

Konnichi wa watashi no doryo (Good day to my colleagues!)

By Dr. Timothy Hoare

During the month of July, Dawn Gale, Vincent Clark and I spent three marvelous weeks in Japan as participants in the 2007 Japan Seminar, a year-long faculty enrichment seminar partially funded by the Henry R. Luce Foundation and sponsored by the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Accompanying us were faculty teams from four other colleges and universities across the country. Our leaders were noted U-Penn Japan scholar G. Cameron “Cappy” Hurst and Seminar Director Jane Spalding, both of whom gave of themselves immeasurably to make this a rich and memorable experience for all of us. Jane and Cappy have been running this program for ten long years—and what made this trip even more special is that we are privileged to be participants in its final year of funding.



Gardens at International House, Tokyo

Along with several structured days to visit religious, cultural, and historical sites in Tokyo, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Takayama, and Miyajima, we were each given, as part of the Seminar requirement, “self-determined days” to engage in individual research on our own respective academic projects for our courses back home. In January 2008, we will all reconvene back at U-

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Penn to present our projects, which could be anything from a completely new course to a new module for an existing course. But amid this primary agenda, we were also afforded several opportunities to strike out on our own and explore this unique culture. Indeed, such independent exploration always proves to be as much a source of cultural enlightenment as anything else that we experienced collectively within the context of the formal program.

What does one say about Japan that has not been said a thousand times before? The temples are exquisite. The gardens are an expression of the eternal. Hiroshima’s Atomic Bomb Memorial transcends words. Tokyo’s Yasukuni Shrine for Japan’s war dead is an enigmatic journey through a history that lives up to the international controversy that surrounds it every year on 15 August. The list could go on for pages. But log on to the Internet and Google any one of these and you can find information and images that will supersede any within my verbal and photographic archive. So let us take a different tack...

Longtime Japan resident and art critic Donald Richie makes the following observation about “the Japanese garden:”

Universal principles make up nature, but nature does not reveal these principles, in Japan, until one has observed nature by shaping it oneself. The garden is not natural until everything in it has been shifted... [heaven, humanity], earth—these are the traditional strata... but it is [humanity] that is operative, acting as the medium through which heaven and earth meet (Richie, *A Lateral View*, p. 12).

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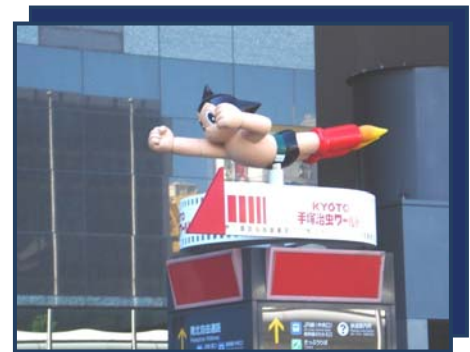


Zen Buddhist Temple, “Ginkaku-ji”

of nature; it is tailored, if you will. But it is only through this human manipulation that the eternal ideal of nature is revealed to us. In the same manner, the tiny *bonsai* tree is trained to do what it does, while the *ikebana* flower arrangement is “arranged.” It is all artificial—but what we *gaijin* need to understand is that *artificial* does not mean “unreal;” it simply means that it has been touched or shaped by humanity. And herein lies the paradox: it is only through this conscious artificiality that the natural is revealed to us. Otherwise, we would walk by and miss it, as we so often do.

The famed tea ceremony, for example, is choreographed to the nth degree. But through this artificiality, the grace of humanity is revealed. What are we truly capable of giving to one another? The presentation of a tea bowl reveals a grace that is beyond words when you “know that you are doing so.” Think of this the next time an airline flight attendant throws a bag of peanuts at you. By virtue of our very humanness, we are, as both giver and recipient, worth so much more than that. If heaven and earth are opposites, the human being is the operative crossroads in which the two are capable of conjoining in a fleeting moment of “ordered grace.”

One can apply this metaphoric principle to so many other Japanese “opposites” as well. Prior to my arrival, one of my initial impressions of Japan was, for example, the seemingly bizarre juxtaposition of cutting edge technology and ancient tradition. In the midst of the early morning rush hour in a bustling Tokyo, I am sitting on a bench on the grounds of a Shinto shrine that awaits its first worshipper. Suddenly, a dark-suited “salaryman” (a young corporate employee), laptop in one hand, cell phone in the other, bounces in through the front gate. As the medium of heaven and earth, he stops before the shrine, forsaking the temporal for the eternal for a brief moment. He chants his private prayer, rings the bell, and offers a few coins to the local *kami* (spirits). And just as suddenly, he is back on the street, scrolling through his cell phone e-mail. In the human being, heaven and earth are



“Astro-Boy” at Kyoto Train Station

simultaneously manifest. They are not in opposition but merely two ordered facets revealed within the same whole.

Tokyo itself can be an imposing skyline of ultramodern skyscrapers and high-tech media displays, and yet at the same time a vast collection of discrete “villages” or neighborhoods, each one with a character all its own (this is, in fact, how Tokyo came about). One can ride the Tokyo subways all days long and emerge from the subterranean depths into a “module” that is completely different in feel and character from the previous one. But it is the interrelationship between them all that comprises “Tokyo.”



Nihon-jin (Japanese woman in Kimono at Kyoto Station)

Just what is a *Nihonjin* (a “Japanese person”)? Is it the aforementioned dark-suited salaryman who may or may not be making a comfortable living? Is it the blue-haired teenager sitting on the subway as she scrolls through volumes of e-mail on a cell phone that is bedecked with tiny dolls and stuffed animal characters from *manga* and media? Is it the lovely young woman in the ancient kimono whose footsteps are miniaturized by the natural constraints of her clothing amid the bustling masses at the gigantic Kyoto Train Station? And the answer is yes, yes, and yes. Taken separately, they may not be noticed. But they are all reflections of one another at any given time—

each one is like a prism through which the others are somehow revealed.

I am on the Shinkansen (the “bullet train”), a technological marvel that is hurtling me across the Japanese countryside at over 250 miles per hour. The conductor strides through our car with an authoritative demeanor, checking tickets with an impeccable efficiency. He reaches the opposite door, but would not dream of exiting with his back to his passengers. He turns to face us; he bows, and then continues on his way. Heaven and earth meet in a gesture of human gracefulness.

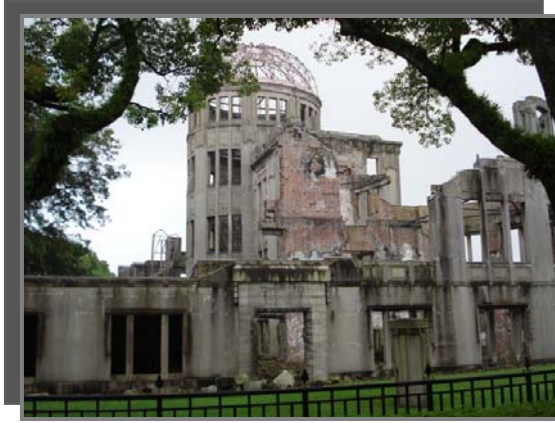


Shinkansen “Bullet Train”

While at a temple flea market, I purchase an antique picture postcard of a famous *onnagata* (in the Japanese Kabuki theatre, a male performer of female characters). In this traditional performance art, the actor is neither “pretending to be a woman,” nor is he “in drag” as one might employ that coarse terminology in the West. Rather, before an audience who is fully aware of what is taking place, he is revealing an illusion of femininity that is beyond the temporal realm of any corporeal human being, but it is only through his humanness that this “artificiality” is able to be revealed. Heaven and earth meet in a performance or ritualized ambiguity.

At Tawaramachi in Tokyo, I buy a small *kamidana* (a Shinto shrine house for ancestors or local *kami*). Simply constructed of very aromatic cedar, it has been hand-sanded so that the grain of the wood stands out, but it is not stained or varnished in any way. Its beauty is found in its seemingly unfinished character. The Japanese call this *wabi sabi*, which literally means “quiet

rust,” not raw, but natural and unembellished. Like the metaphorical garden with which we began, the *kamidana* is artificial—shaped and ordered, but only so that the natural grain and smell of the wood are fully revealed. In both the garden and the shrine, heaven and earth meet in an artificial construct.



Hiroshima “A-Bomb Dome”

And finally, one must say something about the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Memorial—but one must be terse where words are wholly inadequate. Politics aside, on this site, one can see what human beings were capable of doing to one another. And yet, on this site, one can also see what human beings are capable of doing *for* one another. Even sixty-plus years later, if there is to be any hope for the future, then one must preserve the horror of the past. If humanity is indeed the operative meeting place of heaven and earth, it is not only a sacred privilege but also an awesome responsibility. On this site in Hiroshima, heaven and earth meet to remind us that,

at any given moment, we have the capacity to reveal our very best as well as our very worst.

As one component of yet another set of opposites, is this the dark side of Donald Richie’s sublime statement? Perhaps; but as the Japanese say, *Shikata ga nai*, which means loosely, “It can’t be helped.” Another way to put it is, “That’s the way it is.”