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Growing Up

“So much depends on how we understand what happened to us. . . . So much depends on how we tell ourselves the story of our lives, in dreams and day-dreams.”

~ JAMES R. GARNER

HS: As the first daughter in my family of origin, I was taught to dress properly, to speak politely, and to please my parents in every way. I wasn't either encouraged or discouraged toward a career. My duty as the eldest daughter was to be helpful and nice to everybody and to look after my younger brother and sister. It was a matter of pride to me that my behavior was right. My parents didn't even need to express their expectations; I knew what they were and I performed perfectly.

I tried hard to please not only my parents, but everyone. I wasn't an unhappy or frustrated child; there is a certain pleasure in achieving and pleasing others, but I also knew that I wanted to get away. I had a brother who was two years younger, and a sister who was four years younger than I. I was taught that I had to protect them, not just at home but at school and even when we were outside, playing with friends. I always made sure they were safe and comfortable. The habit of caring for others was deeply rooted. Later, if I was traveling with somebody on a bus or train, I always tried to think of a topic I could offer for conversation. It exhausted me. It

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took me a long time to learn that I didn't have to take care of everyone. There's a Japanese saying *happou bijin*—trying to be a beautiful woman in eight different directions. This behavior reveals neediness and the search for reassurance.

In Japan, from the day you enter elementary school to the day you begin junior high at age twelve, you usually have the same teacher for almost every subject and activity. Students are not given the benefit of having different teachers with different styles and perspectives. If you get along with your teacher you'll be fine, but you'll be in trouble if you don't. I had the same teacher throughout elementary school, and I was a model student, the teacher's pet. I got the best grades all the time. I was class vice captain, an athletics star, a soprano in the chorus group, and the library monitor.

My brother, sister, and I went to the same school. Although Yamaguchi is the capital of the prefecture, I felt stifled because of the attractive images I had of the outside world. When I was ten all my favorite television programs were from the United States: *Father Knows Best*, *The Patty Duke Show*, Disney, *Ben Casey* and so on. I thought that television shows were based on real life in America, and that America was a dreamland. Charming girls always met handsome boys, had very understanding parents, and their friends and neighbors were kind and helpful. Houses were neat and tidy, full of convenient electric appliances in the kitchen, and there were many flavors of ice cream and cookies. People dressed fashionably. Their weekends were occupied with dating and parties. Their dinner table conversations were filled with laughter and great stories. I thought that American husbands and wives were constantly attentive to each other, saying "I love you" as often as possible. It was just beautiful! I thought that if I could get to America I too could have that kind of marriage.

Of course my reality at home was different. Marriage for love was unusual at the time, and my parents' life was not like the marriages I saw on television. My mother helped my father with his accounting, but even though she made a great contribution to the company, when the business expanded my father suddenly asked her to quit, because he wanted the company to be seen as more than a family business. She was hurt, and I realized that I didn't have any usable female role models. All the women I knew were controlled by men. Although I've never thought

my mother's or my grandma's lives were sad and miserable, I knew that I didn't want to live as they did.

My grandmother who lived with us was very important in shaping my attitudes towards life, especially during my early childhood. She was a clever woman. She loved reading and told me many old stories about the history of our family and the surrounding community. At the age of thirty-six, she was partially paralyzed by a stroke, but lived until she was sixty-nine. Since she required constant attention, my father expected my mother to be a constant caretaker. The situation was difficult for both my mother and grandmother, even though at that time in Japan it was the social norm for the wife of the first son to take care of his parents. It was by observing my mother and grandmother's lives, that I was motivated to find a different life for myself.

My mother was a smart woman. She was also a perfectionist. She used to sweep every morning and every evening. Every drawer was neat. She had her own way of doing things, and if things didn't satisfy her she was unhappy. On the day of my father's funeral, neighbors came to help. They cooked and cleaned, but after they left, my mother and sister went to the kitchen and cleaned everything again.

Once my father told her, "People respect you more if you sometimes let others help you, even when you know that they will not do as good a job as you would." My mother never learned that. Just after her fortieth birthday she began to suffer from a bad case of rheumatism. It still makes me sad to think of how much she suffered. I was sad when she died, but also relieved that she no longer suffered.

MM: My mother was the same. She let my father enter the kitchen only to wash the dishes after a meal. The kitchen was her kingdom, and she did everything in it efficiently and well. She was not a great cook, but she was a wonderful baker. She made all the family's bread, and every Saturday she made fabulous cinnamon rolls. When Mother died, a neighbor brought a casserole and told my father, "All you need to do is put it in the oven." So that's what he did. He didn't turn the oven on; he didn't know how! I don't know how my father managed after Mother died; I was on the East Coast and he was on the West Coast. Until he remarried three years later, he lived alone and was terribly lonely.

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HS: In a time in which there was tremendous economic expansion and cultural excitement, I had no specific career ambition, and I was free to do whatever I wanted. I was lucky to have been born a girl! My father and uncle had a business that sold agricultural equipment; if I had been a boy, I would have been expected to carry on that business. When we were asked at school what we would like to be, I always said that I wanted to be a teacher. But I was very interested in television and newspapers and what was happening in the rest of the world, so I thought that becoming a journalist was also a possibility for me. Or I thought that I could work for an international organization like the United Nations. At the time, import-export companies were popular, so I thought I could work at one of them. Each of these possible careers was related to the big world beyond the mountains. If none of the careers to which I was attracted worked out, I thought I could always try to find a man.

I did not dream of a career that depended on my looks. I was very self-conscious; I thought that I didn't have a beautiful face or a body that could attract boys, so instead I studied. I told myself that intelligence was more important than looks. In fact, when I was in junior high school my father even told me, "Hiroko you don't have big breasts so I think you should study hard, because that's the way you can get on in the world, instead of being cute or sweet."

When I was fourteen, I saw a documentary about Japan's women's volleyball team that won a gold medal. I really enjoyed seeing how demanding the male manager was; he devoted his entire life to the players. I would have loved to be his wife. The idea of being the "invisible" supporter of a man like that, combined with the influence of those American home dramas, was very powerful propaganda.

I felt that something was missing. I was a good daughter, sister, and student, but until my early thirties I also felt that I was a pretender. I could *act*; but it bothered me that I wasn't being true to myself. I wanted to be independent, but I was not brought up to determine my own life. The first time I insisted on what I really wanted for myself was many years later when my husband was preparing to return to Japan from San Diego. I told him, "I am not going back to Tokyo with you." But that is ahead of the story.

Wanting to see the world motivated me to study English. So when a Catholic boarding school opened a few hours' drive away, I applied for a

scholarship and persuaded my parents to let me go there. Because I was so focused on learning English, I did not take advantage of the fact that the nuns who taught me were native Spanish speakers. Instead of learning Spanish, I learned English from Spanish nuns!

MM: So your parents encouraged your curiosity and your efforts to get the best available education. My parents were fearful of my curiosity, which, they believed, could lead only to my departure from their values. They were ambivalent about education, on the one hand valuing it highly, on the other, fearing that education could damage my soul. Later, they were similarly ambivalent about my teaching at Harvard. They were proud of my achievement, but feared that I would lose my soul in that climate of progressive ideas. My parents' worldview, as immigrants, as religious conservatives, and as people who married during the Great Depression, emphasized that there was "us" and "them." I had no sense of a large and various world in which there were many possibilities for me.

What came next for you?

HS: I became less interested in getting good grades in all my subjects; I began to concentrate on English, literature, and history. During junior high I had been the top student of English in my class. I was able to anticipate rather accurately the questions on the exams by trying to imagine what I would ask if I were the English teacher, and I always got one-hundred percent in those exams. Yet my speaking skills were not good at all because all the emphasis was on grammar and reading; I envied my friends who could say, "Hi! How are you?"

Japanese teachers assumed that there was only one right answer. Because many teachers did not speak English fluently, the answer to any question was limited to what they understood. I began to question why we were always taught the one right answer, inhibiting creativity. This was one reason that I later became interested in studying design; in design solutions to problems could always be found, but one could not predict in advance what the solution would be.

"Live as if you were going to die tomorrow, and study as if you were going to live forever."

~ SENECA

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MM: So you were restless, and *knew* that your education was constricting! This is amazing, because you had no experience of other ways of learning with which to compare your education. But somehow you understood that there must be other ways of learning and you wanted to find them.

HS: In my junior year at boarding school I applied for an American Field Service scholarship, which at that time was the best high school exchange program. I was among about a hundred students from all over Japan who were chosen for the program. I came to the United States and spent one year at Collegiate School in Virginia. The first thing I learned was “Hi y’all!” I lived with a host family who had a daughter my age and an older sister who was in college at the time. The father was a professor at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. The mother was a housewife who taught religion once a week at our school. I had a great time with them. It was a dream family. Every night we had dinner together; the food was always delicious and the father made sure everyone had enough. We talked about our day, and the parents always listened attentively and were there for us whenever we needed them. Every night my American sister kissed her parents good night. The family provided an ideal model of marriage and family life for me.

My school life was full of events and fun, but my high school teachers in Richmond were real educators; they didn’t spoil me. I was treated just like the other students, so with my rudimentary language I struggled a great deal at first. But that year, when I was seventeen and eighteen, taught me to feel comfortable living in two cultures. Of course I was, and am, rooted in Japan, but now I have one foot in Japan and one foot in the United States and other countries. The freedoms, options, and choices really opened up.

MM: So you were in the United States for one year and then you went back to Japan?

HS: Yes, I didn’t graduate from high school in the United States so it was assumed that I would go back to my old high school in Japan and study an additional year in order to graduate. But I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to go to the International Christian University in Tokyo. Before I

went to the United States I had gone to the admissions office and gathered information about applying there. I was really organized! And brave! So I went to the principal of Collegiate School and told her that I needed a diploma in order to apply for the university. They counted the credits from my Japanese high school and the credits from Collegiate, and they were enough for me to graduate, so they gave me a diploma. I saved a whole year that way.

I didn't know, until I went back to Yamaguchi and read my mail, that ICU had accepted me. My American father had written a very strong recommendation for me. So one month after I returned to Japan I entered the university. I took classes in art, philosophy of religion, philosophy, and introduction to Christianity. I majored in English and wrote my thesis on Emily Dickinson. Those subjects gave me the basis for what I do presently.

MM: It sounds as if you were motivated throughout by curiosity combined with a good dose of courage and a lot of energy. Perhaps curiosity is another word for delight. You found the things that attracted and excited you and you pursued them ardently. Another aspect of your story that interests me is that you always actively sought the best educational opportunity you could find. You did not just accept the nearest school, the school all your friends went to. Your commitment to activity rather than passivity was, I think, absolutely critical.

“The happy life is thought to be one of excellence; now an excellent life requires exertion, and does not consist in amusement.”

~ ARISTOTLE

HS: Soon after I got married I got my first teaching job at the American elementary school in Tokyo. I taught Japanese for two years. Then I had a baby, and I didn't teach again for six years. My husband and I went to San Diego and I completed a master's degree in applied linguistics, teaching Japanese language and culture as a full-time lecturer for two years. There was a language institute on the same campus where many Japanese students studied English. I coordinated occasions outside the classroom where my students of Japanese language and culture could meet native speakers of Japanese in a social setting. I created a bridge between the two cultures for the benefit of both Japanese and American students.

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MM: Oh, that sounds like the beginning of your present career!

HS: Yes!

MM: Americans have a stereotype of Japanese women, that they are very shy, but you weren't shy at all!

HS: I am shy in some social occasions.

MM: Oh, you are not!

HS: Yes, I can't dance, for example. I'm also shy in that I don't know how to relax in big parties unless I am in charge of them and I know who I need to introduce to whom, and what I need to say.

MM: In youth, one is attracted by all possibilities that cross one's path, afraid that something will be missed. Of course, that is also how a person learns to be discerning, by trying many things and gradually focusing on opportunities you recognize by your inner delight. Instincts become more trustworthy as you get older and have done good work. You don't have to worry about your decisions quite so much.

I notice that speaking more than one language has been important in both of our careers. For me as an academic, each language I have learned has opened to me another literature with new authors and ideas. Of course, original languages are expected in graduate work, writing, and teaching. Translations are already interpretations of texts, so it is important not to rely on others' translations, but to read the text in its original language.

When I decided to undertake a doctoral program, the only language I knew other than English was French. I had learned French because I had lived in eastern Canada and picked it up there. My parents spoke French when they didn't want us to know what they were saying, so that was great motivation for learning French! But Canadian French sounds strange to French people, so I try not to speak it when I am in France. I think I sound just like them, but they don't like the sound of it!

“Life is too short to devote much of it to activities that are not at the heart of what it is to be human.”

~ MARTHA NUSSBAUM

When I was fifteen and living in Seattle, I was very bored with everything because my parents had strict rules about what I could and could not do. They were immigrants to the United States from Canada and fundamentalist Christians. They felt that the United States was an alien place, characterized by wrong values and spiritual and moral danger. Also, they had married during the Great Depression of the 1930s, an economic situation that frightened them permanently.

My father, a Baptist minister, suffered from depression, so I learned very quickly to sense the atmosphere of the house when I came home from school. If he was happy he could be fun; if not, he could be very difficult. Moreover, my parents' generation seemed to think that they owned their children. My father told me that when I grew up I could be either a missionary or a professional violinist. He had wanted to be a violinist when he was young, and was not able to, so he thought that my life should fulfill his dream.

Every child's first concern is getting and keeping her parents' love, and I felt their love to be so precarious that it could easily be lost by a misdeed. Thus, as a small child, I learned to lie. Because almost anything I wanted to do was forbidden—eating candy, playing, or reading comics on Sunday—later, going to movies or plays at school. As I grew up, lying became habitual. As an adolescent earning babysitting money, I was supposed to send the money to missionaries. When instead I bought clothes with the money I earned, I said that a girl at school gave them to me. I saw my first movie at age seventeen; I stayed overnight with a friend and we went to see *The Glenn Miller Story*.

By the time I was eighteen I had become a very skillful liar, which came in handy when I became pregnant. My father had a colleague whose unmarried daughter got pregnant, and my father had told me that if this ever happened “to him,” he would never preach again. So of course my fiancé and I lied. We got married, and when my daughter was born seven months later, we said that she was premature. My gynecologist agreed to put the wrong weight on her bracelet. She didn't look like a premature baby; she weighed seven pounds, twelve ounces, but her bracelet said five

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pounds, two ounces. However, wanting desperately to believe our lie, my parents did. Later, in psychotherapy, I had to learn to *stop lying*. Even now, I work hard in large and small things to behave in such a way that I don't feel tempted to lie about it.

My parents were always full of apprehension and fear that I would "turn out" wrong. They told me they loved me, usually when they spanked or otherwise disciplined me: "We're doing this for your own good, because we love you." Their religion taught them that a child is by nature wicked and that the only hope for the child was for the parents forcibly to obliterate that evil nature. Years later, a high school friend told me that she always thought that my parents didn't like her. I realized that I also thought they didn't like me. They loved me, but they didn't *like* me. As an alternative to earning their *like*, I tried to make them proud of me.

I had no idea that there was a large world around me, full of possibilities. I sneaked looking at magazines like *True Love* that pictured romance as rebellion, as the ultimate excitement. For me, getting married at eighteen was rebellion. My parents didn't want me to get married; they wanted me to continue my education. Marriage was a way out of my fundamentalist socialization, but it also landed me directly in a different set of social expectations and duties. By the time I was twenty-one I had two children.

HS: So marriage was a way to escape from your parents.

MM: Yes, exactly. I am so grateful that I never learned to type, or I would probably still be someone's secretary. Since I had no marketable skills, I went to school! I'm also grateful that I was not happier in my first marriage, or I would have stayed. But I was unhappy enough that I needed to leave. When I was twenty-two I had an ulcer that threatened to perforate. It was painful enough, and I was young enough, that with the help of seven years of psychotherapy, I was able to change fundamentally.

Two incidents that became wake-up calls for me occurred at the same time as my ulcer. One summer morning my friend Jeannie (who was thirty years old) woke up when she heard her four-month-old baby cry. She had convulsions for thirty seconds and died. She was a healthy young woman; the only advance warning of her death was a small headache the evening before. Her death was not the primary wake-up call, however:

Within four months her husband remarried. For the first time in my life I realized that placing all my energy and hopes in serving my husband and children might not be enough to produce a fulfilling life.

At approximately the same time an acquaintance who was a beautiful and talented lounge singer attempted suicide. Her fortieth birthday occurred and she realized that sooner or later she would lose her looks and her voice. Her suicide attempt prompted me to decide that when I came to be forty, I didn't want to be thinking about how I looked. I wanted to be doing something so interesting that I would not worry about my birthday.

Have you had any powerful wake-up calls that altered the course of your life?

HS: Yes, two. The first one came when I was seventeen, when I first went to the United States as an exchange student. Before that, as I said, my introduction to America was solely from television. I thought that my life in the United States would be totally different from my life in Japan. But what I found out was that even there I woke up, brushed my teeth and . . . *I was the same!* I realized that there is no utopia, that you really just have to get on with living your life wherever you are.

My second wake-up call came in my early thirties, when I returned to Japan from San Diego. I was showing a Japanese guest around Yamaguchi, my birthplace. I took him to the pagoda, which dates from 1433. I suddenly realized it had been built before Columbus discovered America. I had thought that America was the center of culture and technological advances, the powerhouse of wealth and exciting lifestyles, but look! this pagoda was built before Western civilization had even reached there. I realized I had to learn about my own culture, and not just be fascinated by foreign countries. I needed to know my own culture in order to know those other cultures.

I grew up expecting that the world was ruled by wise men who would always lead us in the right direction. My elementary school teacher told me that our country would never again make such a mistake as World War II, and that since Japan had no natural resources we had to develop our human resources. But as Japan's economy began to escalate in the late 1950s, environmental pollution became a very serious issue. At the age of sixteen I became disillusioned about the men who were leading us. It was

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a bit like realizing that Santa doesn't exist. It made me aware that everyone has to take responsibility for his or her community.

How did you pursue your education?

MM: By the time I completed my MA, I was married to my second husband. We both taught at several California community colleges. The district had a rule that only one member of a family could have a full-time job. So of course it had to be my husband. Since I was a part-time teacher, and had my degree in humanities, it was assumed that I could teach anything. So I was assigned at the last moment to teach courses as disparate as world religions, semantics, or English composition. It was not a satisfying teaching experience; I thought that if I got a doctorate I would be able to teach something that I actually knew something about! So I entered a doctoral program.

I continued teaching at a community college in the Sierra foothills three days a week, and I commuted 140 miles each way to Berkeley twice a week. I learned vocabularies of the four required languages on the commute to Berkeley, reserving desk time for learning grammar. It worked for me, though I have never recommended that students learn languages while driving! When I think back to that time, I am amazed that I was able to do it. You had to be young! In short, I eventually got a job teaching at Harvard by a combination of luck and passion for what I was studying, in other words, by chance and choice.

“We are all teachers. And what we teach is what we have to learn.
So we teach it over and over again until we learn it.”

~ FAYE SULTAN AND TERESA KENNEDY

Today, when opportunities come to me, I endeavor to discern whether I can both contribute and learn something from them. For example: when you, Hiroko, and two Buddhist priests came to my home in Berkeley to ask me to write an essay for the Shinjo Ito exhibition catalog, I thought at first that you were talking to the wrong person. I am not an expert on Buddhist art, or even Buddhism. But as we talked, and as you told me your interests and concerns in creating the exhibit, I saw that there were connections with what I have studied and thought about in terms of the use of vision in Western religious practice. I realized that it would be a

good exercise for me to consider religious images in another context than that of Christianity. I had to do a lot of reading, but that was good. I didn't want to just keep doing what I already knew how to do.

SAMPLE