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Tsubaki Grand Shrine Reflection

Underneath the shady trees of Tsubaki Grand Shrine in Japan, hidden at the sacred wells, scattered around the waterfalls, and set among the *koi* ponds, are frogs statues big and small. These amphibians deck the shrine's property as they are associated with the main *kami*, spirit, of the shrine: Satarunohiko. He's the leader of the Earthly *kami*, the *kami* of guidance, harmony and direction. One story of Satarunohiko is how he died and three days later was resurrected back to Earth. Thus the association with *kaeru*, the Japanese word for frog which is also the word for come back home.

Coming to Japan was a *kaeru* moment for me as the shrine's located in the prefecture I formerly lived in as an English teacher. Beyond however the physicality of returning home to the place I once lived, my stay at Tsubaki Grand Shrine was a *kaeru* moment for me spiritually- as I felt through the spiritual practices there I was returning to an ancient, primitive way of seeing and being in the world, of connecting and revering nature, a way that connected me to the sacredness of everyday existence. These experiences I've distilled down to three aspects: *misogi*, ritualization, and community. Together, they've been crucial to my formation as a minister and the future I see for Unitarian Universalism interacting with the global network of religions.

Misogi

Misogi is the act of purification. The idea of purification comes not from freeing one's self from sin but derives from the myth of one of the creator *kami*, Izanagi, returning from the world of the dead after pursuing his wife, Izanami (fellow creator *kami*) and thus purifying himself in a waterfall to rid himself of pollutants from that world. Thus purification is returning back to that original state, of no longer being contaminated. There is no concept of evil or a corrupted human natural state as *kami* themselves can be contaminated, it is simply the polluting of one's heart. *Misogi* is performed among adherents by dowsing the entire body in water: some perform it standing under a waterfall (as Tsubaki Grand Shrine does), some plunge into a river or the sea, Guji-san, the head priest of Tsubaki, even suggested performing it in the shower every morning.

I took part in the Tsubaki style of *misogi* my first night in Japan as a part of a group that specifically came to the shrine to perform the ritual. I decided to set my intention as to accept (let it happen, be an active participant) in standing in a cold waterfall to purify myself. I thought of the negative things that hampered down my soul, burdened my mind and resolved to let them go.

Prior to performing *misogi*, we were given white kimono like outfits (the women) while the men were just dressed in a loincloth. We all wore bands wrapped around our heads. We headed out just as night was falling, twilight settling on this inner sanctum, this secret I did not know that Tsubaki held. It was a courtyard with

a rushing waterfall in a rocky pool with steps that one could walk down into the water. In amongst the rocks were frog statues and burning candles.

The head priest led us in exercises to be purified before going into the water (for the waterfall itself is a kami). Then we lined up to go into the waterfall. Priestess Yumiko was behind me, teaching me the words to recite once it was my turn to go under the waterfall. *Harae tamai kiyome tamae rokkonshojon* (translation from Ann Llewellyn Evans: “Sweep impurities from my being and purify the six roots of my spirt”). The task was this: you stand under the waterfall chanting this as the priest stands in the water and chants with you. You stay under the waterfall doing this until the priest bids you to stop. I was second to last in line, trying my best to remember the words, the steps (when to bow, when to do *toin* (slashing the air, when to clap), my mind was whirling but then I remembered, this is not about the rules, this is about the experience. My heart was open and I stepped under the water, letting the cold water hit me until the priest released me.

I felt a clarity of mind. During the closing services as we chanted the rites, I felt a light descended on me, come over, a clarity of mind and purpose, a shining bright light. A feeling of pure heart. I was purified.

This stands out as an important experience, this connection I felt, that nature itself can be a source of purifying, of healing, of releasing and soaring beyond what once chained us. Hence, I see this experience as evidence of the connection between Shinto and Universalism- the divine is accessible to all of us, dogma or creed does not bind us, but rather our shared existence with each other and nature does.

Ritualization

Everyday existence is ritualized at Tsubaki Grand Shrine. For example, before entering the shrine's property, you go to hand-washing stations where the washing of your hands purifies your body and prepares your mind to enter sacred space. Even entering sacred space is ritualized as you walk into the shrine under a huge *tori* gate. Cleaning is ritualized as a spiritual practice as the entire Shrine staff, from the head priest to the newest hire of a shrine maiden, cleans and sweeps the shrine together first thing in the morning and last thing during the evening. During my first day in Japan, I was given a broom and expected to take part in this system. This act of cleaning is an internal *misogi*, as I sweep the floors, I sweep my mind. Similarly lunch is ritualized as we all ate the same meal, making it an intentional part of our day and our togetherness as community. These ritualizations marked the ordinary moments of the day to emphasize them, hence making me aware of the sacredness of everyday existence. Not everyday is a high holy day, but everyday is sacred and thus, we should treat it so.

Community

We as Unitarian Universalists live our faith by not serving a dogma or a creed but the beloved community. It is similar in Shinto. Shinto is no passive faith, you are in active relation with the *kami*, nature and your fellow humans constantly. As you act with honor and respect to the *kami*, you act with honor and respect to people. As you treat people with honor and respect, you treat the *kami* with respect.

This is shown with the service of the priests to the community through blessings and rituals. One example of this happened I went with Guji-san, the head priest and Seiba-san, another priest, to a new building blessing. There, the entire town showed up, including representatives of the government to take part in this event of opening a new community center. Guji-san blessed it by throwing salt, sake and sacred paper (of the five esoteric Buddhist colors). He then enshrined a *kami* in a *kamidan*, a miniature shrine for inside buildings, for it and made offerings of fish, vegetables, sake, rice, salt and fruit to it. Then children from the community and Shinto priests performed the Lion Dance, a dance that has been performed for or by Tsubaki Grand Shrine for 1300 years that tells the story of Satarunohiko and a lion. Four priests who sat down, one had a drum, two had flutes and the last one sang the story. There were three dancers- Satarunohiko who was played by a 12 year boy, a little girl who was the tail end of the lion and a college-aged boy who was the head. Satarunohiko and the lion danced to the ancient court music of Japan. Finally, everyone came together and shared a meal. In the blessing of the community center, the priest was connecting to the heart of the community by making the ritual a community event. This is the essence of religion, serving and connecting with the greater human family.

Shinto and Unitarian Universalism: A Bridge

As stated previously, Shinto and Unitarian Universalism share the community of no creed or dogma and a dedication to the community; I believe Shinto and UU also share a love of nature and a desire to see nature protected

especially as the effects of climate change manifest themselves. Hence, we have an opportunity as ministerial students to create a global network for protecting nature and resisting the increase of climate change's impact by working together and promoting shared values. We are part of the same interconnected web and together we can help the world's community realize it is too.

There is already a history of this relationship that we can build on. I am the 42nd Unitarian Universalist to visit Tsubaki Grand Shrine and the shrine and the UUA has been working together within the International Association for Religious Freedom as well. It is up to us as the future of the faith to maintain these ties and create new ones for the promotion of the Seventh Principle.

For my focused initiative, I would like to take the first steps in this promotion by creating an adult education class about nature and Shinto as well as about climate change resistance. I would like to further strengthen the ties between Shinto and UU by taking the students in that class to Tsubaki Grand Shrine and have them directly experience the way of the *kami* by Shinto's reverence for nature.

Conclusion

The opportunity to stay and study at Tsubaki Grand Shrine has affected my formation and thus changed my life for the better. I have used techniques I've learned at Tsubaki Grand Shrine to improve my own spiritual practices as well as transferred the values there to my own teaching congregation. I plan to continue my education in Shinto and as well wish to strengthen the ties between UU and Shinto. Thank you for this opportunity. I'm forever grateful.

