
FRIENDSHIP IN TROUBLED TIMES: THE FRIENDSHIP OF JAN RUFF-O'HERNE

苦难中的友谊： 扬·鲁夫-奥赫恩的友谊

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ABSTRACT

Friendship is a key relationship in many cultures. (Lu et al, 2020) In this paper, I would like to present a single example of friendship in dire circumstances. The friendship described here occurred during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) when a group of young women were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military. The description here is part of a wider study of the spirituality of Jeanne Alida "Jan" Ruff-O'Herne, one of those young women. In the first part of the paper, I will provide a brief outline of her life, while the second part will provide some reflections on friendship, which I have drawn from her experience.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE OF JAN RUFF-O'HERNE

Jan Ruff O'Herne's life may be divided into four phases: she was born on 18 January 1923 and led a happy life as a child growing up in colonial privilege in Java. She lived on a sugar-factory plantation, near Semarang in central Java. Jan had a great capacity for friendship, and she recalls that at school she had "splendid teachers and I made wonderful friends – friendships which have lasted to this day." (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, 29)

Then, during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies from early 1942 to August 1945, Jan's life entered its second phase. At first, life was difficult enough with harsh conditions in an internment camp. The Ambarawa camp was not far from her home area. From 26 February 1944 the direst part of her life came with her selection by Japanese officials for work as a sexual slave in a military brothel. This lasted about three months, and then she was transported to another internment camp.

The third phase of her life was marked by a happy marriage in England in 1946, to a British soldier whom she had met in Java. Later followed the birth of her children, and their emigration to Australia in 1960. Her peace was marred by an injury to her husband, causing brain damage, and Jan nursed him for many years until his death. During this time, she remained silent for fifty years about her treatment by the Japanese.

Then, Jan became the first European "comfort woman" to speak out in support of Asian "comfort women" at an international public hearing in Tokyo in 1992. At an age where many people are already retired, she travelled the world

to tell her story, to advocate on behalf of Asian "comfort women", to seek a genuine apology from the Japanese government, and to advocate against rape in war. (Tanaka, 2019) She was active almost to her death on 19 August 2019.

When military personnel began to arrive, Jan led the girls again in prayer. Then one by one they were dragged to their first experience of rape. "We shared our fear, our pain and our humiliation. Sometimes we tried to be young again and laugh a little, and talk about pre-war days. We needed each other desperately and so a bond of friendship and love formed between us, giving us tremendous support."

FRIENDSHIP IN A DARK PLACE

This paper is concerned only with her time as a sexual slave in the Japanese military brothel, and her friendship with the other women and girls (Jan calls them "girls") who had been forced into slavery.

The seven girls were transported to the brothel, and each given a room. Each had only a few possessions in a single bag. For Jan, these included her books of prayer. The group ranged from 17 to 22 years of age. "Almost instantly we became soul mates. We realised that we would have to support each other from now on." Unable to sleep they "ended up in the one big double bed in my bedroom. We huddled together in fear,

too scared and shocked to talk. We just needed each other's company, desperately hoping that we would be safe if we stayed together." (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, 82-83). Jan led them in prayer, and they prayed Psalm 31 and other prayers.

When military personnel began to arrive, Jan led the girls again in prayer. Then one by one they were dragged to their first experience of rape. "At the end of that first, horrific opening night, in the early hours of the morning, seven frightened, exhausted girls huddled together to cry over lost virginity and give each other comfort and strength.... We were so helpless." (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, 95) "We shared our fear, our pain and our humiliation. Sometimes we tried to be young again and laugh a little, and talk about pre-war days. We needed each other desperately and so a bond of friendship and love formed between us, giving us tremendous support. The girls turned to me for spiritual strength and each day I led them in prayer." (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, 98) When one of the girls attempted suicide, "We did not really talk about the incident, or ask her too many questions. We just gave her more of our support and love." (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, 102).

When Jan herself feared pregnancy and disease, she could confide in the other girls. "I told the other girls of my fear. I could see by their faces that they were as shocked as I was. Offering me their strength and their love, the girls gave me an opportunity to talk. This was what I needed most." (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, 111)

Jan still had a handkerchief and got each of the girls to write their name on it, and the date 26 February 1944, the date they had been taken from the camp. Later Jan embroidered over the writing, each name in a different colour. She kept

this handkerchief for fifty years. "Later in life, the handkerchief became almost sacred to me. There were times when I would take it out from wherever I had hidden it, and I would hold it close against my cheeks and cry because of what it stood for." (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, 99) In the final phase of her life, she presented the handkerchief to the museum of the Australian War Memorial. (anon, undated) Jan also drew pictures of all the girls. "I wanted to remember these girls for always....The friendship and bond between us was a great treasure." (Ruff-O'Herne, 2008, 115)

In 1993, when the documentary film of her story was being made, Jan returned to the Netherlands and met some of the girls. Meeting them after fifty years encouraged Jan to continue her campaign for the protection of women in war.

In the second part of the paper, I put before you six reflections on friendship, which are exemplified by the experience of Jan Ruff-O'Herne and the girls. This is not an exercise in theory. Rather, the example of one individual might give us more insight into friendship than a textbook. An individual story, even though partial and unsystematic, can speak to the heart.

REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP: MUTUAL NEED AND SUPPORT

Readers of the *Journal of the Macau Ricci Institute* will be aware of the famous work *On Friendship* by Matteo Ricci. (Billings, 2009) The third of Ricci's maxims is "Mutual need and mutual support are the reasons to make friends". Jan Ruff-O'Herne indeed experienced mutual need and mutual support. But Ricci, in maxims 30 and 96 emphasises choosing friends through an ambition of shared virtue. In the case of Jan Ruff-

O’Herne, the girls did not have an opportunity to select each other on the basis of some virtue, because they were thrown together in slavery. Yet their friendship was real, and lasting. Their friendship indeed is an example of Ricci’s maxim 76: “A friend is the riches of the poor, the strength of the weak, and the medicine of the ill.”

Ricci provides another maxim 17 “Only the person to whom one can completely divulge and express one’s heart can become the truest of true friends.” We should not expect that the friendship of the girls was a solution to their terrible situation. One feature of Jan’s story is that the girls were able to be open with one another, and express their deep feelings. Yet we should note that they could not anticipate that one of them would attempt suicide. Some of them, at least, could not express their deepest needs. Their friendship could not solve every problem.

REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP: BENEVOLENCE

Comparing the writings of Confucius (Kongzi) and Aristotle on friendship, Professor He Yanguo (He, 2007) suggests that Confucius’ views of friendship can be understood through two concepts: xin 信 and joy 乐. For Confucius, friendship brings joy to human life as benevolence 人道. In contrast to the abuse inflicted by their Japanese captors, the girls brought to each other the treasure of goodness, of benevolence. That experience of benevolence acted as a counterweight to the inhumanity from which they suffered.

In 2014, at 91 years of age, Jan wrote a special introduction to the Chinese edition of her autobiography. Jan wrote how she had met so-called “comfort woman” Wan Aihua 万爱

花 from China, and women from Korea and the Philippines. Jan identified with these women, became friends with them, and linked her own experience with their experiences suffered in China, referring specifically to the “Rape of Nanjing”. Jan wrote of her “unlimited compassion” for these women and their families. In a sense, the benevolence which Jan and the other girls brought to each other in Semarang became a much wider compassion. (Ruff-O’Herne, 2015)

REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP: PRAYER

In the camp at Ambawara, Jan had already participated in prayer and encouraged others to pray. Fifty years later she wrote: “It is amazing the calming effect that prayer can have. Communal prayer was our great source of strength. Each evening we met in small groups and prayed together.” (Ruff-O’Herne, 2008, 51)

In the military brothel, each of the girls contributed something special to the relationship: for Jan, it was her capacity to lead the others in prayer. Although only Jan and one other girl were Catholic (the others were from Protestant backgrounds) Jan’s familiarity with prayer, her knowledge of scripture, and her willingness to lead enabled her to make this contribution.

REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP: ELITES AND THE POOR

Writing about friendships can sometimes focus on elites, such as literati or famous individuals. For example, Ricci’s work *On Friendship* was composed for an educated elite. (Hosne, 2014) The experience of Jan Ruff-O’Herne reminds us that the friendships of the poor deserve at least as much attention.

From positions of colonial privilege, the girls gradually lost all status. Their possessions were few, and always at the permission of the guards. Their own bodies were not their own, as they were enslaved and abused by continual rape. The girls had nothing, and no future ahead of them. Yet it was precisely in this destitution that they found friendship. True friendship is not just for princes and philosophers: for the poorest of the poor, friendship can still be a rich experience, perhaps the only rich experience that they can have.

REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP: UTILITY

Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of friendship: of utility, of pleasure, and of virtue. Perhaps some observers would think that a friendship of utility is less valuable than those of virtue (Alpern, 1983). The girls' example of friendship can help us to see the wonderful value of a friendship of mutual need and mutual support. The girls were not engaged in an analysis of virtue. Theirs was a friendship of utility, when they were thrown together in their need. We should not dismiss such friendships as less valuable on account of their origins in utility.

REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP: SYMBOLS

Finally, we can note the symbolism of the embroidered handkerchief, which became almost a sacred object to Jan. Symbols abound in human relationships – perhaps the best known is the symbol of wedding rings. In a friendship such a symbol need not be externally precious or expensive: it is given its high value simply by the friends for whom it is a symbol.

During her fifty years of silence, Jan hid the handkerchief from her children. She did not wish them to see it, because seeing it might lead to questions. The symbol need not be known to others – it need only be known among the friends. *The Economist* newspaper headed its obituary for Jan, “Cries from a handkerchief”. (Economist, 2019)

In the case of Jan Ruff-O’Herne, the girls did not have an opportunity to select each other on the basis of some virtue, because they were thrown together in slavery. Yet their friendship was real, and lasting. Their friendship indeed is an example of Ricci’s maxim 76: “A friend is the riches of the poor, the strength of the weak, and the medicine of the ill.”

CONCLUSION

The life of Jan Ruff-O’Herne is well known at one level. Her activity as an advocate for the so-called “comfort women” and her advocacy against rape in war, has given her an international standing. She was honoured by the Dutch and Australian governments with high awards, and by her church community. But beyond that level, the life and spirituality of this remarkable woman deserves more detailed study. I hope that this initial examination of her friendship with the other girls in slavery can provide a beginning for such detailed study of her life and spirituality.

Friendship is a remarkable relationship, valued in all cultures. The resilience of the young women (Ruff-O’Herne’s “girls”) who were able to build and maintain a friendship even in the most difficult time of life, is worthy of reflection. Friendship is open to all: the educated and the illiterate, the rich and the poor, believers and non-believers. Friendship may have its own symbols, known only to the participants. The friendship of Jan Ruff-O’Herne with the other young women condemned to sexual slavery is a moving example of how valuable friendship can be.

SOURCES:

Sources for this study include the third edition of the book written by Jan Ruff-O’Herne, describing her experiences (Ruff-O’Herne, 2008), and a film based on the first edition of the book (Lander, et al, 1994), a presentation by Jan Ruff-O’Herne at the International Eucharistic Congress in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2004 (Ruff-O’Herne 2004), an interview on *Talking Heads* (Thompson, 2009), and an interview on *Australian Story* (Bowden, 2012). On her death, many obituaries were published. One by Tanaka is included here, (Tanaka, 2019), and another by *The Economist* magazine (*Economist*, 2019).

This study of the spirituality of Jan Ruff-O’Herne is ongoing, and I expect other sources to become available.



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