

A Unitarian in Japan  
A sermon by Steven Epperson  
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UCV

Before I go any further, I want to share some thoughts about context as a path into what I want to say today. The words from Kenji Miyazawa that I have just shared were written in the early 1930s—at the very height of Japan's aggressive self-assurance as an expansive, imperialistic nation come-of-age on the world stage. Miyazawa's words, to be sure, represented an alternative, minority vision in a world going mad.

Fifty years later, Kenzaburo Oe, the Japanese Nobel Prize winning author, quoted Miyazawa at the end of a speech he delivered to an international conference entitled "The Challenge of Third World Culture." In the mid-late 1980s, Japan was in the midst of an extraordinary economic renaissance. There was deep ambivalence and concern both in the West and in East Asia, about the consequences of Japan's return to the world stage as a force to be reckoned with. Memories of Japan's role in world wars of 1930s and 40s were still fresh, and continue to be problematic.

Kenzaburo Oe was all-too-aware of that history. That day in 1986 he acknowledged Japan's disastrous impact in the 30s and 40s; and then challenged his own people, his own readers, to critically re-examine their own culture and its temptation to exert its will on others. And then he concluded by pointing to the work and words of an unassuming Japanese agronomist and writer—Kenji Miyazawa, who laboured in obscurity with farmers and village folk in one of the poorest, most remote regions in Japan in the 1920s and 30s. It was in Miyazawa and his sensibility, Oe suggested, that Japan could reclaim its soul, re-discover its solidarity with nature and with its neighbours, and thus find a chastened, creative, constructive role to play as the Japanese people faced the advent of a new century.

"We are all farmers; the work is hard and unrelenting...  
Truth and strength come from being aware of the galaxy of stars within us, and living according to this knowledge.  
Let us seek true happiness for the world—the search for the path is itself the path."

Every nation, every culture, every epoch desperately needs its alternative, minority, progressive voices, political and spiritual. Please don't ever discount the importance of who and what you are! Though in the eyes of someone like our current Prime Minister who tends to think in quantitative terms: "how many Unitarians are there in Canada," he asked me one day in the Toronto airport. It is the vision, quality, and effectiveness of our witness, not our numbers, that will endure, abide, inspire and have the power to heal.

Most of you know by now that during the 2007-08 church year, this congregation granted me a five-month sabbatical leave that I am taking in two parts. The sabbatical has two areas of focus: first, to discover if we can increase our effectiveness in working the political system and influencing policy outcomes in order to better serve our commitment to social justice, that's a task I will work on this spring. And second, to enhance the spiritual life of this congregation and its minister. I have thought that a key way to do this is by paying attention to our practice of ritual in order to deepen our connection with each other, and with what we call "that transcending mystery and wonder...which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." Quoting Kenji Miyazawa again, I want us to "have the sort of talk [and experience among us] that combines the facts of modern science, the experiments of seekers of the truth, and our own intuition."

To do that, I have been reading academic studies of ritual theory and practice; I hope, as well, and look forward to in-depth conversations with you about creating and celebrating rituals attuned to the needs and vision of this congregation; and finally, back in October, I got out of the study to do work in the field. In this

case, a nearly three week journey to Japan where, along with my wife Diana, I traveled to eight different cities and towns. It was an idiosyncratic trip—a journey that focused on visiting Shinto shrines and public festivals, and personally participating in some fascinating rituals.

Traveling to Japan was, as well, the fulfillment of a life-time dream for me, and I want to express my deep appreciation to you for making it possible. For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated and impressed by Japanese aesthetics: its arts, crafts, architecture and literature. As well, my father fought in the Pacific War and was part of the Occupation forces in the post-war era. His wounds have clouded my life; so in a sense, in two ways, this was a very personal voyage.

Now without getting into a travelogue, a couple of impressions: during the trip to Japan, I didn't see any lawns, no turf grass. Look at the photo in the upper left in the *Sunday Unitarian* insert. See the parked vehicle and frontage road? This was typical of what I saw. With the exception of ornamental and meditative gardens, every conceivable plot of land that can be put under cultivation is dedicated to growing rice, fruits and vegetables. Now I admit I wasn't on a tour of Japan's golf courses. What I did see is that though Japan is a thoroughly urbanized society, cultivated nature and its fruits are close at hand, and attentively, lovingly cared for.

Train and subway travel. It's true; you can set your watch, almost to the second, by the scheduled arrival and departures of trains and subways. On our second day there, oh let's say at about 10:38 a.m., I was about to step from the platform onto the train, when I was politely plucked back by some fellow travelers who proceeded to tell me, "no, that's not the 10:42 a.m. train you want; that's the 10:38." Silly me! And then, exactly four minutes later, on schedule, and coming from the *opposite* direction, our 10:42 train pulled up to the platform. The sophistication, precision, comfort and remarkable speed of Japan's plethora of national and private trains is a humbling experience for a person from North America, believe me!

Uniforms. Everywhere. And I'm not talking about a military, police or security presence. Every primary and secondary school student we saw wears dark blue uniform modeled on turn-of-the-century Prussian military and British naval outfits: lots of tunics, caps, brass buttons, and sailor style collars. And October is field trip month throughout Japan, so just about everywhere we went it was like being in a nation-wide school production of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. As well, adult men are ubiquitously attired in dark suits, white shirts and ties, with women quite formally dressed, coiffed and made up. Only university-aged youth are set loose for a couple of years; and they do it with a vengeance and with admirable, grungy style. Oh, but from the look of it, that expressive window of opportunity is very transient indeed, before one must re-submerge and conform again to uniform expectations.

I could go on, the memories are still quite fresh: Japanese-style bathing at the end of a long day, the gentle give and fresh straw aroma of tatami mats under your feet, the verticality of the built urban landscape, the way a sidewalk or a road swerves around and makes room for an aged tree to grow out its remarkable days; and that one crisp morning in the Japanese alps, when I slid the exterior wall screen open in the 250 year old thatched roof house where we were staying—and there, just an arm's length away, in a mountain fed brook: a clutch of trout, each stippled backed fish nearly a half meter in length, treading water, heads pointed upstream; it was a waking dream! Remarkable.

But this is supposed to be about a *Unitarian* in Japan, no? So with the time remaining, some impressions and thoughts about religion. Because I was looking for it, I found expressive evidence of religious practice everywhere. Even in large cities like Tokyo and Kyoto, it is hard to walk a half and dozen blocks and not cross paths with a Buddhist temple, a Shinto shrine complex. And I am not just talking about the internationally famous museum pieces on the foothills east of Takayama, Nara and Kyoto. Contemporary working temples and shrines offer oases of relative peace and quiet from the frenzied pace of streets and the routines of work and commuting within walking distance in almost every neighbourhood. And from what

I could see they were frequented by a lot of people, young and old. Village life, like in the mountain town of Shirakawa-go, is centered on its temple and shrine; Buddhist funerary monuments rise up and dot the landscape at the edge of cultivated fields, and they cover the floors of wooded foothills above towns and cities like thick, cut stone undergrowth; exterior wall niches on busy urban streets, shelves and corners of restaurants and shops display diminutive statues of bodhisattvas, Daoist deities, and simple, colourful Shinto shrines. Sacred ropes, knotted with fringed tassels and festooned with lightning bolt shaped paper encircle unusual outcroppings of rock and aged trees. Occasions for stepping beyond the mundane into the realm of the sacred seemed everywhere close at hand wherever we looked and walked in the streets, lanes, and through the fields and woods in Japan.

And because it was mid-October, and harvest season, cities and towns were alive to public celebrations of their religious culture and of nature's faithful rhythms in street festivals, portable shrine processions, and pilgrimages to venerable religious sites. Here I want to focus on Shintoism and Shinto practice. First, by describing it, contrasting it briefly with Buddhism, and then by recounting an experience we had at the Grand Tsubaki Shinto Shrine near Ise Bay about a hundred kilometers southeast of Kyoto.

What follows is going to be a very subjective, selective, and impressionistic reading on my part. Here goes: Shintoism is the indigenous religion of Japan. To be sure, it has evolved and changed enormously over time; its history is complex, and as any long-lived, broad-based religion is going to, it contains a wide range of interpretations and practice, ranging from literalist and conservative to historical/critical and progressive. But central and enduring to its ethos and practice is the belief that *first*, all of nature is inherently alive with extraordinary "spiritual" power; *second*, that there is no such thing as immaterial, creative causation and power external to nature; *third*, that all things within nature and the cosmos, including the human family, are interdependent, and intimately connected; *fourth*, that a pre-eminent way to see and experience the interdependence of nature is to be alert to its rhythms and manifestations, to the changing of the seasons, and the transformative process of aging, and *finally*, that the purpose of Shinto ritual and festival is to enable human beings to be fully and attentively alive and present to the intensive, transformative power of nature.

It is a profoundly, this-world religion. Traditionally, it had very little to say about anything resembling a life after death; nor did it speculate about our existence prior to this world. Indeed, the "overall thrust in the two most important and ancient Shinto canonical chronicles is that creation ...happened fortuitously as an unintended side effect" of natural forces. There was no goal, no purpose to life save for the creation of existence itself. And thus, if there is any point at all to our lives, it is to learn to feel at home with each other and in the world, and to savour creation's quietly, awe inspiring presence. (see Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: the Way Home*, 2004) I have tried to convey something of this ethos in the images in the order of service and those on the left side of the insert.

Buddhism, on the other hand, was exported to Japan from China and Korea beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, where it had evolved over centuries into an advanced and complex theological, philosophical, aesthetic and cultural powerhouse. Buddhist missionaries from the East Asian Coast blew the Japanese away by the force of their message and media. Buddhism introduced the notion of heavens and hells, systems of rewards and punishments, a plethora of intercessory saints, esoteric practice, and the allure of continental wealth, art, and sophistication. Buddhist emissaries went straight to the top with their message and converted many in the Japanese elite. If you look at it in a particular way, Buddhism is to Japan, what Roman Catholicism was to pre-Christian, pagan Europe, both for good and ill.

For over a thousand years, Buddhism and Shintoism became deeply entwined in co-optation, co-operation and competition with each other. And to this day, though they have evolved into rather distinct religious, institutional and cultural traditions, it is said that Japanese go to the Shinto shrine for birth and marriage, and to the Buddhist temple for funerals and the commemoration of the dead.

In view of the above, it may be clear why this Unitarian found Shinto, at least this time around and for this journey, a more immediate and compelling religious phenomenon to explore. As well, I turned to a study of Shinto in the field as it were, because Shinto has reached out to us. One of the oldest, most venerable and fascinating of Japan's 100,000 Shinto shrines is the Grand Tsubaki Shrine located at the foot of Mt. Nyudogatake in Japan's Mie Prefecture. Almost alone of all Shinto institutions, due to the courage, independence and vision of its 95<sup>th</sup> generation High Priest, Yukiteru Yamamoto, Tsubaki Shrine resisted the compulsory co-optation by the fascistic, military governments of Japan in the 1930s and 40s and kept its integrity intact into the post war era. This extraordinary individual was deeply immersed in the innate, natural power of the shrine he served. As well, he was influenced by the philosophy of the seminal Shinto scholar Mootori Norinaga who taught that nothing could be a greater violation of the mindful heart and the awesome, life-affirming mystery of nature; nothing could be abhorrent to the deep interconnection of all things than the death obsessed, blindly obedient state ideology of the fascist government of Japan in those frightful years.

His son and successor to the role of High Priest of Tsubaki Shrine, Yukitaka Yamamoto, in turn, dedicated his life to promoting peace and inter-religious dialogue. He led the Tsubaki Shrine in joining the International Association of Religious Freedom, instituted a study-exchange program with the Unitarian Universalist Starr King Divinity School, and thus, he and the Tsubaki Shrine have become well-known to the Unitarian world. As well, Rev. Yamamoto discerned and hoped that Shinto's reverence of nature and its power could inspire the Japanese people to become a leading partner in helping the world community to preserve and protect the environment. And so it was a singular privilege for me, and a highlight of the journey to Japan, to worship at the Tsubaki Shrine.

Rituals at the Tsubaki Shrine are quite an experience. Their purpose is to clear away what obstructs you from standing fully present in the sacred now and in a holy place. And so one night, in the candle lit darkness, there I stood at the foot of a waterfall flowing from the summit of Mt. Nyudogatake clad only in a loin cloth and headband performing misogi, the mother of all Shinto get-yourself-present-in-the-moment-*NOW!* rituals. The warm up exercises, the incantatory prayers in Japanese were invigorating. A young priest spewed sake into the night air and the cascading water in a pleasing spray. He strewed sea salt on me and the water with a few brisk handfuls. The water was shockingly cold. The falls pummeled down on my head and back like a geyser. My prayers rang out and I sprouted dazzling wings of water.

Perched in the rocks all around the falls and pooling brook were hundreds of frog statues lit up by the flickering candle light. Rather bemused creatures, not bad company at all, I thought as I stepped into the stream and then shivered my way back to dry land. The word for "frog" in Japanese is *kaeru*; *kaeru* is also a verb that can mean "to return home." I don't know that I "came home" during misogi, though the waterfall may have pummeled some sense into me. Rather, encountering Shinto in Japan was something like meeting a distant relative, exotic yet familiar. The kind of relative you want to meet and get to know better; believing that in that encounter you just may come to learn more about yourself. And when I looked in the kindly eyes of those frog brothers perched in the rocks, I couldn't help exclaiming to myself: "my god, what a journey this life has been! May the journey continue."