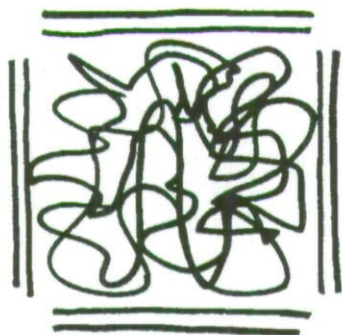


# RECONCILIATION WITH MY PAST: GROWING UP IN A TROUBLED FAMILY IN JAPAN

Wakako Masuno, MSW, La Casa Mental Health Rehabilitation Center, Long Beach, California.

*The following narrative describes the author's experience growing up in a troubled family in Japan and the struggles that contributed to her decision to become a social worker. The experiences that led her to relocate to the United States are described in an effort to increase awareness about the unique cultural attributes that influenced the author's behavior, and the construction of the world view she holds today.*



## Part One: Confusion

In 1976, I was born into an ordinary family consisting of my father, mother, and an older brother in a small suburban town in Yokohama, Japan. My earliest memories of childhood are pleasant: the beautiful mountains where my brother and I would travel to dig bamboo shoots in the spring, chasing cicadas all over the town in the summer, the rice field where tall golden rice crops hid our small, muddy bodies in the fall, and the warmth of the oil-heater in my house during the cold Japanese winters. My childhood was filled with opportunities to enjoy the wonders of the natural world, which nourished my development.

My parents believed that children should act like children; thus we were given the freedom to engage in play without expectations to mature more quickly. School was thought of as a place to develop social competency rather than pursue academic success. My parents did not encourage me to achieve high grades nor discipline me for poor grades, as was prevalent in other families. I enjoyed my childhood; however the freedom and innocence I enjoyed were short-lived, as my parents began to argue on a daily basis.

My happy childhood ended when I was ten years old. My house became a place of anger and sorrow; laughter completely disappeared. My stomach felt sick every time I heard my parents yelling at each other. As a child, I could not understand why they were arguing. My bedroom became my refuge; my sanctuary where I would go to be quiet. Their arguments usually ended with the sound of my father slamming the door as he left the house. My mother would then come to check on me and my brother with a sorry expression on her face.

One such fight occurred during a family dinner. My mother nervously asked my father to spend less money on gambling and alcohol. He responded with degrading verbal abuse. Their argument continued to escalate, and my father swept all the dishes of food from the table as if he was entitled to do anything he wished. My mother was crying, picking up shattered plates from the floor, and repeatedly apologizing to me and my brother. Although I felt the urge to help her, I was so unsure of what to do or say that I simply sat still in my chair. She started to cook for us again, but by then I had no appetite.

My father went out drinking and gambling nearly every night during that time. He owned a small air-conditioning company, and our family was considered an upper-middle class household at the time. However the business did not succeed as my father planned, and he would not modify his lifestyle to fit his income: he spent more than he earned. It did not take long for my father to run up a large amount of debt. My mother tried everything she could to save money, but her tireless efforts could not catch up with my father's spending.

One night, I was awakened by the sound of a thud. I heard my father yelling on the first floor. I quietly crept downstairs to see why they were arguing. I opened the door to the living room to see my mother crying, lying on the floor: I knew that my father had struck her. My father commanded me to go back upstairs, but I ignored him and tried to help my mother sit up. My father grabbed my arm and threw me aside. My mother tried to protect me, but he hit her again in the face. A whirlwind of emotions overcame me. I was furious, scared, sad, and confused as to why he chose to do this to us. I took my mother upstairs after he left the house, hoping he would never return. That night, I went to bed crying, mourning the loss of the joy and love in my family. The next morning I went searching for my mother, but she was nowhere to be found. The house was quiet, which only served to heighten my anxiety. I checked my parents' bedroom and found my father still in bed looking exhausted from his late night. I asked him where she was, but he did not know. Panic set in. I thought she left us and was not coming back. I was angry at my father for hitting my mother, but I was also angry at my mother for leaving me alone.

When she finally returned later that day, the relief I felt could not displace the anger that had taken root in my heart. I could not speak to either of my parents, choosing instead to isolate myself in my room and wait for the anger to dissipate. I became very insecure due to the unpredictability of day-to-day life with my father. The uncertainty of what would happen next made me anxious, and I felt like I was walking on eggshells whenever my father was home. I tried to make sure everything was perfect to avoid upsetting him. I felt a great sense of accomplishment whenever I was able to make everyone laugh at the dinner table, and hoped it was a sign that my family could regain a sense of normality. However, soon after my eleventh birthday, I realized that my efforts were useless. My parents finalized their divorce, and on a cold winter night, my father finally left our house.

Due to the chaotic year prior to my parents' divorce, I was too emotionally drained to feel much turmoil during the divorce. I was somewhat relieved that I did not have to witness any more hatred and sadness in my house. No one felt the need to yell or cry anymore, and the nights became very quiet. Soon after my father left, my mother started working day and night to make ends meet. My father did not provide any financial support for our family, so my mother took on the responsibility of being the provider. In order to pay the mortgage and put food on the table, she worked a minimum wage job during the day. After she came home and prepared

dinner for me, she would leave for work at a bar serving alcohol until 3 a.m. I saw my mother only in the morning and before dinner; I spent most of time by myself watching television. It was a lonely time, but I could never tell my mother how I felt because I knew she was trying to give me the best life she could.

Sunday was her day of rest, so I got into the routine of preparing Sunday breakfast. I loved this routine because it gave me the opportunity to feel important helping my mother. My cooking was, of course, not as good as hers, but I felt so fulfilled when my mother smiled and said, "It is good, thank you." Sunday breakfast also provided me with a sense of security and closeness with my mother: my bright spot in my week of loneliness and uncertainty.

My fifteen year old brother attended high school during this time but dropped out shortly after my parents' divorce, choosing to work at a landscape company rather than finish his education. The company provided him lodging, and he seemed to enjoy the taste of freedom for the first time in his life. I was only twelve and had no choice but to stay with my mother in an increasingly empty house.

The first year following my parents' divorce was one of solitude. I struggled against feelings of abandonment and seclusion. However, when I enrolled in junior high school, I began to find companionship among other children of divorced parents. Most of my friends were from single-mother households, which meant plenty of unsupervised time in the after school hours. At first I felt guilty for leaving my house at midnight to see my friends, then hurrying back right before my mother returned from her night shift. My friends and I spent our time together talking and laughing. I felt a great sense of belonging when I was with them, as they could relate to my family situation.

Late one night, just for fun, we decided to visit our school. The idea of entering our empty school at night filled us with excitement. The feeling quickly turned to anxiety, however, when we arrived and discovered several senior students were there as well. They welcomed us, and in their hospitality shared their cigarettes. I did not want to smoke, but felt obligated to accept the offer as it came from a person older than me and I did not want to offend them. My friends and I quickly learned this was one way to appease our acquaintances, both during school and at our late-night *rendezvous*. On other occasions, we were introduced to students from neighboring districts and new activities besides smoking: sniffing thinner (volatile solvent).

The smell of thinner was so disgusting that I thought I could not keep inhaling when I first tried it. However, my sense of smell was overridden by the effect of thinner on my brain, and I quickly became "high." Thinner became the love of my life, my new obsession. I tried to sniff it as often as I could with my friends, and sometimes by myself. I liked the sensation of becoming gradually detached from my cognition as if I was sinking into deep water away from any awareness of self or environment. I would lose my memory and sense of time: three to four hours passed in a flash. I was hesitant at the beginning about sniffing thinner, but the fear of losing my friends was greater than my mortality. I was desperate for companionship and I was strongly attached to my friends. Thus, my addiction to thinner was compounded with my desire to feel connected to my circle of friends.

I kept my addiction secret from my mother, until she received a phone call from the local police station to let her know that I had been arrested for abusing a controlled substance. When I saw my mother's face filled with sadness and anger, I was consumed with guilt. She did not say a word to me, but rather made a deep bow to the officers, took my arm, and led me to her car. I wanted to apologize for my actions, but words evaded me. Shortly after we left the police station, my mother suddenly ran the car onto the sidewalk, sobbing hysterically, and yelling, "Why? Why did you have to do that? Why?" I felt scared and ashamed of making my mother cry uncontrollably. As I watched her from the passenger seat, the memory of our old Sunday breakfasts flashed into my mind. The realization that my actions had wounded my mother, whom I loved so dearly, made a deep impression on me. It had been almost three years since my mother had taken on the role of financial provider, and we had grown apart, though unaware of how much our relationship had been damaged until now.

Though my arrest alerted my mother to my addiction to thinner and other problems, she could not leave her night job to stay home and supervise me, and there was no one to help her. My mother had no living relatives: her sister committed suicide when I was four years old, her brother died from alcoholism when I was eight, and she never even knew her biological mother. We did not keep in contact with relatives on my father's side either, which meant that my mother, my brother, and I were our only support system. My father would visit me sporadically whenever he felt lonely, but offered no help in terms of child support. The weight of supporting a family rested on my mother's shoulders, and her only daughter's newly found self-destructive tendencies only added to her

worries. Yet after the arrest, I still sniffed thinner occasionally and hung out with my precious friends constantly.

Japan has a unique educational system compared to the United States. When a student decides to attend a high school, a "high-school entrance exam" has to be taken and passed with an acceptable score for the desired school. Each school determines potential candidates for continuing their secondary education by their T-score and academic report during their junior high school years. Students who meet these criteria may then sit for the exam. If a student's T-score falls below the standard set by their choice school, the student must choose a school from the lower ranked pool which can affect their available choices for attending universities in the future. Thus, parents felt the need to encourage their children to succeed academically in junior high school so that their chances for attending a "superior" high school increased.

Given this educational system and my own foolish decisions to sniff thinner and pay little attention to my studies, I had no choice of selecting a high school because my T-score and school report had too many F's. At first, I thought of not attending a high school and getting a job. But my mother insisted on the importance of education in providing for my future. Even though I had no plans or dreams for my future, my mother put me into a private high school for girls where strict rules were imposed. She paid a large enrollment fee in hopes that this new placement would cure me of my behavioral problems, and remake me into the "good" daughter she'd lost. I felt frustrated for being unable to decide my own future, thinking that I was ready for the real world as an independent individual. The school became a reason to hate everything: I hated the train ride every morning, I hated the uniform that killed my individuality, and I hated the rigid rules that suppressed my will. I kept these feelings bottled inside, unable to tell my mother how much I hated everything because I knew that she was doing everything she could to send me to a private high school, a privilege that even a two-income household had difficulty affording. I did not know how my mother managed to pay for everything; however, her efforts did not last for too long.

When the summer vacation of my freshman year was coming to a close, I found a job at a coffee shop and applied for a full-time position to wait tables, determined to drop out of high school. I was fifteen years old at the time. When I heard from the shop that I was hired, I felt a great sense of relief as if it was a ticket to the freedom I longed

for. This feeling of elation was mixed with anxiety as I wondered how to tell my mother the news. I decided not to tell my mother right away. When school started back up, I put on my school uniform every day pretending I was going to school. Then I changed my clothes in the bathroom of the nearest station. My lie was uncovered when the school called my mother after hearing nothing from her about my absences for two weeks. One day, when I came home from the coffee shop, my mother was in the living room waiting for me. She blankly told me to sit down and asked, "Why haven't you gone to school for the last two weeks?" My mind worked very fast to look for words that might calm my mother down, and I explained that I decided to drop out of high school to work full-time at the coffee shop. The effort was useless; I could not help my mother comprehend my decisions. "Please, please go to high school, at least," my mother sobbed, just like the night I was arrested. My only recourse was to sit still, feeling guilty for becoming a bad person that made her sad all the time. In my eyes, my mother and I had become too different and did not understand each other like we used to do. She did not speak a word to me that night, and I cried myself to sleep.

My mother insisted that I return to high school and continued to pay tuition until the end of my freshman year. However, I ignored her wish and retained my job at the coffee shop, working long hours there to show my mother my determination. I enjoyed my job and the freedom that came with earning a steady paycheck. Even though my meager salary hardly compared with the average Japanese income, it was quite a fortune for a high school dropout. My mother made me contribute one-third of my monthly income towards my living expenses. I was unhappy with this decision, but in order to prove to her that I was ready to take on adult responsibilities, I agreed.

Everything seemed to go as planned except my relationship with my mother. I did not care for her treating me like a child; likewise, she disliked how I conducted myself as an independent young woman. Even though we saw little of each other due to our conflicting schedules, whenever we were in each others' company we would argue. One particular argument escalated to the point where I exclaimed, "I am paying YOU, so don't mind my business!" I regretted my words immediately, but the damage had already been done. My mother quietly told me, "Okay, I don't need your money anymore, so leave my house right now." I wanted to apologize, but my stubborn pride would not let me. I left my mother's house without another word. I knew that I had nowhere to go, but I was weary of

feeling like I could not meet my mother's expectations; I was tired of the guilt that overcame me every time I let her down and watched her cry. I wandered by a river for hours, musing over our troubled relationship. As it grew dark, I headed to the train station to visit my father, hoping he would somehow help me from the devastation which threatened to overwhelm me.

After the divorce, my father moved in with his mother who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. Due to his intemperate life, he became ill, lost his job, and was living on welfare. Yet my father could not accept responsibility for his actions. He often spoke of his hatred for life and for those who were culpable for his current situation. He blamed everyone except himself. My father continued his gambling habits, visiting the local casino everyday. The money he received from his welfare check every month could not satisfy his addiction, which just added to his anger and frustration with his life. In my eyes, my father's life was miserable. Learning of his present circumstances added to my own misery. I began to blame myself for all the difficult situations that had arisen in my family. I questioned myself, "What if I had tried to save their marriage? What if I tried to intervene more when they were arguing?" The questions swirled around in my head with little hope of an acceptable answer. My wishful thinking of being saved from my own devastation died and was replaced by the conviction that my father could not reach beyond his own weakness to help me.

In the beginning, my father seemed to enjoy my presence and the help that I offered him in acting as the caregiver for my grandmother and my father. Yet, I became weary of listening to his constant complaints. I felt pity for him, yet felt anger at his selfishness. Because I loved and despised him simultaneously, I became insecure of my father's love for me. I wanted to ask him why he left us, but I could never bring up the question because I was scared to hear the truth. I did learn that nothing in his life ever brought him true happiness or fulfillment, not even his children. After living with my father for a month, I decided to go back to my mother's house. Even though I was unsure of my welcome in her home, I could not stay with my father any longer. His misery compounded my own, and I needed to be free from that bondage and guilt.

My mother accepted my return under the conditions that I show her respect and modify my behavior. I did my best to adhere to her request, which improved our relationship dramatically. By the time I was 16 years old, my mother quit her second job and decided to sell the house she had

tried so hard to keep for six years. The sale of the house paid the debt my father left, and gave her the luxury of spending time with me. My mother had been obsessed with owning a house in an effort to reclaim her poverty-stricken childhood, growing up in a dark, tiny apartment with an alcoholic father. She spoke of her dream for my brother and me: a warm, bright, comfortable home where we could happily reside. However, this dream house became empty and full of sorrow after the pain of my parents' strife-filled marriage and bitter divorce; it lost the meaning of home. After my mother gave up the house, our life became calm; a feeling that hadn't been present for the past six years. We could now rebuild our relationship.

While I enjoyed my mother's presence, I had difficulty finding the words to express this to her. The past six years consisted of days filled with frustration and confusion. I wanted to place the blame on someone, but I knew that there was no one to blame. Our circumstances were inevitable. Although I was rational, my emotional status was very insecure and I was fearful about being hurt again. I sought solace in romantic relationships, trying to forget my negative feelings by focusing my attention on my boyfriend. He became a source of normalcy in my life. He gave me the love and attention I longed for, which fueled my addiction for his affection. We met nearly everyday, and I became obsessed with him. I succumbed to feelings of panic and fear when I was unable to reach him by phone, or when we argued over trivial matters. My days quickly became an emotional rollercoaster; one day I felt secure in our relationship and my life, and the very next day I was preoccupied with fears of my boyfriend abandoning me like my father did. I had unfairly placed my hope of safety and protection onto this young man's shoulders, which was more than he could handle. We broke up after two stormy years. Once again, I was devastated at being abandoned.

My late teenage years and early twenties were consumed with romantic relationships. I was continually searching for that one person who could fill my inner void and wipe away my panic of being alone. Even though I was blessed with supportive family and friends, I could not satisfy my inner longing for emotional fulfillment. My mother no longer instructed me in how to live my life, but cautioned me to make wise decisions and find happiness within myself. Friends were my shelter from loneliness and my healing salve for my more destructive relationships. I appreciated their love and support, yet I longed for something more.

My romantic relationships during my teens and early twenties always ended on a bitter note as I realized time and time again that no one could save me from being alone. After each relationship ended, I felt emotionally devastated. As my search for emotional fulfillment showed itself to be futile, I blamed myself. I reasoned if I were somehow a better person, no one would want to leave me.

My relationship with my father during this period in my life was estranged. Although I saw him on a regular basis, my feelings toward him were a mixture of anger and sadness, observing how he chose to live his life. I had been working as a full time employee, and he became financially dependent on me. My father's welfare money did not support his lifestyle and he would ask for a little allowance whenever we met. He always promised to pay me back, but that only happened when he won his gambling bets. While it was difficult to hand over money knowing it would go straight towards his gambling addiction instead of providing for necessary things, I said nothing about it.

I knew he would never listen to my concerns, and I could not make him change. It also hurt me to watch him leave our lunch meetings hurriedly, anxious to get to the casino. I wondered if the sole purpose for our get-togethers was for money. Did my father even care about having a relationship with me? I wished for the latter idea, but whenever he stopped calling me for a little while after winning at a casino, I was pretty sure he did not need me for anything else.

In my late teens, I felt an obligation to see my father only when he needed me. I felt little affection for his behavior and his bad decisions. But he inspired me to look for a different way of life, one that was not bound up in the chains of addiction and selfish living. I felt guilty for feeling this way about him, and for watching him as a passive observer instead of actively trying to help him change. This just added to my emotional wounds.

I never told anyone about the complicated relationship I had with my father. I wanted to vent my frustrations, but I was scared of being judged and labeled an ungrateful daughter. Occasionally, my mother asked how our relationship was progressing, but I refused to confide in her because I did not want to complain about it. Through my experiences with my father, I became more aware of what my mother endured during her marriage. I knew that my mother had felt a great sense of guilt that she had put her children in a difficult situation after the divorce. Wanting to lessen her emotional load, I kept my feelings to myself. It seemed the

only compensation to make up for my early adolescent problems.

When I was twenty one years old, I became involved with a man I was sure I would be with for



rest of my life. There was an instant attraction between us, and I fully believed that his existence completed my happiness. As the honeymoon period waned, I started to see the incompatible nature of our personalities and visions for life. However, my longing for companionship triumphed over my reason. I ignored the red flags and instead hoped that if I molded myself to his expectations, everything would turn out fine. I tried everything I could to make him happy, while at the same time looking for any sign that my efforts were futile. I became a woman consumed with fear, someone distantly related to the person I was before.

About a year into our relationship, we got engaged and decided to live together. I believed things were finally going in the right direction: the security of marriage. However, my efforts to change my personality began to take their toll. My unstable emotional state ignited arguments, and as the fights became more intense, I would become hysterical. My insecurity could not be hidden any longer and threatened to uproot my happiness. This emotional rollercoaster ceased after one particularly violent fight when he hit me and left, leaving me behind with a bruised face and a wounded spirit.

Injured both physically and emotionally, I returned to my mother's house. She asked few questions of what had happened between us, and I was thankful that she refrained from touching my deep wounds. Depression engulfed me, and I became a recluse. I quit my job, avoided all contact with friends, and rarely left the house. When the fog lifted, I tried to regain a sense of everyday life. When I looked for a job that offered a living wage, reality hit home. There were no such jobs available for a high school dropout. I worried that I would have to work minimum wage jobs for the rest of my life. Panicked and unsure of what steps to take, I

forged a false academic background on my resume listing me as a high school graduate. I finally realized my decision to drop out of high school was unwise.

My deception seemed to pay off, and I was hired at a computer company as a temp staff member. I had no prior experience working in an office, but co-workers kindly taught me everything I did not know. In return, I worked very hard to learn new skills and performed tasks as quickly as possible to supplement my lack of education. While I enjoyed my new responsibilities, the shame of padding my resume grew, as well as fear that someone would discover my lie.

About a year into my job, I met an older woman who had worked for the company for almost ten years. I was surprised to hear that she was working in the same position for so long without getting promoted. Usually men who work for a company for ten years receive promotions for management positions. Women do not receive the same recognition, and I wondered why.

The answer was embedded in Japanese culture in which woman's ultimate happiness is thought to come from being a good wife and mother. Within this male dominant society, women entering the workforce were believed to be temporary employees, as they were meant to find husbands and settle down into their new roles as housewives and mothers. This limitation did nothing to alleviate my anxiety and fear. However, instead of rushing headlong into another disastrous dating relationship, I chose to be by myself and endure the loneliness.

While working for this company, I met several co-workers who had studied abroad. Their experiences sounded very foreign to me, but the educational system in America interested me very much, mainly the freedom that allows students to return to school whenever they wished. In Japan, I needed to obtain a high school equivalent diploma in order for me to enroll in a college, which would take three to four years as a part time student. After completing high school, I would have to pass a competitive entrance exam to even begin my college education. Completing a Bachelor's program in Japan would take seven to eight years for me. This was too daunting for me to even contemplate. I started to research the U.S. educational system to determine if this road was a viable option for me. Since I had learned very little English at the time, researching on the internet in English was very challenging. With the help of co-workers, I found out that there were several community colleges in America that accepted foreign students without a high school diploma if

the person was eighteen years or older. In addition, that student would be eligible for transferring to a university after the completion of General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and Associate of Arts degree. The whole process would only take two years. I saw a dim, but strong light of hope in my future.

The prospect of receiving an American education, however, proved to be expensive. My meager savings could not begin to foot the bill. The average tuition for an international student costs about ten times more money than it does for U.S. citizens. I was faced with finding \$40,000 to pay for four years of higher education. Since my current job could not provide these necessary funds, I decided to work a second job at a bar serving drinks just like my mother did when she divorced my father. My days became a whirlwind of work and exhaustion. I was driven to achieve my dreams and to take control of my future instead of waiting for someone else to come and fill my voids. Although I was exhausted all the time, I felt fulfillment for the first time in my life.

My mother seemed happy about my decision to continue my education in America and told me to live my life as fully as I wished. My father however, was not supportive at all. He questioned my reasons for going while encouraging me to marry instead, saying it would solve all my problems. He asked, "Why do you have to leave me alone?" with a puzzled expression on his face as if my decision was beyond his comprehension. While I desired to defend myself and my decisions, I left our meeting feeling guilty for embarking on this new journey to improve my life. Again, I learned that my father could not see beyond his own needs for my well-being. I realized that I had never forgiven him since that winter night when he walked out on our family.

As time progressed, I received added insight into my relationship with my mother. After a small argument, my mother broke down in hysterics. She told me about her anxiety and depression due to severe stressors at work. My mother had started working for a company part-time, but, due to her work performance, she received promotions and became a director in the company. It was rare for a middle-aged divorced woman to be able to climb the corporate ladder, even in small companies. She had co-workers who were resentful of her success and would not acknowledge her role as their supervisor. They treated my mother with disrespect and attempted to usurp her position. My mother tried to ignore the spiteful acts of the other employees, but it reached the point where it affected her well-being. The managers in her company did

not offer much support, due to their fear of losing other workers.

Enraged by this information, I was faced with the knowledge that my mother was tired and beaten by the world. She had attempted to deal with this situation all alone, like every other hardship she had experienced. I finally realized how self-centered I had been, focusing solely on my own life without acknowledging her struggles and pain.

My mother stopped going to work and was consumed with depression. I took her to see a psychiatrist, as the idea of actually dealing with depression was something entirely foreign to me. At first, my mother showed resistance due to the stigma that Japanese culture attached to psychiatrists and mental health. In fact, the very concept that she suffered from depression added to her distress. With a fair amount of coaxing, she finally agreed to go. She was diagnosed with depression, and her recovery started with medication and bi-weekly therapy with a psychiatrist. She resigned from the company and focused on the treatment. We thought about suing the company for the unfair treatment, but even if she could gain monetary compensation for her pain, going through the emotional trauma once again was not worthwhile. Fortunately, the medication and treatment were effective, and my mother gradually regained a balanced emotional state. Watching my mother work through her issues caused me to think twice before leaving for America, but she sensed my hesitation and insisted that I carry out my plan. She said, "You could never imagine how happy I was when you told me you wished to continue your education, even if it means you will be away from me." She then gave me \$20,000 that she had saved little by little for my wedding since I was a kid. She told me to use the money for my education instead of a big wedding, since that was what I wanted. Her unconditional love and support was so apparent; I wondered how I had never appreciated it before that moment.

The day for my departure finally arrived. I was twenty seven years old at the time. I had been accepted to a community college in San Jose, California. I made all the necessary preparations and said all the goodbyes. The last goodbye was to my father. The expression on his face told me not to go, but I pretended I did not see it. I wanted no more guilt from him. My mother came to the airport to send me off, which made leaving much more difficult. I could not say anything, and just cried when it was time for me to go through the gate. Walking away, I looked back to see my mother for one last time. Her figure gradually became smaller and smaller in the distance until she

disappeared from my sight. My new adventure had begun. All I could do then was to try to believe that this decision had been necessary to make my life brighter and better.



### Part Two: Realization

After a nine hour flight, I arrived at the San Francisco airport. The picture of my new ideal life had faded during the journey. Even though I had self-studied English for the two years prior to my departure, I still struggled with even simple conversations in this unfamiliar language. My one comfort was my living situation. I had arranged to room with an American family experienced in housing foreign students. I connected with them immediately upon my arrival, which helped ease me into my new home.

The first quarter at the community college proved to be challenging as well. I found myself to be behind the other students, particularly in English and math. I could not write a single sentence without making a mistake, and fractions were a mystery to me. To help me catch up with the curriculum, I was provided with tutors. The amount of work I was given was overwhelming; the idea of going back to Japan entered my mind at least three times a week. To ease my homesickness, I told myself over and over: "I can go back anytime I want, so try one more day." When I called my mother in Japan, I pretended as if everything was going smoothly to keep her from worrying about me.

With the help from my tutors and classmates, I passed the classes I was taking that first quarter. While I was elated at this first taste of success, the hardest part had just begun. There were numerous classes I needed to take in order to obtain a GED while also fulfilling the requirements for an Associate degree. My course load had to include six classes each quarter in order to transfer to a university within two years. This plan seemed insurmountable to me, but I was unwilling to give

up. I had started my journey of self-discovery and I could not turn back.

My academic plan was to obtain an Associate degree in human behavior from the community college, then transfer to a university to major in psychology. I chose psychology because the course work fascinated me. I could not get enough of the theories and concepts that analyze and explain human behaviors in various social contexts. Beyond finding the subject matter interesting, I felt that the knowledge I was gaining also filled my empty void. I spent everyday writing papers and reading hundreds of pages, and I enjoyed being excessively occupied with tasks. For the first time, I felt that my life had a purpose. One year into my studies, I was offered a job as a teacher's assistant for General Psychology. Even though I felt momentary hesitation about my qualifications for the position, I did not let fear stand in my way. I facilitated three groups per week, assisting eight students per group with understanding the material. It was exhilarating to be able to help students who were facing challenges similar to my own, and helped build my self-esteem as I realized I had an inner strength I'd never known before.

While I enjoyed my new experiences in America, I still missed my family and friends. The summer break of my second year afforded me the opportunity to return to Japan for a few months. Returning to my homeland was refreshing. I had grown accustomed to my new life and had forgotten how easy it was to converse with others in my native language and live once more among familiar surroundings and customs. Growing up in a homogeneous society in which I had no difficulty communicating with others, I had never questioned this basic ability to verbally communicate. I wondered what other areas in my life I had taken for granted.

During that summer, I spent as much time as possible with my mother and visited my father on a weekly basis. After my mother was diagnosed with depression, our relationship matured as we pledged to have open communication with each other. She consistently took her antidepressant, which seemed to stabilize her moods. I spent quality time with her, making the most of my opportunity to be home with her again. My father, however, was still unhappy with my ambitions, and explicitly suggested that I remain in Japan instead of returning to school in California. "There must be a school that you can go in Japan. Don't you want to get married and have a kid?" I gently ignored his comments, hoping that someday he would understand.



Life at community college gradually settled into a routine. I met many people and even dated a few, but my main focus was my education and achieving my goals. It was the first time in my life that I had applied so much energy into improving myself. As I prepared to transfer to a university, it became necessary to narrow down my emphasis in my field of study. While psychology still intrigued me, I did not find the research aspect attractive. Instead, I wanted to use my new-found knowledge to actually work with individuals instead of merely analyzing their behavior. My professor recommended that I investigate social work as a possible career. In my research, I discovered that the social work profession utilizes multidisciplinary information to promote the well-being of individuals in society, with great consideration given to culture and environment. This corresponded with my own vision for life.

After my childhood experiences of watching my family suffer, I often thought that if we had had support, our circumstances would have been different. However, the Japanese culture does not allow for such a support system. Because we were not able to deal with our problems solely within the family, we were segregated from the rest of society as if we were second class citizens. There was no advocacy for families like ours in Japan at that time. When I discovered advanced social work in America and learned that it existed to help individuals strive for their welfare despite their adverse life experiences, I found the direction for my life. It was extremely clear: I was to become a social worker.

Because of my tight budget, my university choice had to come from the pool of the California State University (CSU) system. My two main options were San Diego State or Long Beach. After careful consideration, I chose staying close to a big city where the demand for social workers was high. CSU Long Beach became the next step in my academic journey. While I still felt anxiety with each new change, fear did not take over my heart as it once did. During my graduation from the community college, I reflected on my personal growth over the past few years. Life had challenged me both personally and academically, but with the support of my family, friends, and professors, I had overcome them. I was confident for the first time in my life that change was possible. A sense of accomplishment added more light to my hope for the future. A day after the graduation, I packed everything in my car and headed to Los Angeles.

Living in Southern California was much more comfortable compared to San Jose, due to a larger Japanese population. The information I was

learning through my studies began to shed light on my own family's experiences, and through the process of analyzing and understanding my parents' behavior, old wounds started to heal. I realized how society, culture, family, and individuals interacted with each other to create circumstances similar to the situations we had experienced. They could not be separated one from another. As I progressed in the course, I was able to assign meaning to my past events. My confusion and insecurity during my adolescence appeared to be rooted in the emotional instability in my childhood; my primary needs in childhood were not met due to my parents' divorce. Throughout my life, I had been searching for someone or something to fill the void created by the lack of attention and instability I experienced. My social work education made me aware of myself and how my past had shaped my present.

This new found understanding of "self" made it possible for me to finally accept my personality and flaws. I was a product of my unalterable past; however, my future was wide open. I was not destined to follow in my parents' footsteps—I could choose my own path. In order for me to do this, I had to take care of the wounds I had neglected for years, starting with forgiving my father for abandoning me. My anger towards him had hardened my heart. I had despised myself as someone unworthy of love and denied myself the dignity of grieving for the relationship I had lost. As long as I held onto this grievance, I could never be set free and experience true peace. To begin this healing process, I verbally walked through past hurts with my mother and close friends. It was painful to relive memories and the emotional turmoil that accompanied them.

During this self-recovery, I received a phone call from my brother telling me that my father had been diagnosed with cancer. Due to a pre-existing illness, he was not strong enough to go through chemotherapy, which left him few options to beat the disease. The doctor predicted he would live a year at the most. It didn't leave us very much time.

I flew back to Japan to see my father during the winter break of my junior year at CSU Long Beach. He was thinner than the last time we met, and he knew his time on earth was limited. He thanked me for coming back and was happy to see me; a first in our relationship. While some of my anger towards him had dissipated, it was still difficult to accept him as he was. Too much water had gone under the bridge. When the time came to return to school, I chose to go back to America despite his entreaties for me to stay. While I worried about my father's welfare and felt guilty for leaving

him in his physical state, it was not enough to make me quit everything I had established in America. I had worked hard at establishing my life away from his influences, and I needed to preserve my independence. But to ease my guilt, I resolved to spend my school breaks with him until he succumbed to his disease.

For my summer break at the end of junior year, I spent two months in Japan. My father was in a hospital waiting for death. I saw him on a daily basis, and brought him small comforts to ease his last days. During my visits with him we did not talk much, but our time together soothed the confusion that I had experienced. I hope it was the same for him. The last time we saw each other, he wished me good luck and told me to take care of myself, smiling at me in his familiar way. I wanted to say something, but I could not stop crying. After I pulled myself together, I told him, "I will see you again when I come back this winter." However, I knew in my heart this was our final goodbye.

Two weeks later I received the call from my brother in Japan to let me know that my father had passed on. Even though his death was expected, grief still hit me hard. I arrived back in Japan an hour before his funeral. It was a quiet ceremony with few mourners, just family. I was able to keep my composure until the cremation, but when his coffin was pushed into the flames all the tears I'd held back for so long came forth in a flood. I grieved for my father's life and mine, and for the relationship we would never fully share. I had written my father off as a selfish individual who could not give his family what they desperately needed. As I watched his remains go up in smoke, I wondered if it might have been the best he could give me as a father. My father did not love me in the way I wanted, but he taught me a valuable lesson on forgiveness and releasing past hurts when it is needed. I believe it added resilience to my personality, this last gift from him.



## Epilogue

In May 2007, I graduated with my Bachelor's degree in social work. It had been a rough road with many obstacles to overcome, but when I reflect back on my past trials and triumphs, I'm proud of myself for achieving my dream. The past had shaped me: my parents' divorce, my unwise adolescent choices, the feelings of hopelessness and fear, and finally the forgiveness I experienced contributed to my inner strength. My studies helped me find my true self, and my life began to have hope and meaning.

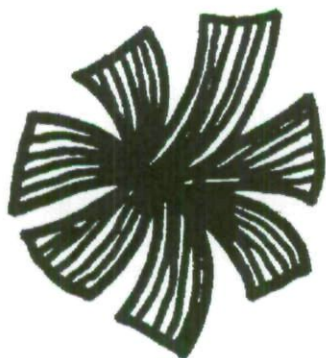
My mother traveled to America for the first time for the big event: my graduation. Even though she did not understand any English, she seemed to enjoy meeting the faculty and my friends. Each time I introduced my mother to someone she expressed her appreciation (in Japanese) and bowed to everyone for helping me in their various ways, urging me to translate everything. She shared my thankfulness for the second chance I had been given and the support from others to help me succeed. Her visit was wonderful, and when she left she told me, "I was proud of you at the graduation." That one comment erased years of guilt that I had still carried for my past mistakes, and for making her worry. I could accept her unconditional love for me, as I could now love and accept myself. My mother's life became an example for me: always strive for happiness despite adverse consequences that may hinder the quest.

My academic journey continues on towards a Master's degree in social work, with the goal of one day serving the mentally ill population. Because I watched my mother suffer from depression for so many years, I have become intimately acquainted with the lack of understanding in society about mental illness. Mental illness is truly devastating, yet recovery is possible with adequate support and treatment. I have compassion for those who may be temporarily lost and overwhelmed by their circumstances; I can relate to their situations. The experience of loss of hope and the inability to plan for the future allows me to empathize with the feelings of devastation and confusion that follow. This has given me the skill to understand the suffering that people experience, as well as see their potential for change. It has given me a clear understanding of the change process and the time, courage, and self awareness necessary for change to take place.

My mother is visited America once again when I graduated with my Master's degree. Even though we have lived thousands of miles apart for years, our relationship has never been closer. Working through our issues has strengthened our bond; it

is the orchid growing up from the ashes. Reconciliation with my past continues on. It is a long and winding road towards healing, yet each step along the way grows just a little bit easier. The past cannot be changed, though I am learning from my mistakes to choose the direction of my future. Hardships and challenges will come and go, but I am hopeful for my life and excited about what each new day will bring.

Wakako Masuno, MSW, is a Psychiatric Social Worker at La Casa Mental Health Rehabilitation Center in Long Beach, California. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: [wakako0129@gmail.com](mailto:wakako0129@gmail.com).



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