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2012 JAPANESE AMERICAN LEADERSHIP DELEGATION (JALD) REFLECTIONS

by: Janet Ikeda

East Asian Languages & Literatures, Washington and Lee University

Past President of ATJ

In March of 2012 I traveled to Japan with USJC President Irene Hirano Inouye, Counsel Toshio Odagiri and nine other delegates of the Japanese American Leadership Delegation. It was a privilege to have been selected to join this important delegation. The landscape first revealed itself at the start of our journey as we set down in Tokyo. The ride from Narita Airport to the hotel gave us a glimpse of the newly constructed Tokyo Sky Tree, as it dominated the skyline and symbolized so much of Japan's upward gaze toward the future. Reflecting upon the past, there were signs everywhere down below encouraging Japan to persevere in the struggle of the 3/11 aftermath. From Tokyo we boarded the Bullet Train and traveled to Sendai, where we descended to the coastal region of Ishinomaki to see up close the tremendous power of earth and water. The wisdom of the past taught people to seek higher ground. Looking about we could see the devastation of everything built at sea level. Perched high atop a hill, an ancient shrine remained intact and it was here, we were told, those escaping the great wave found refuge. Piles of rubble, buoys, cars, and shells showed that the ebb and flow of the tsunami swept everything away in its wake and deposited it back on shore in disarray. Now neatly arranged piles, some as high as small mountains

waited for disposal. As we stood atop Hiyoriyama, where Basho once stood on his journey to the deep north, JEN staff told us stories of how hospital patients were brought to the foot of the mountain and carried piggy back up the steep stairs to the top.

It was an honor meeting high government officials, such as Prime Minister Noda and Foreign Minister Gamba. We met business leaders, non-profit change makers, prominent members of the Japanese-American community in Japan and a member of the imperial family. The young people we met in Japan embodied such a feeling of exuberance and hope. Entrepreneurs, volunteers, non-profit organization leaders and survivors alike had that same look of determination. Some of the young business leaders we spoke with in Sendai had left conventional jobs against the wishes of their parents, armed only with a hope of reviving the Tohoku area and a renewed vision of Japan's future. In a world that grows alarmingly more digital and virtual each day, I felt that this very real and tangible wave had awakened everyone. I began to wipe away those images of today's youth sitting listlessly while staring at cellphone screens. At a Beyond Tomorrow banquet in Tokyo, child survivors sang *makenaide, nakanaide* in a moving song that expressed that this was neither a time to give in nor a time for tears. After our meeting with MEXT officials we were guided to a 3/11 exhibition where one striking photograph titled *genki dama* and translated as "Energy Balls," showed hands forming *musubi*, the ultimate Japanese comfort food.

One of the memorable events of the delegation trip was the CGP Symposium on "Empowering Civil Society for the Future of Japan." In the wake of 3/11 the 2012 JALD group was able to participate in a discussion about the crucial issues that face Japan -- the revitalization of community and civil society, the spirit of volunteerism, and the acute realization that *tasuke-au* is essential during tragedy. It is often the case that one needs to travel a long distance to discover something about one's self. Typically, as a lifelong learner and teacher of Japanese, I have turned my gaze outward, hoping to learn all I can about Japan and its people. On this trip I felt myself looking inward. The attributes of strength and resilience of the Japanese people, exhibited so recently in the months following March 2011, were very much a part of the fiber of early Japanese immigrants who ventured to unknown lands in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Four members of our delegation gave presentations. Dr. Paul Watanabe provided a brief profile of Japanese Americans in the U.S. today, Barbara Hibino spoke about NPOs from a Silicon Valley perspective, Mark Mitsui described the spirit of entrepreneurship and Susan Onuma shared her New York experiences relating to empowerment of civil society. The Japanese presenters taught us much about the ongoing work in the Tohoku area and described the particular challenges. They described the challenges to us as the following: few highly specialized NPOs, leadership is not a role that many actively seek, lack of coordination and funding, no social mechanisms for setup and support, the confusion that arises when a safe road map of one's life is washed away, the young and idealistic who are discouraged from straying from a conservative career path. I think we could all empathize and understand these issues from events that challenge us here at home in our own country. I came away with two important lessons; one, that education should not focus solely on curriculum and career. It should also teach people a resilience and flexibility that allows them to deal with the unexpected and inspires them to seek an unpredictable path of helping others. It should encourage finding creative solutions. And, two, that the possibility of failure, which early immigrants encountered on a daily basis, is something modern citizens are finding less familiar. The *gaman* and *ganbaru* mentality of the *issei* now makes sense if we can see that it was naturally accompanied by mistakes and setbacks. We were told that the Japanese have not been teaching their young people that failure is an option. From the JALD presentations I realized that courage and failure are important elements of entrepreneurship and, perhaps, an essential part of restructuring and revitalization.

This trip for me was very holistic in the sense that the personal and professional came together. Life can be a string of occasional intersections and, for the most part, my heritage and profession have remained on distinctly parallel tracks. Studying Japanese literature in graduate school had little to do with my *issei* grandparents' experience in the U.S. Therefore, traveling to Japan with the JALD delegates created an ideal crossroads. It gave me the opportunity to view Japan through a different lens and get to know Japanese American leaders from around the U.S. Our delegation also gave the Japanese an opportunity to meet Japanese Americans of various professions. When I first studied abroad in Japan during the 1970s the word *nikkei* was not widely understood. In addition, this experience helped reshape my image of Japan and renewed my teaching. Before departing, I had beginning Japanese language students learn the stroke order for the character “kizuna.” Advanced students read poetry of Wagō Ryōichi, Kaneko Misuzu, Mado Michio and, of course, Miyazawa Kenji. In the busy moments leading up to the trip, I began to understand that disaster refreshes our vocabulary and gives voice to experiences that at first seem a world away. Miyazawa's well-worn words “ame ni mo makezu, kaze ni mo makezu” seemed to take on new meaning.

A meeting with U.S. Ambassador Roos and the Embassy staff affirmed our belief that the U.S.-Japan relationship is a long and close one. American and Japanese youth feel an affinity for each other and share a new set of cultural icons. When I asked embassy staff to reflect on their own career trajectory, one member said it was essential to focus on kanji and to read the *Nikkei shinbun* on a daily basis without the filter of reading English translations. Another staff member compared the Japanese language boom years of the 1990s to that of the current interest in Chinese. Students who studied a language simply because of a trend seemed to lack the passion necessary to sustain that study. In the face of competing interests, today's Japanese language learner has a true enthusiasm about the language and culture. This will sustain them in their language-learning journey ahead.

Studying world languages is absolutely crucial to developing a genuine interest in people and cultures and leads to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a global citizen. Since the March trip I find myself looking more closely at three groups of young people. One, Japanese Language Learners: More recently I served as the president of the Association of Teachers of Japanese (now a new organization known as AATJ). I was impressed with the many dedicated teachers who are supporting a future generation of avid language learners. Those of us who teach Japanese know that students have both an affinity with and fascination of Japan. They respond to the pop culture that seems to tickle their imaginations. They want to walk the same streets as Murakami Haruki's fictional characters. Since 3/11 there has been no noticeable decrease in the number of students studying Japanese who seek a study-abroad experience in Japan. Two, Japanese Students: I learned on this trip that there has been over the years a steady drop in the number of Japanese students coming to study in the U.S. We realize that there are other places in the world competing for the Japanese student's interest, along with a host of impediments to their going abroad. There is also the puzzling notion that in a shrinking world some find it more comfortable to retreat to the familiar. Even more so than ever before, we need to rededicate our energy to the educational exchange between our two countries. Three, Japanese American students: I would like to propose that we go beyond the overstated use of words such as *gaman* and *ganbaru*, and encourage more Japanese Americans to take up a study of the Japanese language. While we value our heritage and what I often think of as my grandparents' Meiji values, I know that the Japan of today can be just as mystifying as our own children. For young Japanese Americans, learning the Japanese language will reconnect them with a heritage that they may suddenly find remote when older relatives pass away. For the *sansei* baby boomer generation, many who are retired, studying the Japanese language will provide renewed stimulation and encourage travel to Japan. Just as so many people want to take €

European language in order to travel, take a cooking class or understand opera, learning Japanese later in life can be very rewarding, not to mention fun and downright baffling. What would the early *issei* make of terms in Japan today that refer to men as "herbivores" and women as "carnivores"?

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5700 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 100

Los Angeles, CA 90036

P. 323.761.7510

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