TRANSCENDING CULTURAL DEFINITIONS

A SENSE OF PEACE

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This project by Susan Sanae Sakayori is accepted in its present form.

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ABSTRACT

Who am I? What am I? This paper is an attempt to tell a personal story of my struggle to answer these questions about my racial and cultural identity. As a Japanese American who has lived the first half of my life in the U.S. and the latter half in Japan, I found it increasingly difficult to find my place in either culture. I was faced with issues of ethnicity, cultural background and personal values that I didn't realize were so important in understanding who I was. I have traveled down a road of discovery where I was given a new perspective on life. I see that we are all cultural beings with our own cultural identity which goes beyond ethnicity and color and which transcends cultural definitions.

I begin this paper with a reflection of my life beginning as a child growing up in the U.S. and the pain and sense of inferiority I felt as a Japanese American in a white society. The second chapter deals with my life as a young wife and mother in Japan determined to assimilate into the new country. Cultural clashes with my adopted country are revealed in the third chapter. I have also examined the events and experiences that influenced my need to question whether what I was giving up to belong in Japanese society actually balanced what I was being given in return. The journey ends gracefully and peacefully with a new respect for myself and my newfound identity

ERIC DESCRIPTORS:

Cultural Awareness
Culture Conflict
Cultural Images
Intercultural Communication

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INTRODUCTION

As I sit at my computer and visualize all that I am prepared to write and need to write in this paper, I do not see myself doing it simply to complete the final requirements for a Master's Degree in Teaching from the School for International Training. I view it as a positive way to understand who I am and what I am which will hopefully, in turn, lead to a reference or guide to other teachers and educators and even to parents who are concerned with cultural awareness and socio-cultural identity. To tell the truth, a few years ago I would never have imagined that I might be in a position to offer guidance towards cultural sensitivity in the classroom. The importance of knowing who I am and what I am was brought to light when I enrolled in the Summer Master of Arts in Teaching Program at the School for International Training (hereafter referred to as SIT) in Brattleboro, Vermont during the summers of 1997 and 1998.

Let me take you back to the summer of 1997. I had applied to the SIT program the previous fall, hoping that the graduate program would help me become a better teacher – a very simple reason. I had no idea, at that time, that the classes, the materials, the assignments, the teachers and the student community would indirectly be the forces

that would make me stop and think of myself as a cultural being. These two summers would serve as a focal point in terms of discovering my past and how I viewed myself and who I had become. The whole process compelled me to share my story.

Although I had been living in Japan for the past 23 years, I am an American (Japanese-American to be precise), born, raised and educated in the U.S. After a lapse of over 20 years, I was excited about finally being able to go back to school in my home country. I thought I would have no problem adjusting to the academic environment because my first language was English and most importantly I wanted to learn. The fact that I look Japanese but don't speak perfect Japanese has always made it difficult for me to fit into the Japanese community. I blend in but I'm not 'one of them'. I am an invisible minority. Since I didn't always feel comfortable living in Japan, I was optimistic that being back in the States would be, in contrast, simple and easy. I would have no language problems and I knew the customs of the U.S., so I didn't anticipate any problems going back home to study.

But I was deeply mistaken. On the first day of orientation at SIT, I was ready to return to Japan! I looked around the room and realized I was the only student with an Asian background enrolled in the program. Here I was a visible minority. I felt as if I

were a child again in a new and unfamiliar environment and imagining people looking at me and trying to label me. I could **feel** people asking the dreaded questions, "Who is she? Is she Japanese?" Whether they were or weren't, I don't know. It didn't occur to me that they just might not care. The important point is the feelings that I had were real, not imaginary. It was just out of habit that I would see myself as an outsider in any new situation. I felt inferior and different. I somehow sensed that I didn't belong. I was an American, but I was afraid that I wouldn't be treated or accepted as one. I remember feeling the same way when I was a student many years ago. Why did I continue to have such negative feelings about myself and my cultural background? I was happily married with two wonderful sons and a satisfying job. Why couldn't I be happy and feel confident with what I had?

I discovered, to my shock and disbelief, that feelings from the past were still around to haunt me. Sensitive feelings about my cultural identity that I had buried deep inside for many years had resurfaced on that day in June 1997. I left the U.S. in 1974 never having understood my place in American society, and there I was, 45 years old, reacting as I had done in the past – insecure and uncertain.

What made me feel this way at SIT? We were all supposedly equal in terms of

education and experience in teaching. We all had the same goal in mind – a Master's degree in teaching. But for some reason, I felt different than the others and this made me feel insecure and extremely sensitive to any comments about my cultural background or about my present situation. A comment such as "Oh, Susie should know about the Japanese education system" brought fire to my eyes. Why does he assume I am the expert on the Japanese education system? I was educated in the U.S.! I didn't view the question as an innocent comment based on his knowledge that I had two sons who were born and raised in Japan. I saw it as a direct reference to the fact that I was of Japanese ancestry. To anyone else, this comment would seem innocent indeed. For me, it was a statement to demonstrate that I was different than the rest of the group.

Another often heard remark during that summer that upset me was "Susie, how would you say that in Japanese?" There were nine of us who were teaching in Japan, and I was one of them. I had been living there the longest. This person had assumed I was the most fluent Japanese speaker of the group considering my 20-some years of residence there. Again I twisted the question around and felt that he viewed me as a Japanese, not as an American, and took it for granted that I was born fluent rather than because I had studied the language. I understood it as 'them' against 'me'. Why did I

jump to these conclusions without having any proof that my classmates were stereotyping me or categorizing me? Why did I think of myself as different and feeling apart from the group? Did these emotions and feelings come from something deeper than simply ethnicity and color?

I now have a much better understanding of why I reacted that way and why I was so terribly sensitive over remarks that may seem very natural and non-offensive to most people. It took two long, emotionally wet summers and a lot of thinking, writing and talking to others to help me draw out experiences and memories in my past, that I didn't want to remember, but were necessary for me to grow as a person, as a mother, as a teacher and in the end, respect myself for who I am. By learning from my past, understanding what happened and how it influences my present life, I have the power and will to go forward with confidence and strength.

The first day at SIT was the beginning of a precious learning experience, and that is why I feel compelled to write 'my story'. I would like to share, in this paper, the experiences and events of my life as a Japanese-American, born and raised in the U.S. of second-generation Japanese-American parents, my struggle to assimilate into Japanese society as a result of my marriage to a Japanese national, my feelings of confusion and

frustration as I try to assimilate into both Japanese and American cultures, and finally how I have come to accept my situation and embrace my unique identity. My two summers and the interim year at SIT taught me “We teach who we are” and I strongly believe this is true. A speech made by two of my classmates at one of the closing ceremonies during the last week of the program made me think of the importance of understanding who or what I am. As Terry and Wade so eloquently stated, “So the journey of teaching starts inside of us. When the body and mind act in harmony, the music begins and all are affected.”

This story, I hope, will also be a resource for my colleagues who have never experienced what it is to be a member of a minority group, who may not understand what it feels like to be different or to feel like an outsider. I would like to write my personal story as a Japanese-American raised in a predominantly white society and to convey to my readers how events and experiences in my childhood and youth indirectly made me into an insecure, frightened young woman who desperately wanted to be accepted for **who** she was and not **what** she was. I wanted people to treat me as Susie, the person, and not Susie, the Japanese girl. By reading my story, I do not ask for sympathy or pity or apologies. I hope this story can serve as an example of what people from ‘the other’

group have gone through, still go through and what educators can do to soften the hurt, the frustration and feelings of inferiority on the part of our students (and even fellow teachers).

In the first chapter of this paper I will give my readers a glimpse into my background, my childhood and my emigration to Japan. The second chapter will delve into my life in Japan as a wife and a mother. In chapter three I will talk about a very painful period of my life when I had to reconsider my life in Japan. The final chapter will go into the present and look into my multicultural identity and analyze the stages and circumstances that culminated in a sense of personal strength and self-worth. Through this paper, I sincerely try to help my readers gain entrance into the heart and soul of a person who has finally found a sense of peace with herself and her surroundings.

Now my story begins.

CHAPTER ONE

GROWING UP

Imagine this - a shy, quiet little girl with black hair in a school playground surrounded by other little boys and girls of all shapes and sizes. Everyone is talking and laughing and enjoying what they do best - being kids. Then, suddenly without warning someone yells out, “Ching, chong, Chinaman.” A dead silence. Slowly, children turn towards the shy, quiet little girl with black hair. The little girl is too shy and too frightened to reply, “I’m not Chinese!” and too shy to fight back. The only way she can protect herself from further pain is to pretend that she didn’t hear the remark or didn’t care. She doesn’t want to show how much she hurts inside. No one knows that this remark and others like that will haunt that little girl for the rest of her life. Not even her closest friends have any idea how painful those words were to her. They realize that

derogatory remarks and racial slurs of that kind are not acceptable. They know that and try to understand. Sympathy helps, but it isn't enough. All that little girl wanted to do at that moment was to run away, somewhere far away where no one calls people dirty names and no one makes remarks about one's physical appearance.

This little girl will spend years wishing and hoping to be someone else, anyone else, and wanting to believe that someday people will treat her as a person and not as a person from the other race. There would be very few days in the years to come when she would not feel self-conscious about who she was and what people thought of her.

I was born 48 years ago in Chicago, Illinois, the youngest of four children. Although I consider myself American, it was never easy to be accepted as a 'true American'. The word 'sansei' or third generation Japanese-American sounds more pleasing and satisfying to many first acquaintances. (I have learned that it isn't worth defending my citizenship or nationality. I can't hide my Asian features.) My grandparents, on both sides, came to the U.S. in the late 1890's and early 1900's to try to make their fortune like so many other Japanese immigrants. Success didn't come easy. My maternal grandparents decided to return to Japan, taking with them my uncle and aunt. My mother stayed behind and married my father whose rather large family of six

brothers had become gardeners in southern California. In 1939 my parents were starting their own family only to be interrupted by the outbreak of World War II and the sudden incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese and Americans of Japanese descent. My parents lost their land, their home and belongings and most importantly their sense of pride. After the war they moved to the Midwest to start all over again. They couldn't go back to California, their birthplace. They were too humiliated. I could picture my parents saying, "Let's just forget the whole thing and start from scratch."

History will later reveal the terrible mistake that was made in incarcerating Americans only because of their race, but apologies and admittance of wrongdoing on the part of the U.S. government will not completely heal the emotional scars of the survivors and their families. In 1988 my mother learned that she, along with other surviving Japanese Americans of the camps, would be receiving monetary compensation for what was done to them over forty years ago. She told her children (my two brothers, my sister and me) that it wasn't the money that was important. It was the apology that mattered. Although the younger generation (made up of third and fourth generation Japanese Americans) felt that they deserved the compensation, I know that my mother and other 'nisei' (second generation) parents were just thankful that they were

finally vindicated and that truth was on their side.

George Bush, president when this law was enacted, wrote a letter and sent it to all Nisei and their survivors.

> A monetary sum and words alone cannot restore lost years or erase painful memories; neither can they fully convey our Nation's resolve to rectify injustice and to uphold the rights of individuals. We can never fully right the wrongs of the past. But we can take a clear stand for justice and recognize that serious injustices were done to Japanese Americans during World War II. In enacting a law calling for restitution and offering a sincere apology, your fellow Americans have, in a very real sense, renewed their traditional commitment to the ideals of freedom, equality and justice.

It took forty years, but my mother lived to see the day. She died the following year.

None of the German or Italian Americans were arrested or sent to camps although they were supposedly descendants of the 'enemy'. My mother and father very rarely talked about the relocation camps and about this period of their lives. I never heard one negative remark from them about the war years. I do remember listening to my father's stories about being leader of a group of barracks, although he didn't use the word 'barracks'. To him it meant that he was head of a small group of houses – he was in charge. My mother had a sewing circle. Listening to them talk about camp life was more like listening to someone talk about a summer camp with fun and games. They never mentioned the bleak side of their lives in these relocation camps. They never

talked about what they lost. I now wonder if this was intentional or if it was a way to obliterate the feelings of humiliation of being treated as the enemy. As I reflect on this sad event in the history of my family, I see how I have been influenced and affected by it.

I look back on my childhood with mixed feelings. It was not a bad life, but I never felt the security that I think a child needs to grow confident and proud of who he or she is. I was always wishing I could be someone else or live somewhere where I didn't feel different. I remember hoping that someday our family could go back to California where I knew more Japanese Americans lived. Maybe then I would be happier with myself and have more self-confidence. I was tired of being known as 'the Japanese girl'. I wanted to be 'white' just like my friends.

I felt that life was definitely better 'on the other side'. I grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in north Chicago. My classmates were 85% Jewish and 14.5% Protestant or Catholic and then there was a Chinese-American boy and me. Until I went to college, I thought most of the world's population was Jewish! I remember feeling like an outcast when there was a Jewish holiday and none of my friends had to go to school. They were at the neighborhood synagogue. How I wished I were Jewish! I remember going to my friends' houses and listening to them talk to

their grandparents in Yiddish. I think I knew more words in Yiddish than Japanese at that time. I felt comfortable around my Jewish friends.

Life was fine most of the time when in the security of the classroom, my house and my friends' houses. But when I was least expecting it, children that I didn't know would call me names or tease me because I was Japanese. Hearing the dreaded word 'Jap' made me feel like crawling into a hole. Why? Why did they call me that? I wasn't around during the war. I didn't start it. But I hadn't the nerve to say anything to my tormentors. I just wished I could be someone else. I never told my parents about the name calling. I didn't want to make them feel bad. I didn't want my parents to be hurt. I thought I was as American as everyone else until people made remarks about my race. "Just leave me alone," I wanted to shout. "I can't help it if I'm Japanese."

I was becoming overly self-conscious with being Japanese and being ashamed of who I was. I did my best to get good grades and win the approval of my teachers and classmates. My dreaded class was history because I remember feeling extremely uncomfortable when the mention of World War II came along. Pearl Harbor! Japs! I wanted the lesson to end. I felt the stares of my fellow classmates. Susie is Japanese!

As I grew older and got interested in boys, I hoped that someone would be interested in me. But that never happened in high school. It seemed as though Jewish boys didn't date Gentiles. Another blow to my ego. How can I be American if I can't date like other American teenagers?

At about the same time, I joined a Buddhist youth group. Since my parents were both Buddhist, I started going to church on Sundays and attended youth group activities on Saturdays. This was my first real encounter with other Japanese Americans. I felt alive. I was able to interact with them as a normal teenager. I didn't have to worry about looking Japanese because everyone looked like me and came from similar backgrounds. I could talk about the Japanese foods that my mother sometimes served us for dinner. I knew they could relate to some of the cultural habits our family preserved, such as using chopsticks, eating rice and using soy sauce, not that unusual now, but an oddity in the 1960s. When I get together with my friends from the old church days, they all recall that I was quite a noisy kid. I guess I was. I was able to be myself. I was judged because of who I was and not what I looked like. I have fond memories of those years because of the youth group. Even though it was only once a week, that day was important to me and probably gave me the encouragement I needed to

get through my teenage years.

In 1969 I was accepted at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, and thus began another four years of trying to make sense of who I was. Again the majority of the students were white, but this time mostly white Anglo-Saxons. I felt inadequate. How could I fit in? I was still trying to find my place in American society. I pledged at an all-white sorority and was initiated. I thought I had found a place where I belonged, but I soon learned that again not many college boys wanted to date a Japanese American. Was it because I was too shy and too self-conscious and simply assumed no one was interested in me? Perhaps the years of feeling uncomfortable in situations where a majority of the people were white made me cower and automatically think “No one wants to go out with a Japanese American”. Again my studies came first. I could lose myself in my books. I could pretend I was too busy studying to go out on weekends.

During the late 60’s the book *Roots* by Alex Haley was becoming a huge success. ‘Finding one’s roots’ was a household phrase. For me, it meant the beginning of an important change. I became more interested in learning about Japan and its culture. As Japan became more powerful economically, it made being of Japanese descent easier.

No longer were products ‘MADE IN JAPAN’ an embarrassment. No more cheap and shoddy products. Japan was entering the technological field with high quality goods! I was not as sensitive being referred to as Japanese-American or even Japanese. My interest in Japan and the language continued which led to a summer Japanese intensive program at Harvard University at the end of my sophomore year and a summer homestay in Japan the following summer. After the homestay, I decided that someday I would like to return to Japan and teach. Some people thought I was returning to my homeland. I wasn’t returning to my homeland. I was looking for my ‘roots’. I was searching for my identity.

As fate would have it, a Japanese businessman who had been assigned to Chicago for 3 1/2 years and who, incidentally, was the first ‘real’ Japanese person I had ever met, proposed to me during my senior year. Rather than go on to graduate school, which was my initial intention, I accepted his proposal and we got married the following year, in 1974, in Japan. I was ready for some adventure. I was ready to be Japanese. I felt that life would be perfect in Japan. From my experience living in Japan for six weeks the previous summer, I thought that life would be simple in Japan. I blended in so easily with the native Japanese. I didn’t look any different, and I would feel like a new

person. I could walk the streets and no one would make a comment about my being Japanese. No one would tease me or call me names. I would be treated as an equal. I would belong! Although my level of Japanese was still rudimentary, I didn't think it would be a problem. I could always learn the language. How difficult could learning a language be! My dream of being like everyone else was coming true at last.

CHAPTER TWO

LIFE IN JAPAN

I crossed the Pacific Ocean in January 1974. I was optimistic about the move to a foreign country. I believed Japan would be the country where I could feel comfortable and live in a society where my race or color didn't matter.

I was 22 years old when I married Masao, a Japanese national. I had met him while he was in Chicago on a three-year business assignment for his company. He and two of his coworkers were living in one of the apartments in the building that my family owned. I was still a student, but I was attracted to Masao because he seemed so

confident and self-assured with who he was and had a positive attitude towards life. He took pride in being Japanese which I found intriguing. When he proposed marriage, the month before my graduation from the University of Illinois, I had no doubts that I would be marrying a man whom I could love, admire and deeply respect. I was perfectly willing to leave my life and family and friends in the U.S. and build a new life with my new husband in a new country. I was young, adventurous and a romantic.

I soon learned that I had married not just a man but a man and his culture. The person I had known in the U.S. had suddenly become a man with a deep sense of cultural identity, something that I wasn't conscious of while we were in the States. Where was the man who had just a few months earlier felt completely at ease holding hands in public? Where was the man who wasn't embarrassed with my somewhat 'American' gestures and facial expressions?

I had been looking forward to being married and living happily ever after. I had hoped that I would be treated as an equal and perhaps be accepted as a woman without the hyphenated Japanese-American attached to it. We made our home in a small rural community in Gunma prefecture about two hours from Tokyo. My first impression of that community was that everyone looked alike. I found it difficult to distinguish one

Japanese from another, let alone remember their Japanese names, but it was not of great concern for I was able to blend in perfectly with my black hair and Japanese features.

Before long I realized that the utopia that I had been dreaming of for so many years was not to be. Granted, I could walk down the streets of Japan and be somewhat invisible to the other pedestrians, which gave me a wonderful sense of freedom, until I had to speak. Whenever I went into a store, restaurant or any public place and opened my mouth, the salesperson or waitress/waiter would look at me with an expression which I interpreted as "why is your Japanese so strange?" No matter how grammatically correct my sentence was, they would stare at me as if there were something wrong with me. I would then try to excuse my awkward Japanese by saying, "Excuse me. I don't speak Japanese very well." Before continuing, I would give them time to digest what I had just uttered. I could see them trying to come to some logical understanding as to why this person standing in front of them with a Japanese looking face could not speak Japanese. "She must be either lying or very stupid." To clear up the confusion, I would then tell them that I was born in the U.S. and was a third generation Japanese-American. I never knew if my explanation completely cleared up the misunderstanding, but at least I received a polite, "Oh, I see" and then silence. There

were days when I wanted to scream out, “I’m not Japanese. I’m American. I’m a Japanese-American. I don’t speak your language.”

Strange and embarrassing encounters like the above were and are still part of my life in Japan. The only difference between 25 years ago and now is that I don’t feel as uncomfortable as I once had. I have gradually learned to accept the questioning faces and have realized that people like me are still a rarity in many areas of Japan, and it is quite natural for people to be curious about what is unfamiliar and new. People are not to blame for not understanding why I look but can’t speak Japanese. They are simply not aware that there are hundreds of thousands of people like me who do not fit the picture of a typical American. I can talk about being born, raised, educated in the U.S. and even talk about my paternal grandfather who first came to Hawaii in 1898 and then settled in California in the beginning of the 1900s. All those facts about my cultural past do not seem to be enough to qualify me as an American to many people, both in Japan and the U.S.

But these were issues that I was not capable of dealing with at the age of 22. What I was most concerned with was being accepted in Japanese society and, upon reflection, making my husband happy by being as Japanese as possible. How does one assimilate

into a culture? I naively thought that having an everyday knowledge of the language and learning and observing the customs of the country would automatically allow me to be a part of the society. During the first few years of living in Japan, I studied Japanese at home, learned how to cook Japanese food, adjusted to unheated rooms, and Japanese style squat toilets. I even learned to survive without hot water. I avoided wearing clothes that were bright and kept all jewelry packed away in a box for fear that my neighbors would talk about the 'strange person' living nearby. To my friends and family in the U.S., it may have sounded like a sacrifice, but it was something that I had to do in order to 'make it' in Japan in the 1970's. I was searching to find my place in Japanese society and was willing to do anything to be accepted.

In the mid-1970's Japan was quite conservative and very group oriented. There seemed to be some unspoken rule in Japanese society which dictated that to get along well in the community, everyone must follow the group and not do anything that might attract unwanted attention. To fit in and be accepted, I did my best to blend in and avoid situations where neighbors would gossip about my strange and different ways.

I can now look back at my early years in Japan and laugh, but in retrospect, I was actually holding back inner feelings behind a façade of enjoying life in this new country.

I didn't want to worry my family by confessing that life was hard and lonely. I didn't want to embarrass my husband by asking if we were poor because we didn't have central heating or hot running water or a four-burner stove. I learned not to question, but to "grin and bear it". I tried not to compare what I had in Japan and what I could have had if I hadn't left the U.S. I had too much pride to say, "I can't take this life anymore. I want to go home." I couldn't give up.

Masao patiently waited for me to become a 'nice Japanese housewife' but he was not as obsessed as I was. Fortunately, we had the common sense of not starting a family until I was able to adjust to the new culture, environment and language. I spent long hours looking through Japanese cookbooks with the help of a dictionary. After deciding what to cook for dinner, I rehearsed the appropriate line that I needed to say to the butcher to order the right cut of meat. I practiced at home and all the way to the store, and when I believed I could say it smoothly, I would step up to the counter and order. Two times out of three I would make a mistake. No matter how hard I practiced, I would stumble over the sounds. I had tried to hide my foreignness, but I couldn't. People knew I was different. Shopkeepers would know I was different, but they couldn't pinpoint what made me different. I was just not 'one of them'.

I honestly believed, at that time, that I could learn Japanese well enough to be considered an average Japanese. I had innocently assumed that by being of the same race as my neighbors, I would automatically be accepted. I gradually realized that no matter how hard I tried to learn the customs and the language, I would never be totally accepted into the Japanese community. I had no problem fitting in physically, but I was still an outsider. Not being brought up in this culture and not being fully aware of the proper social conventions, I had to be careful how I acted and what I said. Actions and statements that may have been appropriate in American culture oftentimes put me in embarrassing situations. I had to learn not to give my opinions too openly. At that time it was not socially acceptable to offer your opinions unless you wanted to be labeled a nuisance or a trouble maker.

I also learned to be humble the hard way. It was during my first ski outing with my husband and his friends when I was asked by my husband's friends if I could ski. I replied simply and honestly, "Yes. A little. I like to ski." I asked them the same question expecting an equally honest response. They very nonchalantly told me that they weren't very good at all. "No. No. We can't ski well." I assumed the meaning of "I can't" meant the same in all languages, but I found a few minutes later that

in Japan it can also mean “Yes, I can. I’m a fairly good skier.” As I saw them ski down the hill, I felt betrayed. They came down with such speed, skill and grace that my “I can ski a little” seemed out of place. You can imagine my embarrassment when I left the group to ski down the bunny hill feeling confused and rejected. I didn’t learn until much later, after many similar incidents, that it was a Japanese custom to be humble and to avoid praising oneself or family.

What most Japanese could do and feel instinctively, I had to think about my actions and put it in the perspective of a Japanese. What was proper and what wasn’t? What might be offensive and what would create stares? I lacked the social graces and common sense that were second nature to the Japanese. There was an unwritten social rulebook that only Japanese had access to. I couldn’t buy it at a bookstore.

It took years before I would see that I might be better off being on the edge of Japanese society, not completely in and not completely out. Until I was able to step back and look at what I had become and realize that I didn’t necessarily like all I was seeing, I continued to live as a woman with no sense of who she was. I was actually forcing myself to become a different person, to adopt values and beliefs that I didn’t completely understand or accept but thought I needed to accept in order to survive in

Japan. I didn't think I was doing anything wrong. I was trying to belong.

After giving birth to my first son after three years of marriage, I thought that he should be brought up understanding English. It seemed very logical that our son should be bilingual since he was part American, and I wanted to raise him knowing both cultures. However, being in an environment where I was the only American and living at a time when being different was not acceptable made it extremely difficult to create an atmosphere where English could be spoken as the first or even second language. As young as three years old, he would ignore what I said if I spoke English in front of people or guests. He would pretend he had no idea what I was saying to him. The frustration of not being able to raise him the way I wanted and the pressure of trying to be accepted in this closed society were too much for me to fight. Rather than embarrass my son and make him feel uncomfortable and self-conscious having an American mother, I decided not to speak English in public. By doing so, I now see that I didn't want to have my son feel the same sense of 'being different' as I had when I was a child. I had wanted so much to be like everyone else as a child and I believed my son should have the opportunity to feel as close to being 'like everyone else' as possible. The birth of my second son strengthened the desire to become a normal Japanese family.

I did my best to be a good Japanese wife and mother. I observed what other women my age were doing, watched how they acted and tried not to do anything that would cross the thin (and often invisible) line between what was acceptable and unacceptable. It was not an easy task. However, when you are raising two young children, you are willing to make sacrifices for the family.

The years of effort did have its rewards. I was fortunate to make some very good friends who called me ‘Susie-san’ rather than the more formal ‘Sakayori-san’. It is not a Japanese custom to use first names, so I felt privileged that they broke the rules in order to make me feel comfortable. I was able to relax around them and be myself, although I also sensed that by calling me Susie they were politely implying that I was not a member of the Japanese society and therefore they allowed the differences.

My presence in the community brought about a variety of reactions from people and everyone had their own assumptions as to how I was supposed to act according to their definition of what was ‘American’ or ‘Japanese’. Susie, as the individual, was rarely considered. People took it for granted that I would do things differently and expected it. “Susie, you can stretch your legs. You don’t have to sit Japanese style.” Comments such as, “Oh, you use chopsticks so well” or even “Can you eat rice?” were

high on the list of typical phrases to suggest I was not one of them. Some Japanese would tell me to ‘be more American’ assuming that there was a special way to be American. It made me wonder if they were associating with me because I was a symbol of status.

In some incidences, rather than accept me as a Japanese-American, friends and other people in the community tried to help me become more Japanese. I was often told, “We don’t do it that way in Japan. You should do it this way.” Comments which particularly made me feel uneasy were aimed at teaching me that it was wrong to do things differently or to ‘stick out’. There is a Japanese proverb which translated means “The nail that sticks out, gets hammered in.” Perhaps they were trying to help me become Japanese because being of Japanese ancestry allowed me to be a part of their group. I was getting different signals on how I should behave which, at times, confused and frustrated me. I was stuck in the middle trying to accommodate the group that wanted me to remain different and the other group that preferred that I change my ways.

As the years passed and my children entered school, I learned that mothers should wear dark colors when they attend a school entrance ceremony or graduation. I would have loved to have worn a nice, colorful dress for the various school ceremonies, but I

knew that people would stare at the ‘strange American’ so I did what I was advised and wore black or navy blue. Conformity and acceptance of the status quo were two aspects of Japanese life that I learned to follow, for better or for worse.

Life in Japan was a struggle to be what everyone wanted and expected me to be, but I was never sure what was good for ME. By then, my primary job was raising our two children and keeping abreast of what was happening in and out of school. So much was new to me in terms of Japanese education that I was constantly worried about their schoolwork and any correspondence from the school or the teachers would be received with apprehension. Although I had a basic knowledge of Japanese and could read and write a bit, I was nowhere fluent enough to feel confident with the language. I relied more on my own intuition to understand the handouts written in Japanese because I no longer had the time to consult the dictionary whenever I came across an unfamiliar word or character. School and other school-related activities took up all my energy and time.

I had increasingly become less dependent on my husband for support and help in raising the children. The responsibilities of child-rearing in Japan are oftentimes left to the mother. Fathers, unfortunately, play only a minor role in the family. Due to long working hours and commutes of over an hour, most fathers see their children only a few

minutes a day. I had to accept these conditions, but strongly believed that a father's presence is needed to make our family whole. Despite my husband's 14-hour work days, I tried to keep him informed as to how the children were, who their friends were and the main news of the day. I knew our family would disintegrate unless I gave my husband a daily report. Since my husband was a 'salaried worker' whose typical day consisted of leaving the house at 7:30 and coming home close to midnight five days a week, I knew that sharing child-rearing responsibilities would be impossible. Meals without father were the norm rather than the exception. My sons would have to wait until the weekend to play with their father. This was the reality of a typical Japanese company worker in the 1970's and '80's. Working for a large company entailed thinking of the company first and the family second. My desperate pleas for him to come home early were met with promises to try to be home a little early, but unfortunately these promises were hardly ever kept. The more I pleaded, the more guilty my husband became. I could see my husband being torn between trying to be 'a good company man' and a good provider and wanting to help his struggling Japanese American wife with the children. Seeing my husband coming home not only exhausted but also feeling guilty was something I didn't want to see. I realized that my husband's

company was ruling our lives and there was nothing I could do about it. I would have to adjust and again ‘grin and bear it’. But, the stress of raising the boys by myself soon came to a climax.

The volcano inside of me exploded when my elder son was about eight years old. A series of small incidents at home made me feel that my son didn’t respect me or possibly didn’t understand that I could not be like other Japanese mothers. I admit that my Japanese was below par and that I definitely did not act or speak like his friends’ mothers, but these inadequacies were something that I had very little control over. I could not hide the fact that I was not Japanese. I had to find a way to make my son see that the ability or inability for me to speak or be Japanese was not a measure of my real capabilities. Two short visits to the U.S. when he was still in kindergarten and infrequent visits from my mother and family were not enough to see his own mother as a competent woman rather than some woman who sounded awkward speaking Japanese and was frequently socially inept.

I asked my husband to take us to the U.S. so that I could show my eight-year old son that his mother was capable of communicating without stumbling over words and making grammatical errors, that she could talk without embarrassing herself by doing

something culturally incorrect. This would be the first time we, as a family, would take a trip abroad. Since time and money were key factors in deciding the destination, we went to Hawaii. Upon our arrival in Hawaii my husband, although a fluent English speaker, let me be ‘the boss’. I ordered at the restaurants in my perfect English and took care of my family in a way I could not do in Japan. My son seemed impressed seeing his mother looking at ease and acting with confidence. The trip also gave me a chance to respect myself again and win back some of the confidence I had lost during the past 10 years.

Child-rearing took up most of my time, but I did find time to teach English, first at the neighborhood kindergarten and later at the community center and at home. It gave me a chance to have my own spending money as well as contribute to the household expenses. The English classes also brought a certain amount of recognition in the community for being a teacher (or ‘sensei’) in Japan was and still is a highly respected profession. It gave me an escape from the boxed-in life I was leading and brought a much-needed goal to my life. Teaching gave me the freedom to plan classes and develop an English program the way I wanted. No one could tell me what was the right or wrong way of doing it because there were no guidelines which suggested how native

speakers should teach English.

Eventually I stopped teaching at the kindergarten and devoted my time to teaching at home to make it easier for my family. I was responsible for teaching 25-30 students and planned parties and yearly recitals with the help of my students' mothers. I had a positive purpose and I felt confident and satisfied when in the presence of my English students and family. I had the freedom to be Susie, the English teacher, the American. The strong interest in my English classes among adults and children was instrumental in bringing me out of my shell and giving meaning to my life in Japan.

In 1988, my husband was transferred to the Osaka branch of his company. My two sons were in the fifth and second grades by then. Through the years I was able to reconcile myself to the fact that I was in Japan and had, more or less, to follow the rules of my adopted country. I spent 15 years trying to fit in and doing my best not to embarrass my family. I observed and learned and managed to keep within the boundaries of what was acceptable as long as it didn't interfere with my beliefs and values. I was willing to adapt to the new customs and traditions, but I could not abide to what I personally believed to be wrong or unjust. I do not mean to imply that I believed my values to be better than Japanese society's, but I felt there was a definite line

between how much I was willing to relinquish for the sake of ‘fitting in’.

As my children approached their junior high and high school years, I was confronted with aspects of their education and the school system that frightened me and forced me to see the danger of blindly following the crowd and not questioning what I didn’t understand. The older my children became, the more I questioned what I was seeing in and outside the classroom, but I was always at a loss as to what to do. A teacher would comment that my younger son should learn to follow the group or he’d have problems in junior high school. My older son would obediently attend daily after-school junior high club activities, not because he enjoyed playing baseball everyday, six days a week, but for fear of being reprimanded by the teacher or older club members if he missed a practice. I was uncomfortable with the words ‘follow the group’ and ‘do it for fear something would happen’. No one else seemed to want to challenge the system, and I often found that people thought it was safer to be quiet rather than cause trouble and be labeled a troublemaker. I saw what was happening to my sons, and I could only sympathize with them and promise, to myself, that I would be there if or when they needed me.

Two unforgettable incidents that took place during this time angered me and finally

woke me up to what was happening to my life and the lives of my children. When my younger son was in the sixth grade, in 1993, he had planned to go camping at a nearby river with three other friends. My husband and I were informed of his plans, checked the campsite and helped him get ready for the big day. On the afternoon of the day of the camp, his school teacher called and asked if we knew about this little adventure and if we were going to allow it to take place. She continued to complain about the camp trip stating that she could not be responsible if anything happened to our son. I was aware that teachers in Japan feel a deep sense of responsibility towards their students, so I politely apologized for inconveniencing her and calmly said that we approved of his going camping and that we would be responsible for his actions. I suppressed my anger, but after putting down the receiver, I was fuming. What right does she have to keep him from going camping even when he had our permission? I could not understand why a teacher should be able to have such tight control over her students' after-school activities. I considered her to be interfering with my job as a parent. The incident made me question the teacher's methods and the Japanese education system, for it neglected to consider the parents in the raising of their own children. I felt a very strong cultural clash between education as I had known it from living in the U.S., and the

kind of Japanese education my sons were receiving. I saw aspects of the Japanese system which disturbed me and forced me to re-evaluate the kind of education that I wanted for my children, and also seriously question what was happening in Japanese schools.

The incident with my older son, who was always more sensitive to my 'foreignness', occurred when he was in the third year of junior high school, which is a crucial time for many Japanese students and parents. The examinations that they take during the end of this year determines which high school they will be allowed to attend and frequently determines whether he or she will go to a good university or not. The pressure to perform well on these tests is high. It was during one of the once-a-semester class parents' meetings that I was embroiled in another cultural clash. The homeroom teacher asked all the parents how their children were doing at home and if they were preparing for the tests. We went around the room and each parent talked about her child without hesitation. Many said such things as, "My son isn't studying at all, teacher. What should I do?" or "My daughter just watches TV and always says she's going to study but she doesn't. I don't know what to do with her." I listened very intently and with sympathy. When it was my turn, I told the truth but I was careful not to sound as if

I were boasting because I did sympathize with the other parents and didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. In my halting Japanese I said, "I think my son is doing okay. I don't tell him to study, but I think he's doing fine by himself." This was the truth. He was studying and it wasn't necessary for me to remind him about the tests. He had been like that ever since he was a child. I never pushed because he always seemed to be responsible for his own studying.

The meeting was finally over and I felt that I didn't say anything silly or unintelligible as often happens when I am asked to speak. I didn't realize until the next day that what I said may have sounded correct, but the mistake I made was more horrendous. It seems that I had spoken as if I were praising my son. By saying that I didn't have to tell my son to study was the same as saying he is studying very hard! My son came home from school and was furious at me for telling the truth. It seems some of the mothers had gone home and told their children that my son was studying very hard and that they had better do the same. The students actually teased him for studying although they were probably doing as much studying themselves. My son said I should have kept my mouth shut. By then I had been in Japan for 19 years and never had anyone ever told me that I had to lie and degrade my own child. I was not upset

because I had made another cultural mistake. I was sad because I didn't understand why I had been breaking my back to be accepted in a culture that I felt was making me go against my own family. I could not understand why I had to demean myself and my family in order to follow some unspoken rule of undervaluing yourself or your family. A class meeting where the truth could not be spoken was a disservice to our children and it crushed me and left me emotionally drained.

I understood the situation from a cultural standpoint, but it didn't make accepting the Japanese educational system any easier especially when I could foresee the adverse affect it would have on my children. I did not want my children to blindly follow others because it was expected of them. I want my children, and all children, to be able to think for themselves, to question what they do not understand and also to have the courage to give their opinion with sincerity and honesty. What I saw and experienced during this period made me realize that an educational system that had been praised for producing 99% literacy had serious flaws and even if I were the only one who was concerned about it, I had to do something.

The real inner change in me began that winter in 1993 when I felt the cultural clash that I was having with Japan had been pushed to the limit. I was no longer willing to

accept an educational system that did not value the individual. I was educated in the U.S. and I knew that there were other options for young people that they must be allowed to explore and experience at their own pace and in their own way. I saw too many Japanese students lose interest in school and lose confidence in themselves because of the pressure placed upon them too early in their lives. Seeing my children entangled in this inhumane system jolted me in such a way that I felt I was awakened from a deep sleep. I found I needed a little help from the American side of me to ease the hurt and pain and to help me reassess who I was and who I wanted to be so that I could go forward not only for myself but for my family. A new sense of self began to emerge.

CHAPTER THREE

LOST AND FOUND

In 1994, with my older son in high school and my younger son in junior high school, I began to observe them through new eyes. As the cultural clashes between my adopted country and me continued, in order to survive, I had to go back to my past, to a life I had known as a young adult, but had kept hidden for so long. Having been born, raised and educated in the U.S., unlike the Japanese, I had experienced a totally different way of living and thinking and this enabled me to look at a situation from a different angle, which in turn gave me the strength and courage to challenge aspects of Japanese society that I found ran against my personal values. The American side of me was

shouting to be heard.

I had been questioning the type of education my sons were receiving and was deeply concerned whether they would see life as an exciting journey uphill and downhill, around unexpected curves, rather than a straight, unchanging road paved with rules and regulations. They had never attended an American school, so they had no idea what such an education could be or should be. But I knew, and knowing and believing that there were other options, other roads to take gave me the courage and the inner support I needed to guide my two sons through a very long and dark tunnel of a Japanese education.

Past feelings of wanting to be ‘Japanese’ and wanting to be accepted were replaced by feelings of wanting to be true to who I really was. The ‘old me’ from years past was ready to come out of hiding and connect with the ‘present me’ to bring forth a better sense of order, a new perspective to my life. This reawakening came at a time when I sincerely believe that my family needed me to be emotionally strong and the American side of me provided me with that strength, patience and energy.

For some reason I had an ominous feeling that life in junior high and senior high school would not be easy for them, and I secretly tried to keep one or two steps ahead of

the Japanese education game. I feared what the effects of their Japanese education might have on their sense of identity, and I believed that I needed to be strong and not buckle under the pressure to conform to the Japanese way of educating children which in many ways emphasized quantity over quality. I saw the schools to be a place where conformity to the school rules was the norm and those who could not or would not adjust were left aside. Teachers taught classes with the average student in mind and disregarded poor struggling students and even the more advanced students. Remedial classes and honors classes for these special students were unheard of. Discussing and exchanging opinions were not encouraged. Independent thinking and individuality were not commended. I learned that having students copy straight from the blackboard and engage in rote memorization were not uncommon teaching practices in the schools.

I saw my older son blindly following the ‘path to success’ as his high school teachers talked about the number of graduating seniors who entered the top universities in the country. The pressure to perform well was great. My son was overly concerned with getting good grades and being at the top of his class. It was fine when he was in junior high school, but when he entered a ‘good’ high school, where everyone was serious about studying and going on to college, he realized he was not one of the smartest,

and he panicked and lost all confidence in himself and his future. I did not want him to view life in such a negative and closed way, but he was already caught in the education web. When I expressed an opinion that was different from his or suggested that he look at the situation from a different viewpoint, he would often argue, “Mother, this is Japan, not America.” That put an end to many of our conversations, but it did not stop me from worrying about his future. What can a parent do when her son has lost hope? Cry? I did that. Blame the educational system? I did a lot of that. Believe in him? I tried. Or talk about it? Yes, and that is what saved me. What gave me the strength to survive that two-year nightmare was talking about it to my husband, other Japanese and American family members and understanding friends in Japan, both Japanese and American. “When the larger society is fighting your very existence, your strength can only come from friends and family, from mixing and accepting, from extending and including.” (See 1998, 138) And the more I shared, the more I found that there were other parents in Japan who were going through the same problems but were too embarrassed to talk about it. Being able to verbalize my feelings and concerns about my son, I heard of teenage sons and daughters who refused to go to school or who had actually quit school for various reasons such as bullying, lack of interest, pressure to

achieve, boring classes and inability to fit in. Serious issues of this kind were not even mentioned in the news. (The problem has since grown quite serious and school authorities are finally addressing the problems.) I understood how difficult it was in Japan to admit that you or someone in your family was different or not following the norm, but I couldn't accept it. I was disturbed by the lack of support groups and capable school counselors in Japan and the fact that few educators were ready to handle the growing problem of students who could not or refused to go to school for reasons ranging from boring classes to fear of being bullied. Again I questioned the Japanese schools for not addressing students' problems and seeking solutions to these very serious issues.

My older son struggled through his three years in high school. Having to prepare for the university entrance examinations made a tense atmosphere even worse. It pained me to hear him constantly talk about his need to get into a 'good university' or else risk being labeled a failure. Where did he get these ideas? To be 18 years old and feel that your life will be a waste based on the university you attend or the company you work for made me want to cry out, "Leave him alone. Don't push him. Give him a chance." As my husband and I feared, my son buckled under the pressure.

We had never pushed him to study or to attend a good school, but he felt the pressure at school, from his teachers, from his peers and from the media. After seeing the poor results of one of his numerous pre-entrance examination tests, he convinced himself that he was unable to attend any university. He was so scared that his life would amount to nothing if he couldn't pass the test that it came to a point where he could no longer concentrate. I remember his saying to me, "I want to study, but I can't." His nerves were frazzled. I would go into his room after work every night to sit and talk to him which he said helped calm his nerves. I tried to reassure him that good scores did not and should not determine a person's future and that there were other things in life besides school. He truly believed that if he didn't do well on the tests, he wouldn't be able to attend a good university, and since the name of the university a person attends determines whether he would be 'successful', which is vital to living in Japan, he had to study. In his eyes, there seemed no way out for him. (The situation is slowly beginning to change because of the tight job market, but even so, traditions are hard to change in this country.) I knew there was another way, but I also knew that my son and I were looking at the world from two entirely different perspectives and I had to try to see it from his point of view or lose his respect. He could not stop feeling that he

wouldn't do well on the test and feeling that he had no future. At the end, he adamantly refused to take the examination despite pleas from his uncles and aunts, whom he deeply respected and whose opinions he valued, and decided to get a recommendation from his high school which allowed him entrance into a 'not so well-known' university without taking a test. To see the pain and stress he was under made accepting his decision an easy one for my husband and me. Although it was upsetting to watch him give up when we all strongly believed he was quite capable of doing well on the examination, deep down inside I was positive that he would have other opportunities to prove himself someday. He may have thought otherwise, but I knew that life should not end at 18 or 19 years of age. Other Japanese parents may not have been as optimistic and may have resigned themselves to the fact that their children were just 'average,' but I still believed 'if there was a will, there was a way'. Looking back on my college days and remembering changing majors at least five times and still not being sure of my future, it seemed absurd that Japanese education offered no second chances.

Now, three years later, he is studying at a university in the U.S. as part of a junior year student exchange program with his Japanese university and will be returning shortly. He has learned from his experience, understands why he decided to bypass the entrance

tests three years ago, and is ready to use what he has gained from past experiences and move on. Fortunately, he has regained some of the confidence he lost as a high school student and has found something more valuable than entrance into a prestigious university. He has learned the value of real friendship. My son has been very fortunate in making some wonderful friends upon entering college. They may not be in the top of their class, but his friends represent something much more precious to him. They have allowed him to get in touch with a healthier world where close friendships and good relationships can represent a 'good' life. My son still views Japan in a traditional way, as a country where working at a major company is a sign of success, but he seems better prepared for the challenge and is moving in a more positive and constructive manner.

My younger, free-spirited son got through his high school years in a more rebellious, but quiet manner. He surprised us all by getting into a good high school, the same one as his brother, but we were shocked when he told us of his plans to quit school before the end of his first year in 1997. He was ready to surrender. Keeping up with the other students had become more and more difficult, and he couldn't see the purpose in studying. The boy with the smiling face was gone. While other students seemed

devoted to studying and getting into a good university, my son knew that there had to be more to life than books and memorization. In spite of everything I had learned with my first son, I still dreaded thinking that another son was unable to get through the Japanese academic assembly line. I blamed myself - maybe I had done something wrong as a mother. Then I blamed Japanese education - why couldn't they treat children as individuals? I felt as if we were being pushed into a corner. Yet, at the same time, I wasn't surprised by his decision for I understood how he was feeling.

My son found a correspondence school where the only requirements for graduation were to hand in assignments and to attend classes held a few times a month. By quitting high school, his only option was to enroll in a correspondence school and study at home to prepare for the university entrance tests. I spent hours trying to find a regular high school that would accept my son, but all calls were met with the same answer, "He'll have to take the entrance test and if accepted, begin from the first year." Thus the inner battle between me and Japan intensified. "You are not going to take away my son's dignity."

By this time, because of his long working hours and a patchy understanding of the entire situation, my husband let me take charge and served as my sounding board. My

husband was well aware of the uncharted territory our younger son was willing to enter and knew that quitting school in Japan was highly frowned upon, but our discussions together and my fervent belief that we must allow our son the freedom to plan his own future won him over. I thank my husband for his openness and willingness to give our son a chance. I did worry about the kind of future my son would have if for some reason he didn't finish high school. On the other hand, a little voice inside of me believed in him and trusted him, and he, in turn, I believe, knew that his mother did not and would not give up on him.

In the end, after two very long years of hard work and self-commitment, my free-spirited wonder boy surprised us. He graduated from high school and successfully passed the entrance examination to a respectable university in Tokyo in 1999. We were proud not only that he passed the test, but that he did it without having a formal high school education and that he passed it on his first attempt. It is not unusual in Japan to attend a cram school for one or two years after graduating from high school to prepare for the university tests. The fact that he didn't made his acceptance into the university of his choice even more exciting. He believed in himself and he didn't give up. He went down a course that no one believed he could survive and he came out shining. For

a child that has always been labeled ‘unique’ (in a negative way) and unwilling to conform, he hasn’t done too badly, but I believe the challenge for him is just beginning. He still needs to find his place in society and decide for himself whether he chooses ‘social expectations’ over ‘personal happiness’. I am positive he will choose the latter. (As for the correspondence school that he attended, the number of students enrolling in schools of this type are continuing to increase.)

I was able to survive the roller coaster ride of these past few years primarily because I felt almost entirely responsible for my family’s well-being and believed that I needed to be strong. My husband did his best to keep abreast of what our children were doing in their daily lives, and compared with other Japanese salaried men he should be commended. But with his long working hours and other company obligations, he simply did not have the time or energy to grasp what was actually happening to our children on a deeper level. My responsibility was heavy indeed.

Having been in Japan for over 20 years, it would seem that I should have been able to adjust to and assimilate into the culture, and to understand the ‘way it is done’ in Japan. For a long time I thought it was possible, but seeing what my children had to go through and knowing that it was not entirely necessary, made me ready to quit trying. As I saw

my children enmeshed in a no-win situation, I knew I had to be strong to be of any help to them. A disillusioned and helpless mother can only add to the problem. When I was feeling most discouraged and frightened, a side of me that seemed to have been in remission for so many years emerged to give me the needed strength, courage and patience to fight. The person from the past that I thought I had to erase came back at a time when I truly needed her. This is the part of me (the part of me that was still very much American) that believed in such values as we can learn from our mistakes and that we can always have another chance, that it's all right to take a chance because if we don't, we may miss out on some wonderful and exciting opportunities, and most importantly that our future is not based on one single decision. The Japanese side of me was overflowing with negatives – one decision will determine your future, follow the crowd lest you be looked down upon and accept the status quo. Without knowing it, the beliefs and values that I had been trying to suppress for many years actually came back to save me. I finally saw the value of connecting with my inner self and understanding who I really am. It was wrong to deny the part of me who had grown up in the U.S. However, it was also wrong of me to be angry and disturbed with my adopted country and overlook all the wonderful aspects of Japan.

Twenty five years is a long time, but I now have a better understanding of who I am and what I am and that is a very empowering feeling. I have a new respect for myself as a Japanese-American, as an American and as a woman who has lived half of her life in Japan, and I feel I do have the freedom to choose and not be limited by what society prescribes as the right thing to do. My newfound multicultural identity will enable me to look at the world through three pairs of eyes and understand each situation from three different viewpoints. One set of eyes is that of a Japanese American, another as a Japanese and the third as an American. I do not claim to be a true representative of any of these three groups. Living half of my life in two countries and being a minority in both does make feeling part of any of the groups difficult, but I do feel privileged to have been able to understand and experience life in three totally different worlds. Rather than trying to be someone I cannot be, I can be proud to be someone that no one else can be.

Recognizing my multicultural identity and embracing it did not come overnight. It was a long, emotional process which I have only recently begun to understand. Who I am and why I am who I am is a question that has been gnawing at me for many, many years. I would like to bring closure to this question of my identity by analyzing the

experiences, feelings and circumstances that made me see that it was okay to be ‘me’.

CHAPTER FOUR

A SENSE OF PEACE

"The deeper you travel into yourself, the closer you will be to the state of grace."

- Greg Henry Quinn

The intense and draining years as a mother to two teenaged boys was quite an emotional learning experience. Now with both of my sons in university, leading relatively happy and stable lives, I see the necessity to go deeper into myself and reflect on the steps and stages that led me towards a sense of peace and serenity.

This paper has given me the opportunity to put the events of the past into perspective. Trying to find the answer to 'Who I am?' or 'What I am?' was not an easy undertaking. How do I measure my Japanese-ness or my American-ness or even my Japanese-American-ness? How do I convince myself that perhaps it doesn't matter? "…for racial and cultural identity becomes an inherent sum of who you are and what your experiences have been." (O'Hearn 1998, xiii)

The cultural inventory that I did of myself contributed to a personal cleansing that enabled me to unload some of the cultural baggage that I had been carrying. These are some of the issues I needed to confront. Would I be able to relinquish the pressure I had

put on myself to be what I thought I was expected to be and expected to do in order to fit the description of a certain culture, be it Japanese or American? Could I unravel the confusion I felt about my identity and not feel I needed to belong to any one group? Would I always be ashamed, embarrassed and frustrated over being a minority? Would I continue to believe that the cultural confrontations that I had been experiencing were unique only to me? This cultural load needed to be lightened in order for me to move forward in a positive direction. I have reexamined personal events and experiences of the past three years which I believe may provide answers to the above four questions in a way that allows me to celebrate my cultural and racial diversity rather than be distressed by it.

The first and most important step towards my transformation was enrolling in the SIT program in 1997 and three key events that took place during those two summers. As mentioned in my introduction, I entered the SIT program for the sole purpose of improving myself as a teacher. However, not only did I acquire some of the tools necessary to become a more effective educator, the program also provided me an opportunity to open myself up and to deal with feelings I had about myself, my past and my present in a gentle and warm atmosphere. Confronting my own complexes was

certainly not easy or pleasant, especially in front of 21 other classmates. A lot of tears were shed during those two summers – tears of sadness and tears of joy. I cried because I felt alone and misunderstood or not understood. On the other hand, the more I cried, the more layers of insecurity and inferiority I shed. I was no longer afraid or embarrassed to talk about delicate subjects, such as the fact that I was supposedly American but not accepted as one because of my Asian features. To be able to talk about the hurt and feel that I was being understood by my fellow classmates was a tremendous step forward in terms of inducing pride in myself and my cultural background. As a result of many informal talks with SIT teachers and classmates about our teaching, our students, personal feelings, ideas and experiences, and listening to their responses, I became aware that I may have something to say which could be of value to my classmates. I was a link to a world where most of my classmates would never know. For the first time in my life, I felt that what I thought might be worthy of being aired. I felt equal. I began to see that although I may have been the most physically different of our group, I needed to shift from the 'I'm different' mode and get into the 'I'm a person just like you' frame of mind. It was a struggle to establish a new identity but the seeds were sown that summer in 1997.

During one of our 'Check-in' sessions scheduled intermittently during the summer, the director of the program, Bonnie Mennell, asked us "How is the program as a whole going for you?" As I look back at my journal, which we were encouraged to write during the summer to reflect on our experiences, I am surprised to see the excerpt dated July 12th. It says,

> "…What I want is to understand myself, not just as a learner, but as a person. I have always been too busy to sit down and think about what's going on inside of me, too busy to really look at myself and see what I am doing, what I want to do. I am happier with myself – happy because the SIT community has been "supportive" and willing to listen to me, hear me and not ignore me. I have this feeling that people are trying to understand and that hasn't happened very much in the past."

This new environment and the program made me question not only my teaching but also my personal identity. The precious seed to understanding was placed by Lise Sparrow, the key facilitator to a seminar on 'Socio-Cultural Identities in the Classroom' as part of the Diversity Education Series at SIT. As I recall, one of the activities was to divide a piece of paper into decades of our lives and then divide it horizontally for two socio-cultural groups of which we felt we were a part. We were to indicate for each 10-year period when we felt we were a member of the dominant/privileged/one-up group and when we felt we were a member of the non-dominant/targeted/one-down group. Not knowing where this activity was leading, I did what I was told and drew or wrote

words, symbols and images to represent key personal events that occurred during that decade and whether I felt I was in the dominant or targeted group at that time. After my life spanning four decades was laid out in front of me, I confess I was saddened and felt sorry for myself because I noticed that I very rarely considered myself in the privileged group throughout my 40-odd years. The value of the activity came when we were then told to get into groups of threes and share ‘our stories’ to the other members of the group. I remember holding back tears as I unfolded my story to the other people in my group, going through each decade and having to admit that I had very rarely felt I was ever in the dominant group in terms of race, culture or even social situations. I had always been in the minority whether in the U.S. or in Japan. I listened to their stories with feelings of envy and loneliness. They were quite honest with their feelings and said that they had usually felt they were in a dominant position, even when living in a foreign country. One was living in Brazil, the other in Japan. They were white, middle-class males.

The facilitators brought everyone back together and we shared our thoughts on the activity. I was moved and surprised when one of the men in my group raised his hand and said that he didn’t realize how fortunate he was to be white and male until he heard

my story. His words were meaningful to me because I realized, at that moment, that most white people may never or hardly ever think of themselves in terms of racial or cultural identity until they are personally affected by it. As he spoke, he had tears in his eyes. I don't know if the tears were because he felt sorry for me or for some other reason. I know the tears I shed were tears of joy. Here was a man in his thirties that listened to my story and was affected by it.

That seminar and other activities and incidents during that summer and the next brought me to a point where I had to stop wishing I were someone else and start accepting and respecting myself for the person that I was. I wanted to deal with this question of identity and find out who and what I was. I had to make sense of my life as a Japanese-American who was raised in a white society and as a Japanese-American living in Japan and to confront the issue rather escape it. I needed to look at my past, understand and accept it for what it was, reflect on these past experiences and finally learn from them in order to open the doors to the future. As Mary Catherine Bateson says in her book, *Composing a Life* (1990, 34), "The past empowers the present, and the groping footsteps leading to this present mark the pathways to the future."

The next challenge came in the form of a ten-page culture paper for a required

culture course entitled “Language and the Culture Teacher” which the instructor, Pat Moran, gave as a final course assignment. I chose to interview 10 Japanese students who were on campus studying English as a second language, many of whom were taking courses to improve their English scores so that they would be able to enter an American university. These students were called ISE students (International Students of English.) I wanted to get their views on English language education in Japan versus the U.S. I went into this project blindfolded. I had no idea where the interviews and data would take me, but with tape recorder and notebook in hand, I approached the students and asked for their opinions on several aspects of English language education. Knowing that I had come to SIT to get a Master’s degree in teaching English, they were more than willing to help me out. The interviews were conducted primarily in English.

As I take myself back to that summer and revisit what happened during those eight weeks, it’s strange and embarrassing to admit that I had avoided those Japanese students during my first two weeks on campus. When I saw groups of Japanese students sitting together in various places on campus, I immediately imagined that I would be associated with ‘those Japanese’ rather than with ‘the Americans’ if I talked to them. I saw these innocent students as an obstacle towards my being considered an American. An ugly

thought, but true. Fortunately, as I adjusted to my new surroundings and as I did some soul searching as to why I was acting so shamefully, I was able to pull myself together and understand why I wanted to separate myself from these Japanese students. The more I talked to them, the more I began to understand the conflicts I was having with living in Japan. The ISE students brought me closer to an understanding of their Japan and my feelings toward my adopted country.

Through my research, entitled “A Sense of Peace,” I found that 60% of the students described their English classes in Japan as boring, frustrating, terrible and a few other negative descriptions. They talked quite frankly about their Japanese English education. One 19-year old student said that she was surprised, upon coming to the U.S., when she couldn’t even say the simplest things like “I have a headache,” or “I’m itchy,” in English. She had never learned the words necessary to have a simple conversation. All the English she learned was basically introduced as words and expressions that would be on a test. These tests determined who will get into a “good” college, which in turn will be their ticket to success. Parents believe that one single test can determine whether his or her child “makes it” in Japanese society. But, what happens to those who don’t get into a “good” university? Where is their place in society,

and do they have the support of their parents and of society to make their lives fulfilling and satisfying?

This disturbing and overly stressed attitude toward education in Japan and the tendency for many young people to be without a dream or goal in life is a very serious concern of mine. Students spend so much of their junior and high school life preparing for tests that by the time they do enter a university, they no longer want to study. They have literally "studied themselves out." It is a pity to see bright and talented students spending four years at university as if it were a long vacation. They feel that they deserve this vacation because of the hard work they put into getting in. If you ask people in Japan why this situation continues, although it is obviously a dehumanizing system, you will probably get an answer such as "*shikataganai*," it can't be helped. Many people believe that students deserve this break because the cycle for them will resume when they enter the work force four years later, especially for the majority of male students.

A younger student who had just graduated from a high school in Japan was hoping to study hotel management in the U.S. There seemed to be no university in Japan that has courses in hotel management, so he decided to come to the U.S. He said that he

hopes to someday work at an American hotel and use both English and Japanese. "In the U.S. I can come close to my dreams. In Japan, maybe I would fool around because I don't have to study in university. I'm happy here." The students I talked to were in the U.S. because they were going after their dream, and they felt the freedom there that they didn't have in Japan. In the U.S. they were not pressured to conform to Japanese social expectations. Mente mentioned that "Conforming to the expected way of living is a serious strain on the Japanese because it is role playing to an extreme degree. It is like living on a stage where one's performance is under constant surveillance." There is a feeling of frustration among the young people because they do want to express their individuality. They are more attuned to the world, through the influence of TV, movies, music and the internet, and they want to be a part of all that is new. But with education the way it is in Japan, it takes a lot of courage and determination to take the road that is unpaved. All of the ISE students that I had the privilege to talk with had a desire to do what they wanted to do rather than what everyone else was doing.

These talks were an important learning experience for it reawakened me to what my personal values and beliefs as a teacher, a wife, a woman and as a mother of two sons were. The ISE students presented their views on English, education and their future

which oftentimes coincided with my opinions. Having lived in Japan for over 25 years, and being aware of how society works and how the people think, I could no longer just 'grin and bear' it knowing the effect the pressure to conform has had on my children and millions of others. Not only were my children affected, but these ISE students were too and they were determined to seek other options.

The culture paper left me with a 'sense of peace' mainly because I no longer felt the need to be Japanese or to fit in. These ISE students were Japanese and finding it difficult to live and study in their own country, so why should I expect myself to feel that I had to be completely Japanese to find my place in Japanese society? I didn't feel the necessity to be American or Japanese because it became clear to me that I could not be either. I couldn't be considered an unhyphenated American because of my physical features. On the other hand, although I met the physical requirements, cultural and social conflicts prevented me from being accepted as Japanese. But, couldn't I be a combination of the best of both cultures? I'd rather aim for that than force myself to be one or the other. As a friend advised Maya Angelou while she was living in West Africa, "Don't lose what you had to get something which just may not work. If it don't fit, don't force it" (Angelou 1991, 176). If people want to see me as not fully American in

the U.S. and not fully Japanese in Japan, that is their problem, not mine. I do not want to feel I am not as good as the other person simply because I do not fit the stereotype of a true American or Japanese. I will be whomever I want to be – free from cultural bindings, transcending cultural definitions.

The second contributing factor leading to a more open view of my cultural background took place in the U.S., at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. I had never been so proud to be a Japanese American as I was on that day in August 1997. I had been visiting an old childhood friend, Felice, who was living in the Los Angeles area. On our way back to her house, I casually mentioned that I had wanted to visit the Japanese American National Museum, but since it was already late afternoon, I would have to make the trip during my next visit to LA. For some reason, Felice proceeded to drive me directly to the museum, stopped the car at the front door and said, “Susie, you still have an hour. Go inside. Take your time. I’ll park the car and wait for you in the lobby.”

I honestly didn’t know what was beyond those doors. Perhaps it was the name of the building that attracted me. However, the moment I stepped through those doors, I knew I was in the right place. The cover of the pamphlet states, “The Japanese

American National Museum creates a bridge of understanding between peoples of all ages, nationalities and backgrounds. By exploring what it means to be Japanese American, visitors discover a familiar face. Their own." This was my heritage. This was what I was looking for. This was where I came from. Panel after panel of photos left me with a very deep and empowering impression. I remember looking at each photo with tears in my eyes. There was so much more I wanted to know about the past, and the fact that my parents were no longer around to help me sort out these complex feelings made the experience even more emotional. I regretted not being able to talk to my parents about the war, about the camp, about their hardships. Things that I thought were not important as a child were now so vital to fully appreciate my cultural background. Photos going back to the early years of Japanese immigration, photos and memoirs of life in the internment camp, exhibits of Japanese culture and even a computer containing information about all the Japanese and Japanese Americans interned during World War II was an experience I will never forget. I remember timidly asking a Nisei volunteer staff if government records of my parents and brothers would be on file, and he graciously told me to sit down at the keyboard and type in their names. With tears rolling down my face, I watched the information come out of the printer. Here was

written proof that my parents had been in an internment camp. Facts such as when they entered the camp, pre-evacuation address and post-evacuation address were right there, in black and white. Before my father's name was his camp identification number 12203, followed by my mother's name, two brothers, and four uncles along with their numbers. The list ended with my grandfather, Sue Sugano, number 12211. To be in this sacred building and be able to absorb decades and decades of Japanese American history was a powerful awakening. "…when I visited the internment camp exhibit at the Smithsonian a couple of years ago, with another sansei, we found we were both in tears by the end of the exhibit, a response neither of us had expected. After all, like much of their generation, neither of our parents had talked much about the camps. But perhaps that was one of the reasons why the exhibit so struck us: we were entering the forbidden, the silenced past; we were regaining a lost part of our heritage and ourselves." (Mura 1998, 83)

That brief hour I spent walking through the museum filled with photos of the past and exhibits of traditional Japanese arts and crafts gave me a tremendous spiritual uplift and made me realize how much I had in my heritage to be proud of and value. Each picture and each display brought me closer to understanding that if it had not been for the

people in these photographs and the hardships they had overcome to be accepted in American society, I would not be here today. As the museum was about to close, I saw my friend at the door waiting for me. All I could say to her was, “Thank you, Felice.” I found a part of me I thought I would never find – pride in myself as a Japanese American.

The cultural load was definitely becoming lighter but from time to time I would unexpectedly be given an unwanted package that I would have to choose whether to add to the load or discard. An unforgettable incident took place on an Amtrak train going from Brattleboro, Vermont to Morristown, New Jersey in August 1998. The summer at SIT had been an exhilarating one - learning about teaching, about learning, about students, and most importantly about ourselves. I had worked hard all summer and was now looking forward to going to New Jersey and enjoying a couple of days with my cousin and his family. I boarded the train and found my seat. After a few minutes, I was asked to go to the dining car if I wanted to pay for the ticket by credit card. As I was walked into the dining car, I was approached by a train conductor. Here is the exact conversation (which I wrote down immediately after the incident) I had with this conductor as I was standing near the ticket master:

Conductor: *'Konchiwa'* (distorted pronunciation for 'Konnichiwa' which means Hello in Japanese)

Me: 'Konnichiwa' (trying not to take offense and calmly giving him the correct pronunciation)

Conductor: *So, where are you from?*

Me: Chicago.

Conductor: *Chicago? What does that mean?*

Me: Chicago.

Conductor: *China?*

Me: That's not very nice.

Conductor: *Aw, I'm just kidding.*

The ticket master seemed to recognize my disturbance with this conversation. By this time I was angry and upset. How could he do that to me? Why did he think it was amusing to make a person feel foreign or less of a person or treat someone in a condescending manner? As the ticket master returned my card, fighting back tears, I said to him, "He was very rude." He replied, "Yes, I'm sorry." In return he told the person behind the snack counter, "Give her a drink on me," which I accepted. In hindsight, I should have refused his futile attempt to correct what was said to me. I should also have reported the incident to Amtrak. But, to be completely honest, for me to even say that I thought the conductor's comment wasn't nice and to express my anger to the ticket master was inconceivable at an earlier time.

The story is not a pleasant one but it definitely indicates that I was beginning to

show signs of strength and courage and that the tendency for me to cower or pretend not to care and even not hear offensive remarks was a bad habit that could be cured. I was slowly learning that "when someone throws an idea or comment in your direction, you can catch it and feel hurt, or you can drop it and go on with your day" (Carlson 1997, 220). It was my choice to make.

Reflecting on these experiences did help to bring meaning to the cultural turmoil I had been under, but what helped me equally to recognize the significance of my cultural history and create a sense of freedom within myself was reading. I would devour any material that was introduced to me pertaining to culture or any book I could find that included the words *biculturalism* and *biracialism*. The more I read the more I understood that there were others like me who were also desperately searching for the answers to the questions 'Who am I?' 'What am I?' These essays and memoirs were written by people who had gone through similar experiences of wanting to be accepted and understood as an individual rather than based on skin color and racial and cultural background. They offered me a glimpse into this ever-changing world where someday we will be able to transcend cultural definitions and stereotypical labels. What I have gained from learning about other people's struggles and their experiences in examining

their own personal histories has enabled me to look at myself and my own history and embrace who I am and who I have become. It was a long journey to get to where I am now, but it was a path worth taking. "If our understanding of race and culture can ripen and evolve, then new and immeasurable measurements about the uniqueness of our identities become possible" (O'Hearn, xiv).

Working on this IPP (Independent Professional Project) was not an easy process. There were times when my fingers would be speeding across the keyboard, my eyes full of tears, trying to keep up with the feelings from the past that were shouting to be heard. I feel relieved and at peace with myself for having been able to go back to the beginning, relive the events of the past, reexamine each incident with a more understanding pair of eyes, so that freedom could be mine at last. "Freedom that comes not only from owning your memory and your life story but also from knowing that you make creative choices in how you look at your life" (Bateson 1989, 41).

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