

Grandma Erma's last year of life documented

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Grandma Erma's last year of life documented by Japanese photographer in book

By Sherry Stripling

Seattle Times staff reporter

VAUGHN, Pierce County — In her mid 80s, Erma Brokaw was recovering from a near-fatal heart attack and wondering why she was still here when two kindred spirits her grandsons dragged home gave her reason to linger.

The first, an orange and white cat, was not entirely welcomed. Brokaw respected animals but didn't care for pets. Star Kitty proved her match, offering an aloof shoulder but accepting Brokaw's rules until both came to depend on one another's affection.

The second curious soul came to this family's eclectic house on Case Inlet with her own boundary issues. Atsuko Otsuka, a photojournalist from Japan, was nursing wounds as a documentary photographer. She knew there was an audience for end-of-life stories but she, and some critics, felt she'd failed in a project following a friend through death. When her friend was in pain, Otsuka's heart got in the way, blocking her ability to take the hard photos.

Don't give up your profession, said Brokaw, who'd just learned she

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had terminal cancer. Follow me in my last year, and I'll show you that your heart is your greatest asset.

"I don't know why," Otsuka, 43, says, "but we both needed each other at that moment in her life."

The result is a children's book, "Goodbye, Grandma Erma," a sweet and moving story on how to die without fear.

Star Kitty provides narration; Otsuka, the grab-your-handkerchief photos; and waning Grandma Erma, who died in 1998, the dignified lessons on saying goodbye. The book is in its seventh printing in Japan and has been translated into Korean and Chinese. Otsuka would like to see it printed in English and so would the crew at Kinokuniya Bookstore, located in Uwajimaya Village in Chinatown International District, which makes frequent orders for the book.

The whole thing was baffling at first to Pat Heaven, the daughter with whom Brokaw lived in a mammoth half-done house.

Why would anyone in Japan — especially children — care about an elderly, Caucasian woman's death? And why would her mother, who was intensely private and disliked being photographed, put this difficult time of her life on display?

But there were lessons people could learn and Brokaw, a former educator and student of science, believed our purpose on Earth is to learn and improve. She knew from Otsuka that death is largely hidden in Japan and therefore scary to new generations of parents and children who've lost the rural experience of helping elders die at home.

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"This is what I was meant to do," Brokaw told her daughter. Now she knew why she survived the heart attack. It was so she could share her lessons in dying with Otsuka.

"I got out of their lives a lot," said Heaven, "because they had business to do, things to talk about."

'Inviting them in'

In one way, Brokaw set the lure for both Otsuka and Star Kitty very early in her life. Growing up, she'd invite people to stay for a year or more. Her five daughters eventually did the same.

"You will meet your family in unrelated people as well as genetic relatives," Heaven recalls as one of mother's lessons. "It is important for the nuclear family to keep growing by finding other kindred spirits and inviting them in."

Heaven and her husband, Ed Taylor, built their cedar and river-rock house on Key Peninsula with that in mind. At first, it was going to be 3,000 feet — 1,000 for each of them and Grandma — but an inspired architect grew it to 6,000, Heaven says. Building inside out from an old cabin for 14 years, it is now a combination of beautifully finished pine "compartments," as Otsuka calls them, and plywood and plastic.

Heaven's son, Brian, was staying at the house and volunteering with the prison service dog-partnership program in nearby Purdy in 1996 when he met Otsuka, who later needed a place to stay while she

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documented the pet program for a book.

Even if she hadn't been a kindred spirit, the family would have kept her because she pulled her own weight, laughed at their jokes and made delicious Japanese food.

"We can be bought," Heaven says.

Cats might not have been what Brokaw had in mind by kindred spirits, but her grandson, Alan, gave her Star Kitty anyway, confident connections would be made.

Run from pain?

Returning from visits to Japan, Otsuka worried that she would struggle with the same boundary issues with Grandma Erma that she had with her friend's death. How could she keep from getting too sad? If Brokaw was in pain, wouldn't Otsuka set down her camera and run to her side?

But Brokaw's lessons on life and dying took precedence. As the student, Otsuka's first priority was to get as close to Grandma Erma as possible to learn her ways. Soon, she and Heaven were sharing caretaking duties 50-50, including staying up all night.

"When she was in pain, I didn't think of taking pictures," Otsuka said. "I was there as her granddaughter."

But when the photos came out well, Otsuka saw there were no boundaries. Her role had been as a bridge across which Grandma

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Erma could touch her audience.

If Otsuka pulled back or hesitated in her photography, it doesn't show.

Brokaw's strong will and precision, her warmth and love, come through in Otsuka's photos, as Grandma Erma goes from hardy gardener to a wisp with her nose taped shut to stop the blood loss on her last day.

Photography is a sophisticated art in Japan, where children may be accustomed to such powerful images. But to soften the message, Otsuka decided to let Star Kitty tell the story.

"I wanted an animal as a narrator so that children can relate to the story better," she said, hinting that she misses her own cats nearly as much as her husband when she's away. "I think cats can be close to humans in a way which is different from dogs. Cats are more equal."

In commentary appropriate for a no-nonsense cat, Star Kitty quotes Grandma Erma as she prepares for death.

" 'Well, it appears that I would have one more year left,' " Brokaw says after a visit to the doctor's office. " 'I should start doing things before my time is over.' "

Peace in preparation

Otsuka hoped to show the peace that comes from conscious preparation for death.

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With her doctor's encouragement, Brokaw and her daughters researched her disease, multiple myeloma, cancer of the blood. Later, Brokaw took even more control, choosing when to end treatment and signing papers declining measures to save her life. She used her last months to say good-bye, leave messages of love and forgiveness, and even plan a final bash for after she was gone.

Such control is not common in Japan, says Otsuka.

With grown children too restricted by space and time to care for their elderly parents, there are long waiting lists for nursing homes. Many doctors still do not tell people they are dying on the family's belief that it would be an affront to dignity.

"There are many important lessons here," Otsuka said. "This family's way of caring for grandmother; how they fully respected Grandma's wishes. They wanted her to stay, but they never tried to keep her from leaving."

Many adults who have parents or partners with terminal illnesses are buying "Goodbye, Grandma Erma" for themselves, says Otsuka. Letters to her publisher show that readers find the book comforting, not sad.

The book has won three awards, including being named best children's book of the year for Japan by two publishers, and a prestigious annual award by a village that gives out vegetables as its prize.

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Otsuka, who has photographed fleeing Kurdish refugees and been caught in gunfire in Tiananmen Square, is currently in Miami documenting the work of child-life specialists who ease fears and keep life full for children who are hospitalized.

After a brief visit here this month, she'll return to Vaughn this summer to write an adult version of "Goodbye, Grandma Erma."

'Fabric of my life'

Growing up, Brokaw's five daughters were convinced their strong-willed mother had the power to "explode" clouds. She always told them not to worry about her dying because she would choose the time of her natural death.

"Grandma Erma said, 'I've lived long enough. When the time comes, I would like to go peacefully.' It was her decision to stop trying for a cure for her disease. She signed a very important paper for the medical people, saying that she did not want to be revived in case of emergency. Even if she became unconscious, she did not want any medical intervention." — Star Kitty

True to her lifelong prediction, Brokaw picked when she would die from her cancer. She wrote the date months in advance on a piece of paper that she hid, then willed herself to stay alive to finish the work with Otsuka.

"The hospice workers said they'd heard of it, but had never seen it before," Heaven said.

When the date came, Brokaw woke up cheerfully and said "this is the day." She was disappointed to find she was off by 24 hours, but there was no calendar nearby, Heaven said.

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Making the difficult decisions was a great act of love for the family, Otsuka says of Brokaw. It was also comforting for the dying woman herself. Star Kitty may put it best when he reports that Grandma described her last months as her happiest.

" 'All of the pieces have finally come together in my life, and I can see the whole fabric of my life,' " he quotes Brokaw as saying. " 'I can understand why things happened, and I can forgive people in my past.' "

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