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## Serendipity

After the massacre, they all lay on the floor from the entrance to the end of the hallway. Blood was still dripping from a few of the bodies. The whole hallway of Fuxing Hospital was now a morgue. People stopped by, trying to—but hoping not to—find their loved ones among the dead. I felt urged to record the lifeless bodies along with the trepid visitors because I was a documentary photographer. So I surreptitiously lugged out my Nikon and quickly snapped pictures. It was the first time I saw so many dead people around me. I stayed there for no more than five minutes, but those five minutes changed the course of my life. I wanted to get out.

In 1993, the exotic breeze along the La Jolla Beach in California embraced me, my heart severely wounded by what I had witnessed at Tiananmen Square. It was at the University of California, San Diego, that I experienced the gigantic concepts of freedom and democracy firsthand. On my first night in the United States, after I took a shower in my host family's house, I asked my hostess a question, which I later realized was hideously silly.

“Where do you get the hot water for showering?” Slightly confused, Mrs. Jacobson replied, “The furnace of course.” “Where did the government place the furnace in the community?” I persisted.

Mrs. Jacobson probably thought I was an uncivilized monkey. What she did not know was that I came from a country where no ordinary family in any city had a furnace to supply hot water. The government made decisions on whether I deserved a hydronic heater in my home, where I should work after I graduated from college, and what I should say and believe in. The list could go on and on.

It was in the university library that I voraciously consumed every movie, book, and article about the June 4th massacre. I read all the “counterrevolutionary” articles in *China News Digest*, an online magazine published by and for overseas Chinese students, but

inaccessible in mainland China. My heart was tremendously touched when I heard, on television, President Clinton's 1994 State of the Union address, in which he talked about improving ordinary people's lives through education, welfare, healthcare reform, and much more. Was that how a president should address his people? No hollow slogans and no calls for class struggles? I remember tears streamed down my cheeks, and I didn't know why I was repeating, “Damn!” in Chinese. The California sunlight was pellucid, and the air was sweet. I felt like I was living in a dream. But deep in my heart, I still felt bitter. I had to take advantage of the newfound freedom by exhibiting my Tiananmen Square photos to tell my story, and I did.

Is there really a God? I lightly shrugged off the “nonsense” uttered by those from the nearby Chinese Christian Fellowship. I used to listen to such “nonsense” over the “enemy radio stations” when I slept under the stars in hot summer nights in Shanghai as a middle-school student. I cultivated an exciting hobby of arguing with those Christians from my so-called atheist standpoint, though I did not know how or whether I could prove God does not exist. Eventually, the teeming love from above through these seemingly silly people crushed my artful reasoning and dissolved all the bitterness that I had indefatigably held on to and even, to some extent, involuntarily cherished.

A caged bird can fly freely, but only in its cage. My five minutes in the Fuxing Hospital near Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989 inadvertently halted the blissful, numbed life I was leading in Beijing and brought me on a journey to this country, where I have serendipitously found true freedom. Today, like many of my fellow Americans, I take for granted the grand ideals of democracy and freedom that this land has to offer. I breathe these lofty words without thinking, much as a fish is not aware of how vital water is to its existence. I often feel it a moral burden to enjoy and treasure such a life on behalf of those who died for it and of those who still cannot afford it.