

Joy Formula

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Prologue

I have no memory of standing on my own legs. At the age of two, I got polio and could not walk anymore. I crawled on the ground by sitting on a vinyl pack of fertilizer and pulling it with one hand and pushing the ground with the other. People thought that I would be a beggar on the street, but God had a different plan.

Have you ever gazed at the stars and the moon in the dark night sky? As I grew up in the countryside, I used to lie on the straw mat in the front yard in the summer and fall asleep looking up at the Milky Way. I have a memory for special moons: the cold moon shining over the peach orchard at the beginning of the winter that I saw from my mother's back as we ran away from my drunken father; the gloomy moon hanging over the sky of Shinrim-dong during my freshman year of university; the large moon over the San Francisco Bay that I watched while singing hymns when I was weary during my years studying in Berkeley; the dreamy moon that I saw over the sand dunes of Rajasthan, India, while I was tired of my life. Now, the moon is smiling. Like a psalmist, I sing praises when I watch the stars and the moon.

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor (Psalm 8:3-5, NIV).

The cold and sad moon now becomes a moon showing the providence and grace of God. Outside my office window, the sky is filled with greenness and aliveness. Several years have passed since I moved here to KIAS (Korea Institute for Advanced Study) from SNU (Seoul National University) at Kwanak Mountain. Around this time, I would have been teaching Stokes' theorem, topological space, and representation theory, with my hands dirty with white chalk.

The past fifty years seem like a moment: my childhood with illness and loneliness; my youth with poverty and lostness; my university years spent astray without knowing where to go and what to do, and my Berkeley years like a desert. Before I became a professor at KAIST (Korea Advanced Institute for Science and Technology) and SNU, so many things happened. Among these stories, I cannot skip the one about God who always watched over me at every corner of my life, who made me smile when I lost my smile under the heavy weight of my life, and who clothed me with joy.

From now on, I want to tell the story about God, a topologist who encountered Him, and the joy formula that he discovered.

September 12, 2017

1

Would I Not be Starving?

There once was a child living every day expecting tomorrow to be different from today.

(Gloria Vanderbilt, *Fairy Tale*)

Lost two legs

In my childhood, as I could not walk, I was staying alone in a remote village where there was no hospital, no school, and no electricity. When my parents went to the peach orchard and my brothers and sisters went to school, I lay in the room alone. Whether I played by myself, fell asleep, or woke up alone, the silence was all around. I can still feel the quietness, as if I went through a long, dark tunnel. Even at the age of three, I had to learn what solitude was and how to deal with it.

My friends were little chickens, puppies, bees, butterflies in the spring, and the nameless flowers scattered around in the backyard. I remember the warmth of spring sunshine on my cheeks, the heat haze shimmering into the air like an ephemeral hope, the pinky-peach flowers blooming in the orchard, the yellow and purple irises, the grapevine by the well, the skylark's song soaring over the barley field, the smell of acacia in May, the swaying of cosmos flowers on the road. Oh, I still remember them vividly. Maybe that's all my memories of my childhood.

In the summer of 1968, I vomited up red tomato while toddling around in a pair of red boots. For several days, I was delirious with



Last photo of the author standing with brothers and a sister at a peach orchard in 1967

high fever, and my body was so swollen that my mother took me to a hospital in the village. The doctor's diagnosis was a cold with indigestion. After two weeks, the fever was gone, but I could not walk anymore. My mother took me to the hospital again, but it was too late.

My first memory, from the bottom of my consciousness, is of looking at the sunset while lying on my mother's knees. My mother took me to every famous hospital and acupuncturist. When I was around five or six, one of my aunts recommended a famous American doctor in Sooncheon city. With hope, my mother took me there. However, the doctor said it was too late, and nothing could be done. My mother was crying in pain and left the doctor's room with me on her back. I was crying as well, resting my head against her lean back.

Through the windows of the train back home, I could see the sun setting slowly over the mountains. I looked blankly at the dusk in the darkening sky. I instinctively felt that I would have heartache throughout my life like the sunset in the dusking sky. Even now my heart is wet with sorrow whenever I see the sunset.

Once, we went to a hospital in Seoul on my cousin's recommendation. The express bus was so crowded, the motion sickness and the stench of people made us throw up. But I was watching the crowded rest area: the old hunchbacked ladies selling chewing gum, the street vendors with wooden boxes hanging around their necks stepping into the bus at the rest stops. I knew that the journey of life would not be easy for them, nor for me.

Staying at a house where my cousin worked as a maid, my mother and I went to the hospital every day. However, the doctor said that rehabilitation was the only way, but we could not afford it. Once again, my mother returned home carrying me on her back. My parents set up a chin-up bar at the corner of the front yard so I could practice walking.

Nonsan-gun Yeonmu-up Majeon-ri; that was the address of my home. My house was built away from the village road, around the corner from the peach orchard. The only visitors we had were a woman selling fish from Ganggyeong city, and a postman.

On their every visit, my mother talked with them, worrying about me.

“Will he survive without starving? What shall he do after I die?”

People thought that I could not follow the conversation at such a young age, but those words penetrated my soul like a sword. I was deeply disturbed and had bad dreams at night. I cannot remember them exactly, but I once woke up in the middle of the night while dreaming about falling into a dark, spiral abyss. I trembled at the white shine of the moon poking through the door.

Expel him, bury him

My mother sat me under the peach trees while she worked in the field. From time to time she smiled at me, lifting her tired sun-tanned face and straightening up from a weeding hoe. I was thinking about the people and the villages over the distant mountain.

The chickens and puppies were around me. They were my only friends. Each one had a unique character: wild one, weak one, cowardly one, greedy one, wily one. I named one of chickens *kiker*, which means tall. I could understand their language. When a cock seduces a hen, he uses a low baritone tone, “Togdog tok tok, togdog tok tok.” When there is a danger like a lurking weasel nearby, they scream out “Kogog, kogog,” while straightening their necks and tails. I used to call out the chickens with the sound, “Ko ko ko” when I had a bug for them to eat. They regarded me as one of theirs. But when someone’s birthday came, my mother slaughtered one of the chickens. I could not eat it because it had been my friend.

There were tons of work to be done in the orchard and the field. Starting in early spring, the peach trees were pruned, and then strawberries were planted. During the summer, my family worked until late night picking peaches and sorting them into boxes. Though my father never went to school, he was able to count the number of boxes and their exact price. It was past midnight when my family finally loaded the peach boxes into a truck from Seoul. After the peaches, they picked the tobacco leaves, dried them in the vinyl house, and finally packed them up into small dumps.

They also grew rice, sesame, beans, potatoes, and sweet potatoes in the field.

Throughout the year, there was not a single day that they were off work.

I used to watch them, half-sleeping, working diligently under the dim oil lamp. I fell asleep to the lullaby of twinkling stars in the summer sky, smelling the smoke of the mosquito-repelling fire lit in the corner of the house.

My mother prepared the rice sake and kimchi for morning break. At lunchtime, she set a fire to make lunch for the workers in the scorching sun with her face full-flushed. To help my busy mom, I sat in front of the burning logs to keep them burning. My whole body and face were also burning in the sizzling heat of summer. The workers filled their stomachs with rice, taken from a pan with their dirty hands. Some women brought their children to lunch, but my mother was generous and fed them all.

After lunch, workers had a nap for thirty minutes. The summer's midday sun, which made people squint even by looking at it, melted down the souls of the workers covered with sweat and dirt. They slept well with their faces covered with towels and straw-hats.

At the evening sunset, when the heat was calming down, the workers returned home. My family had a late dinner after my parents, sisters and brothers, who came back from school, finished up the last of the work. Even after the whole family was in bed snoring, my mother could not rest. Only when she finished laundry, washed the dishes, and prepared the next day's meal, could she go to bed around dawn.

Yet the heavy labor had been lighter than what my father's violence inflicted. His bad drinking habit wreaked an unforgivable scar on my family. Whenever we heard my father's footsteps after he was drinking late, we felt a terrible fear. When he threw up the dinner table and started to wield his fists, my brothers and sisters ran away. My mother or sister took me on their back to run away as well. When there was no time to take me with them, I stayed there alone trembling with fear of death.

My father harassed my mom, "Expel Inkang away. Bury him

underground now!”

After the long night of war, my mom used to hug me tight on her knees.

“I must live to protect you....”

Since then, I have buried deep inside my heart the caress of my mom’s rough hands on my hair.



With brothers and a sister when the author was a baby, around 1969

We cannot admit a child like him

My childhood passed by even though it seemed halted there forever. My nine-year-old sister entered elementary school late hoping that she could go to school together with me. However, the school was too far away for her to carry me on her back, and the school did not allow it, either. When I was seven, my mother took me to school, but the principal did not accept me after he saw that I could not walk, saying, “It is impossible to accept him since his disability is so serious. We cannot admit him.”

It was my first official rejection from society.

How much I cried in my heart on the way back home on such a windy spring day!

My mother said to me, "My little baby, are you cold?"

She put my freezing feet in her pockets. What else could she say? How can I estimate the depth of despair that my mother was in when there was nothing she could do for her child except warming his feet?

In the end, I stayed home until I turned eleven. Not one to be bored, I did the chores. I packed the dried tobacco leaves, sorted beans for bean sprouts, and made the fire for meals. I learned how to read and write over the shoulders of my brothers and sisters, and I managed to learn math by reading my sister's textbook. I did my sister's math, art, and writing homework and other projects since she was busy with housework. I learned to sing while listening to Nam Jin and Nahoona, famous Korean singers, on the radio. I was able to memorize entire songs by listening to them a few times just after they came out, amazing my sisters. I recited the English words while my sister at middle school was studying English.

When I was home alone during the daytime, I read all my brothers and sisters' books: the novels of André Gide; "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry; short stories of Korean authors from 1940 to 1970. The novel "Le Petit Prince" by Saint-Exupéry, borrowed from a cousin, impressed the loneliest boy in the world a lot.

Even though I did not fully understand the novel, I dreamed about traveling from country to country like the little prince traveled from star to star. But the only world to which I was allowed to go was my shabby house, the peach orchard, and the rice field.



Six children together around 1973

2

Before the Silence of God

With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me. — I am bewildered— I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do...

There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or

that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed.

-In the letter of Charles Darwin to Asa Gray

To a rehabilitation center

In my small village, there lived a blind person. He sold chewing gum and some snacks for children from his own small room. After he groped for the money he received, he handed out the item. But the little rascals in the village very often stole many things from him. It made me gloomy. If I were selling products like him, I would just have to watch the thieves run away from me since I could not chase after them. If I cannot sell products like him, what kind of things could I do to support myself in the future?

Since my mother was not educated, she sent the children to school so they wouldn't regret missing out later.

But my father was not happy. "It is useless to send them to school. Make them work at home. To make money, one has to do business!"

He beat my mother when she gave her own hard-earned money to children for school tuition. But my second sister finally did something extraordinary. She was accepted to a women's high school in Daejeon after she ran away from home with a sack of rice. Right after she graduated, she called her brothers to Daejeon for their education. One day, she called me at home.

"I heard on a radio about a school where children like you can study. Even you can learn some job skills at a boarding school."

It was the Sungsae Rehabilitation School that my mother took me to. I clenched my teeth so I wouldn't cry when my mother and sister took me there and left. I wished I could follow them back home, despite my drunken father being there. Still, I knew what had to be done. If I didn't want to be a street beggar, I needed to study here and learn the skill of woodcarving and printing.

As she left, my mother kept looking back again and again. I tried to smile, holding back tears. I waved my hands. "Mom, I am

okay. I can do it.”

I was eleven years old.

The first fight

Even before the fear of a new environment managed to set in, sorrow and nervousness came upon me. After the departure of my mother, a guy next to me picked a fight.

“Yo, you want to fight? To see who is stronger?”

For the first time, I fought a fight without any reason. It was customary there to pick a fight to order the ranks. He gave me a bloody nose, and I became his henchman.

The food there was terrible. I had never eaten such salty kimchi in my life!

I guess that was the only way to provide a hundred students with proper food. Looking at the other children gulping down food with salty kimchi and dried radish, I couldn't finish the meal and sneaked out. I cried at the building corner. Eventually, I wrote a letter to my mother asking her to take me back home, but I could not post it. I knew that I had to endure if this was the road that I was to take. Unlike myself, there were many abandoned children. Even though they had parents, if their parents do not come anymore to pick them up, the children are considered abandoned.

“My mother will come back to pick me up,” I comforted myself.

At the entrance of the rehab center, I took a level test for reading, addition, subtraction, and multiplication. I was assigned to the third grade. I wound up placing first in the first exam, which I was not prepared for. For this reason, a classmate, Enyoung, did not like me. Enyoung was from Seoul and was always in first place before I came here. She even spewed water from her mouth on me after she drank a cup of water. It had never happened to me before.

“I hate you really,” she told me.

Even though I was beaten badly my first fight, I did better in subsequent fights. Some kids teased me by calling me “chicken girl” due to my shy character, but when I was determined, my fists were strong. Sometimes, even a fight is a good thing. It gave me

the courage to fight against things that are unjust.

I helped the other children with math and fractions after school. They did not bother me anymore. Since I was good at calculation, I also helped out in the snack shop, a small one selling chewing gum, snacks and bread. I also wrote addresses on the envelopes sent out to the students' parents.

One of my friends, Jeonwha, had shriveled hands. He wrote with a pencil pinched between his chin and shoulder. "I am going to go out looking for my parents when I become an adult," he once told me.

He was a good guy. He never showed any resentment towards his parents. I prayed when Jeonwha met his parents, they would feel the same way.

Life there was like being in an army. We worked hard in groups to clean up after meals and before bed, as dictated by the strong brothers and their fists. About six people slept in each room. Starting with the strongest brother, everyone took their favorite spot in the room. Older guys sometimes went out to drink, avoiding the superintendent. If they were caught, they were beaten practically to death. I could not understand such harsh punishment. Rules and punishments were more abundant than understanding and kindness.

There were many lice in the dorms, especially during the winter. A few times a month, my second sister took me to her place to wash me, do laundry, and cook a bean-sprout dish for me. While she could have been spending her time on self-development and leisure, she sacrificed herself and her time for her brothers. She gave up every Sunday to do my laundry and wash me.

White funeral car

There was a chamber group called "Bethesda," made up of several guys in wheelchairs who had graduated from the Sungsae Rehab Center. It consisted of violins, a cello, and a viola, and it is fairly well-known. They came to the center to teach the children for free.

I wanted to learn how to play the violin, but I could not afford

the instrument. There was an older boy who learned the violin, but he died a few years later of necrotizing fasciitis. It was a sad experience. The rehab center was a small duplicate of birth, death, and agony; broken, moaning souls ranging from ten to thirty years old, stricken with various disabilities and living in the shadow of the world. Many children were abandoned there since their parents could not take care of them.

Sometimes, churches and NGOs visited us to distribute bread and milk. Particularly around Christmas, many churches performed concerts and plays for us. After their visit, we only felt more deserted. If some organization visited us, the place was crowded with children hoping to have their portion. However, only one visit event made us more miserable. Helping and comforting someone is only possible through a long-term relationship. Even the holiest and religious act can deepen the isolation if it does not develop into a relationship. Helping others is not a temporary, shallow, emotional thing. It is only possible through a genuine sharing of one's life.

Some of us died from lingering diseases, since we were cast out and crippled. On those days, a small funeral car came to pick up the corpses. There was no one to greet them for the last time, not even their parents. On those days, I went up to the river bank and gazed into the sky all day long. The children were abandoned even by their parents because of their disabilities. Oh! How much innocent blood should be shed for this world to be pardoned? I could not suppress the anger inside of me when I looked at my dying friends, cast out by their family and society at such a young age. I felt the same anger as Camus, described in a book regarding him. "Je n'étais pas négateur du ciel, ni négateur de Dieu, mais simplement homme qui accuse le ciel de se taire, de ne pas répondre à la douleur des hommes."

A pastor came every week to deliver a sermon. Service was mandatory. I was not convinced when he said that God loves us. I had perfect scores in everything but Bible class.

Standing upright

Even though I got to know the bitterness of life at such an early age, I was not always gloomy. At the rehab center, we exchanged jokes, did silly things, sang pop songs, and played sports together. Even though we could not use our legs, we played soccer and baseball using our hands, and we raced by supporting our legs with our hands. We tumbled around in the playground. We crawled on the ground laughing and screaming. Some people watching us playing this way were skeptical, or became sad and shed tears. But this



made others think about their lives again. A violinist who came to Yousung for the hot spring saw children playing and crawling on the ground. It shocked her tremendously, but she came back to teach children violin for free. That was the origin of the chamber group Bethesda.

After ten years of sedentary life, all the muscles of my legs were shrunk and could not stretch out. Once a week, I went through a rehab treatment. This was tremendous torture for me. They put hot packs on my legs for twenty minutes until the flesh became red. Once I was ready, one therapist held my arms while the oth-

er started to straighten my legs pitilessly. I cried out in pain and screamed, spat, and even bit the therapists. They straightened my legs so I could wear braces to walk with crutches. It took me two years. Often, it takes pain and endurance to cure hardened bone or a numbed heart.

In the sixth grade, I could stand straight with braces and crutches. At last, I could see others at eye level. The joy was short-lived. My hips and back hurt too much. Rashes developed on my knees, and my hands had blisters. Since I supported my body weight on my crutches' armpit supporters, I had bruises on my armpits. It was extreme pain. Some children could not bear it, and they went back to wheelchairs. But I endured. I could not go back to my previous state. The rehab center trained us to walk along the riverbank, about two kilometers, until the crutches became a part of our body. Finally, I became a *Homo erectus*. As a reward for enduring pain, the crutches offered me the liberty to walk toward the world.

Meeting a teacher

It was the greatest blessing in my life that I met a teacher, Choi Hwabok, with tiger eyebrows. He voluntarily transferred from a normal school to teach children with disabilities. He was my teacher when I was in sixth grade. He combed his hair in a neat pomade and wore a proper suit. I skipped from fourth to sixth grade at his recommendation.

“Hey guys, his eyebrows are raised. Watch out!”

He scolded us whenever we were rude or acted improperly. There was no excuse, even for disabled children. Still, he never beat us. If we did not understand something in class, he repeated it ten times.

“Now, relax and open your mouth wide.”

He taught us how to sing while he played the organ. Even the child with a speaking disability sang well enough during singing class. He also conducted an orchestra, where I played the harmonica.

Our orchestra won first prize in a national competition held at the Samyouk Rehab Center. He taught me calligraphy, and I won

a prime minister's prize in a calligraphy competition.

My teacher was famous while working at a normal school. It was known that if he trains a student, then that student will be able to enter a prominent school. However, he was happier teaching at a rehab center than working in a public school just to teach the entrance exam.

He would say, "Everyone is good at at least one thing. Let's try to find out what."

He gave us hope when we had no promising future. He told me that I was good at studying. "Inkang, you must enter a normal middle school and pursue your studies to the end."

He gave me sample exams used in ordinary public schools and even some books from Gyohaksa. He erased important words in a history book so we would memorize the book from beginning to end.

As graduation approached, my sister told me to stay at the rehab center to learn some practical skills. It was obvious that it would be difficult for me to get a job, even if I graduated from university. But my teacher persuaded her that I must continue studying. "No one knows the future. Inkang must pursue his studies," my teacher said.

He wanted to send me to Daejon Middle School and visited the school several times by bike to ask for my admission. But the school was not convinced. He drew a map from our rented house to the school to show that it was short enough for me to walk. Still, the school did not believe him. "There are too many stairs in the school. We cannot accept him."

Finally, he threatened the principal. "You will regret it if you do not accept him. He will make your school famous!"

Maybe it did work. I was admitted to the school!

Probably, he did not know how many great things he did for me in my life. Fifteen years later, when I became a professor at KAIST, I visited him. He had gray hair but was still at the rehab center, teaching disabled children. He had heard rumors about me, and he was so happy that I became a professor at a university. He asked me to give a speech to the children. I did not know what to

say, and I knew too well that they needed neither cheap comfort nor advice.

I told them, “Do not compare your life to others’, whatever life is given to you. No one can live your life for you. You must live it out. You cannot throw it away, nor think it too light. Our life is holy and precious.”

My teacher and I had lunch together in a hilly restaurant selling oak tofu. During lunch, he told me, “I knew the road that you must take when you solved the problems, that you never learned, about the eclipse and the zodiac. Isn’t that a teacher who can read his student’s ability?”

I could not sufficiently express my gratitude for his unconditional love for me. The only way to pay him back would be by taking care of the soul and life of my students, as he did for me.

When I got married, he came with Jeonwha to Changwon to celebrate. When my son was born, I asked him to name my child. He named both my children. He retired happily from Sungsaе Rehab School and is now teaching Chinese at Korea-Chinese-Center.

The teacher stood me up and opened up a road for a boy with polio who could not dream, who didn’t even know whether he could dream. He is the best teacher that I respect the most.

Back home

I moved out of the rehab center and into ordinary middle school. Most of my friends stayed at the center to learn carving and printing skills. The products, such as wooden dolls, souvenirs, and printed materials, are not competitive enough in the market. They worked all day long, but it didn’t help much for their living. But there was no alternative.

The founder of the rehab center was a medical doctor. People abandoned their children with disabilities in front of the hospital, so he made his house into a rehab center for them. He was a Christian. Around that time, people got polio by the thousands every year. The year I got polio, 1968, many other children got polio also. The rehab center became known throughout the country,

and a hundred children came. That was the time when parents hid their disabled children at home. My father also was ashamed of taking me out to the village.

According to my own experiences, rehabilitation should take place in the middle of society. The disabled should not be secluded by collecting them together. Learning how to accept differences and living together with ordinary people is genuine rehabilitation. Learning a few job skills in sequestered conditions cannot teach people how to live together and how to be cooperative in society. A disability is not a cross for just a disabled person and their family to bear. Society at large must bear the burden. Disabled people should go to regular schools. Even if they come home crying because their peers make fun of them, they should not give up. If the disabled are secluded, society would not know that they exist. They should not hide; people should see them in normal situations.

I will never forget my experience at the rehab center and I relish the memories of my friends and our time together: Changduk, who stammered and wore his father's old shoes; Jeonwha, who was determined to find his parents; Enyoung, who hated me; Mangi, who was a classmate in sixth grade and is now running a jewelry store at Daejon; Younsoo, who had the same disability as I; Youtae, who sang the music of Song Chang-sik very well. I fondly remember those boys and girls chatting and laughing under the fragrant ivy trees, those friends with both physical and mental disabilities, those boys who could not even move their fingers and had to lie down all day long.

I got to know the valley of death and shadow of the land. Three years of experience in the rehab center helped me fully understand who I am and where I was. That was the desert of my life, without hope, promise, or comfort. I could not accept God, who did not answer the questions in my young mind, and who was seemingly silent to those of us who suffered without reason. Despite this, He must have trained me. This life desert would become a land of conversion and promise if I turned my eyes away from the land, where hope is dried out, and towards the sky.

I cannot remember the day of graduation clearly. I gave a farewell speech, I guess. But I cannot even remember who came, which awards I got, or what we ate after the ceremony. I was just happy about going back home.

End of Sample

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