they were finally able to relax.

"You ought to write more about the two of them. They are truly admirable," said one of the volunteers nearby. Another volunteer added, "It's such a hassle for them to get around, but they still come here three times a week. Only those who are really devoted can do that." The volunteers at the recycling station are inspired by the duo's example.

Wu and Qu feel that they have received more than they have given through doing recycling. "The motions of what we do here are repetitive," they admitted. "But doing the same thing over and over again has the same effect as washing and scrubbing—it washes away our worries and helps us think with clarity."

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To Qu, doing recycling has opened a new door on life. It has awakened her optimistic nature and has given her courage to try new things. For example, two years ago she met Chen Xiu-yu (陈修宇), a well-known teacher of guzheng, a Chinese plucked zither. Chen has been giving Qu free music lessons, something Qu would not have dared try in the past. Qu's animated personality and willingness to share have also made her a welcome speaker; she is now often invited to share her journey out of her previous predicaments and to help lift people out of their mental traps.

Wu has found her life path as well. Though she needs to do some light assembly work at home to supplement her family income, she is not concerned with her finances. "Cultivating the field of blessing is more important than seeking worldly fortune. I've got a very long way to go on this recycling path yet," she said.

Separately Wu and Qu are two disadvantaged people facing many challenges, but together their synergy has catapulted them over their hurdles and made them more sure-footed and confident in life.

Translated by Tang Yau-yang
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