Why I Chose to Study Japanese

From One Wor(l)d to Another September 27, 2016

By Bryerly Long

After Sarajevo, my sister and I lived for the better part of a year in the French countryside with my maternal grandfather, Bill, and his wife, Alice. I attended a boarding school during the week in order to continue dance training at the Conservatory in Bourges. It was difficult to adjust to such a radically different world. I resented what I perceived as the French kids' too comfortable and protected lifestyles, and having been forced to leave Sarajevo. At that time, I found solace, and an outlet for my anger in the Greek tragedies as well as the Theater of the Absurd, and particularly related to "Antigone" by Jean Anouilh. Antigone represented a rebellion against the comfort found in shading one's eyes to the truth of the world and the violence of political acts, in favor of a small amount of personal happiness. Today, fifteen years later, I see some parallels between Antigone's absolutism and the disenfranchised youth committing acts of terrorism in Europe. I feel strongly that we would live in a

better world if children were taught empathy for others and a love of life over absolutist doctrines and egoistic pride.

The following year, my family reunited in London, where I attended high school at the French Lycee. Having skipped a grade, I was a year younger than my classmates, and did not yet wear makeup, smoke, or drink alcohol. As a result, I often felt excluded by the stylish expatriate Parisians teenagers, but found a community of friends in Shift, the youth dance company of the London Contemporary Dance School. Shift was subsidized to support and encourage teenagers from various economic backgrounds. The first impression of life in London that I remember vividly is going shopping at night at the supermarket Tesco ("Every little helps") in Earls Court, and being blinded by the long sterile aisles with so many different flavors of yogurt, cereal, etc., all in similar cardboard or plastic packaging, and each claiming to be "fat free", "low fat", "sugar free", "extra value" or all of the above. My reaction to this over-abundant choice of sanitary, mass-produced foods was to eat the same few options for the rest of my time in England.

During one of my summer holidays I returned to Sarajevo to volunteer at a camp for children who had lost their parents during the war. Unemployment in Bosnia was high, leading to heightened ethnic tensions. Some of my cohorts suffered from eating disorders, or substance abuse, as a way of dealing with post-conflict stress. I was relieved to learn recently over Facebook that many of my former classmates are now married, some with kids, and appear healthy and happy. That summer I learned that Yin Yang had become too much of a burden for our friend's family, so I arranged to take him back with me to London. This is how it came that Yin Yang, who was part Papillon spaniel, with the ears of a bat, a hunchback, a cut-off tail, and who loved to eat cheese, and made occasional grunting sounds like a pig, travelled with us from Hanoi to Sancerre to Sarajevo to London.

After graduating from the Lycee Charles de Gaulle in London, I moved to Geneva at 17 to attend full-time ballet school. There was a Japanese girl, Naomi, who joined the program at the same time and was also looking for a place to live. She spoke no French and only some English. We quickly became close friends, and I introduced her to the women's dormitory in the old town where I was living. Because she was studying French, I decided to learn some Japanese, too, and bought a textbook of hiragana and katakana (the two phonetic alphabets). Unfortunately Naomi and I had a falling-out as I made other friends in our international boarding house, and she may have felt let down. This was my first encounter with the very strong sense of obligation, commitment and duty in Japanese friendships, where once a bridge is broken it is very difficult or impossible to repair.

Having lived in Japan for six years now, I have become accustomed to the expectations and mutual indebtedness, which often accompany interpersonal relations in Japan, both in the private and professional arenas, to the point that I risk applying the same expectations to my non-Japanese friends, family and colleagues.

During my time in Geneva, I continued to develop an interest in Japan and read novels by Tanizaki, Kawabata and Mishima, and about the Japanese performing arts, in particular post-World War Two. I quickly discovered the difficulties of gaining information on contemporary Japanese arts without speaking the

language. Since I wanted to pursue academic studies as well as performance, I chose to apply to study Japanese at Oxford.

Two other reasons may explain my interest in Japan: 1) my father collects Ukiyoe prints; and 2) my maternal grandfather was in the Pacific Theatre during World War Two, and chose to remain in Japan working on the reconstruction for some months after the war. I often asked my grandfather Bill about his impressions of Japan. He mentioned Bataan, as one of the atrocities of the war that the Japanese performed in the Philippines, and how the Japanese were the enemy of the US at that time, but he also described how that relationship immediately changed after the war ended. Bill also spoke of the kindness, resilience and gracefulness of the Japanese he encountered after the war, and when he traveled to Japan again on business in the 1970s.

Though he was with the US Air Force, my grandfather who was actually very near sighted was promoted to commanding a radio station in Guam. He did not fly the bomb routes himself, but accompanied a friend on a flight course a couple times. He was particularly marked by the devastation of Tokyo towards the end of the war, and described flying over burnt-down fields of what used to be populated areas after the Bombing of Tokyo.

After the war when Bill was working for GHQ, he travelled to Kamakura, where he befriended a Japanese man, who showed him around several temples, and they took a photo together. When he returned to Tokyo on business 30 years later, he wanted to look up this man, so he went to Tokyo Station to catch a train to Kamakura. Visibly lost, he was approached by a young couple that spoke perfect English. After explaining to them that he wanted to go to Kamakura, they not only directed him to the right platform and helped him buy tickets, but proceeded to take the train with him all the way to Kamakura (a good two hours out of Tokyo). He assumed that they had decided to visit Kamakura as well, so was very surprised to see that after they had seen him safely arrived, they took the same train directly back to Tokyo. He was very touched by their generosity, and told me this story many times as something he would never forget about Japan.

Once in Kamakura, my grandfather went back to the temple he had visited carrying the photo of his Japanese friend. After asking a number of people if they knew the man on the photo, he managed to meet his friend's son. The son was very pleased that my grandfather remembered his father, who had unfortunately already passed away; but the son invited my grandfather over to his home for tea and showed him various family photos.

My own father's interest in Japanese art stemmed from his time at Harvard Graduate School. He and his close friend would visit the antique stores in Cambridge and Boston, which at the time sold Japanese prints for about $20 at the time. He loved the prints and ended up amassing quite a large collection. Since then, Edo-period art and woodblock prints have been recognized in Japan, and their value has increased substantially. However my father has sold very few of the works he owns most likely because of the fond memories they represent to him. Another one of my dad's best friends from university and a best man at my parents' wedding was Japanese-American. My father, who like me grew up in several different cultures, must have felt like an outsider when he returned to the US. He also identifies with the peacefulness, respect of ritual and forms, and minimalism in Japanese aesthetics.

I remember going to visit the Japanese Tea Garden in San Francisco as a kid with my parents and cousin while we were staying with my paternal grandparents in the Bay Area. The Half Moon Bridge seemed very tall to me at the time. Several years later when I visited my paternal grandfather in the last month of his life, I traveled to Golden Gate Park on my own, and was disappointed to find that both the bridge and the garden had become very small to my adult eyes.

Given my international experiences growing up, and the sensation of rootlessness I sometimes suffered from, it may seem paradoxical that I chose to come to Japan, a society that is relatively homogeneous and closed to outsiders. However, both my grandfather's and father's positive encounters with this culture motivated me to learn more about Japan. I also believe strongly in the concept of "goen", or deep ties, which transcend generations, and which determine the course of our lives. Though my grandfather has passed away, I, living in Tokyo 70 years after the Second World War, am often reminded of the complex relationship between Japan and the United States, which transcends generations. Close to the end of my Grandfather's life, I was visiting with him and my mother in Arizona. He expressed a great interest in my life in Tokyo, and the political situation here today. Though he was already in his late eighties when I moved to Japan, I wish that he could have visited me here once before his death.

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