

## Imperfection: Embracing Wabi-Sabi

Patricia English

### Entry

“I was very isolated. You don’t know anybody and I had a lot of time to kill alone in my apartment. I wasn’t happy for the first six months and I remember thinking very literally, ‘I am on the other side of the world’ and I would picture the world in my mind and how far away I was. I remember also feeling really alone and like ‘what if I die here?’ I had that feeling a lot.”

—Amy, American High School teacher in Japan

### *Voices*

I heard the sound of my own voice and it made me cringe. It broke the dead silence of the classroom of 50 Japanese students who stared blankly at me. I wondered what in the world I was doing here. A graduate student, I chose to teach at a sister college for one year in a small village in Japan. Having just arrived, I had no practical experience in intercultural education so I decided to rely on all of the information I had read in books about Japanese culture and, more specifically, about Japanese education. “I know where these kids have been,” I thought to myself. “Most probably didn’t pass the Japanese university entrance exam, so they’re here.” This thought made me feel better. The stereotype of the hardworking and bright Japanese student intimidated me initially. I read about how much time Japanese students spent going to school and the demands placed on them to do well.

I began the class by introducing myself, and then, I described the course: Interpersonal Communication. When I finished I looked up at the group. They stared back blankly. I saw absolutely no expression on their faces at all. I moved on. I asked them to get into groups. After all, everyone, including the literature, told me that the Japanese are very group oriented. Yes, groups should work. Not one student moved.

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I asked again. No response. Finally, I walked around the room, physically moving chairs into circles. I asked them to prepare short introductory speeches in their groups. I again walked around the room from group to group, trying to help them get started. In a particularly silent group, I stopped and asked one young woman in the group her name. She covered her mouth with her hands and giggled. I continued to talk at them about the importance of talking with each other. They continued to stare at me. All I heard was my own voice and I wanted to stop, but the intense silence made me speak more. The class ended and I was confused. Was I not clear? I thought group work would have been appropriate.

Teaching went on like this until I got used to the students' silence. I began each class period with a new hope that students would respond to me—if not verbally, then nonverbally. I left each class period drained of energy, wondering what I might do to make myself feel more comfortable. One of my students, Yukiko, came to talk with me after every class period. This was not typical. Most students ran out of the class before I even had a chance to talk to them individually. I began to really enjoy my discussions with Yukiko after class. She gave me insight into Japanese youth culture. We became friends and Yukiko asked me to come to her in-laws' rice farm for a few days. I was a bit surprised at the invitation but was up for the adventure so I agreed.

Yukiko picked me up on Saturday morning and we headed out toward the farm. It was a beautiful day and the rice fields were a brilliant green. My excitement grew as we got closer to the house. It was a large wooden structure with huge doors at the front of the house. When we pulled the family of five came outside to greet us. They smiled and bowed at me. The father motioned for me to follow, so I walked behind him to the back of the house. There stood a rice tractor. It looked like a small American mowing tractor that I had seen before on my cousin's farm. He motioned for me to get up in it. I did as he requested. He pulled out a camera and began taking pictures. I was a bit embarrassed, but Yukiko warned me that this family had not seen very many Westerners before so they might want to take many pictures.

After the picture taking we went into the house. The mother had prepared a big dinner with sushi and daikon pickles because Yukiko told her that I loved both. The father didn't eat anything. Instead, he drank beer and then whiskey. He tried to explain to me what he did for a living. He showed me a picture of a mountain and then mimicked an explosion. I understood that his job was to explode mountains to put roads through them. I was having a nice time. The brother was kind but didn't say anything. Yukiko got up and told me that she was leaving. Surprised, I asked her where she was going and when she would be back. She said that she had to go home to her husband, but that she would be back in two days. Two days! I was shocked to think that I would be with these

strangers for two days with no one to talk to who could speak English. I was ashamed at my lack of Japanese and regretted not preparing more for the visit.

After she left we continued eating and the father kept on drinking. Someone knocked on the door and the mother got up to answer. About nine people entered and sat down. Somehow I understood that these were relatives of the family. They came over to meet me. They took pictures and talked about me. I could not understand any of what they said. I began to get tired and started speaking in English. My Japanese was so poor at this time that I was too exhausted to try anymore that day. We mimed things back and forth. The father began mimicking everything that I said. I kept on talking and he continued to try to repeat what I was saying. Everyone was laughing. Finally, the mother asked me when I was going to bed. I replied in Japanese, "Now." For the next two days I did not say a word. I communicated non-verbally with the brother through card playing. I did not want to hear my voice anymore.



*To me, my maternal grandma was kind but aloof. She rarely got angry with us and drove us wherever we wanted to go. She took my sister and me back and forth to my cousin's farm during every summer visit. She never complained when we came back covered in mud from playing in the pasture. Grandma repaid my grandpa's drinking and philandering by paying no attention to him when his circulation went and he contracted gangrene. He sat on the couch watching television until they decided to amputate his legs. He died anyway.*

*I only heard my grandpa's voice one time. We sat outside of the Maid-Rite store waiting for my father to return with some sandwiches when grandpa broke into his favorite Christmas carol, "White Christmas." The day was blustery with snow falling heavily. A blizzard was coming. Sarah, my cousin, and I were scared that we might get caught in the blizzard and not be able to get home. My grandpa's voice was sweet and clear and it soothed me. To this day, Sarah says that grandpa and my father were drunk. I don't remember that. I do remember that my mother and grandma were angry with them when we got back. They said that grandpa and my father had no business taking two little girls out in a blizzard. That is the only specific memory that I have of my Grandpa Jess.*

*Back in Grandma Lula's little place we talk of her life. I ask her questions but somehow they seem forced. I wonder where I fit into all of this. I sit in this place that smells like medicine, stale air, and death and I think about the history of my family. Am I the product of all the silent women in my family? The men in my family could be smart and charming but they were also mean and alcoholic. My father recognized his decision to be mean. He told me that his mother bossed him around his entire life and because of that he would not marry a strong woman so he married my mother. The problem was that my father confused her lack of strength with loyalty. It was not my mother's lack of strength that made her stay for so long. It was her incredible sense of loyalty. Her strength did win out in the end. Finally, after years of being pushed around by my father, she asked him to leave. I remember the look of defeat, sadness, and surprise on my father's face the day he walked out the door.*

**Resistance**

“I couldn’t fit in. I was bigger than anyone else there. I wanted not to be seen but everyone was always watching me. What I found really irritating was that there I was in this town for three years and everyone knew who I was because I was in the papers for giving speeches and you would see me around all the time, but the necks still turned. I kept on thinking this is 1996 and not 1850. They must have seen a Westerner before.”

—Liz, Public Relations practitioner in Japan

*Shirts*

During my first week in Japan, I went to the onsen, an outdoor bath, with another American woman. My friend had warned me that the Japanese sometimes get a bit uncomfortable with American women at the onsen. I didn’t understand the concept of the onsen until we arrived. Then I realized that you take the onsen completely naked. I don’t know what I imagined, but I thought the bath would be private. As I took my clothes off, I could feel the eyes on me. I mustered up whatever pride for my body I could and walked outside into the fresh air. I wanted a shirt so badly at that moment. I wanted to cover up with something.

The onsen was very small, about the size of a hot tub, and filled with Japanese women. When we entered they all turned toward us and stared. One woman gasped at the sight of us and pointed and said something in Japanese. I asked my friend what she was saying and she told me that Japanese women always remarked on the size of Western women’s breasts. I was humiliated and tried to get into the steaming water to hide as fast as possible. The water was so hot that I could not just jump in. I covered my chest with my hands as the Japanese women continued to stare and giggle. Annoyed, I put my entire body in the water. I sat there for what seemed like hours, my body overheated and shriveling up. I sat there until all of the Japanese women got out and left. I could not stand them staring. I was amazed at how comfortable my American friend was with all of this. She just didn’t care. I was envious of her and wanted to feel the freedom she felt. I hated the onsen. Every time someone asked me to go to the onsen, I politely declined. Bathing is a private act for me. Living alone, I change my clothes in the privacy of my bathroom. I don’t want an audience even of myself, let alone a group of people.

After the visit to the onsen, I began to perform private and public acts of resistance. I wore my cowboy boots in my room. I ate ice cream in public. I engaged my students in direct eye contact. Somehow these acts made me feel strong and as if I was spitting in the face of Japanese culture. It felt good. I needed to assert myself and my cultural identity in some way.



*I am a twin. My sister Mary and I are fraternal and have always looked and acted differently. This difference became more and more apparent to me as we grew older and people began to comment on our physical and personality differences. At seven years old, my sister, Mary, was a very athletic little girl. She had short strong legs and could outrun any of the boys in the neighborhood. She had a determined little face and short curly hair that made her look like a little boy. I, however, was fair with long blond hair. My legs were long and skinny and I could not keep up with my two older brothers and Mary. I was agile and enjoyed more solitary activities such as tree climbing.*

*We moved to Oklahoma when I was five. While the street that we lived on in Michigan had been lined with great climbing trees, our street in a new subdivision in Oklahoma was barren. Mary made friends with some of the neighborhood boys right away. Mary and the boys played running games like football and soccer. One day, I was restless and wanted to play. I watched Mary and the boys from behind our front screen door. Mary was faster than any of the boys and I noticed that she looked just like one of them, shirtless and dirty. Jealousy crept over me. I wanted to join in the game and be just as good. I wanted to run and play and be accepted by them. In a moment of impulsiveness, I pulled my yellow cotton shirt off over my head, opened the front screen door and ran outside into the mid-day heat. There I stood topless in the middle of the red dirt of our front yard. I felt free and relieved. As I was just about to run into the street to join in the games, a neighbor woman drove by our house. She had been over earlier as part of the neighborhood welcome wagon and introduced herself to my mother. She said that maybe someday I could baby-sit for her. As she passed by me our eyes met and she yelled out the open passenger side window, "Little girl, go put a shirt on." I stood still for a moment as the heat of embarrassment spread up my body to my face. I turned and ran into the house.*

### **Immersion**

"The Japanese don't expect Americans to know Japanese so even if you know one word they think it is fantastic. In America, if people come here, we expect, we expect them to speak English. If they don't, I think that people have tendency to look down on them. The Japanese didn't do that."

— Mark, College teacher in Japan

### *Identity*

I was a blue grass singer in Japan. I joined a group called The High Tone Rangers a few months after I arrived. It was perfect timing for me as I was beginning to feel isolated and confused by Japanese culture and my place in it. I was trying

to fit in by wearing dark colors and flat shoes. This was my opportunity to show off a talent that I hadn't visited in a while.

The band was Japanese except for a Korean fiddle player and me. We traveled to Nagano twice a month to play at the Liberty Bar. The bar was small and dark and I loved the collection of cool Japanese patrons who hung out there. It was an adventure. I never knew where I would be sleeping or how long I would be staying in the city. I also learned a great deal about Japanese culture. The players were amazing and totally committed to bluegrass. They spent outrageous amounts of money on banjos and guitars and spent more time practicing than working at their paid job. Most of them were much more talented than their Western counterparts. But to be more authentic in Japanese Bluegrass you must have a Westerner somewhere in the band. That is where I came in.

A typical trip to Nagano involved a Saturday morning rehearsal and two evening shows. I sang everything from Emmy Lou Harris to John Denver. They wanted me to wear a traditional cowgirl outfit but after one evening in that get-up, I no longer agreed to the costume. I felt ridiculous. But I enjoyed wearing my cowboy boots. I had stopped wearing them everyday in public. They were clunky and took up too much space. For bluegrass they were perfect.

One night about seven months into my stay, we arrived at the Liberty a bit early to meet with an American bluegrass musician who was touring Japan. I guess he was pretty famous because the Japanese were waiting in a long line to get his autograph. I had never heard of him, as I had no concept of bluegrass music until I arrived in Japan. He played a few songs and then it was our turn. The Liberty is a long shotgun style bar with a huge window at the end. Usually, there was a curtain drawn over the window and I couldn't see myself. This night the curtain was drawn back. We began our first song, a Peter Rowan tune, "Undying Love." I was feeling so Japanese in that moment. Here with my own band in a Japanese bar. When I looked up from my music I saw my reflection through the window at the end of the bar. I didn't recognize myself. There was a blond woman at least a head taller than any of the Japanese male band members staring back at me. My whiteness and strangeness were never more apparent to me than in that moment.

I was a foreigner, a *gaijin*, a stranger. All of the memories of standing out of being so embarrassed of my own presence came back to me. How did I ever assume I would become Japanese? Why did I ever think I needed to be? There was no expectation on the part of the Japanese that I would assimilate. They didn't expect me to know the language and complemented me on basic skills like knowing how to use chopsticks. There, expectations were low. I was just to be who I was, a foreigner. In that moment I accepted this. It was the beginning of the awakening of my intercultural identity.

**Wabi-Sabi**

The above narratives all point to issues of entry, resistance and immersion into my Japanese experience. The stories from my childhood serve to help me understand some of the antecedents of contact that I had going into a foreign experience. My personal history affected how I felt about the Japanese upon my arrival in Japan. Issues of self-consciousness, confusion, and a desire to fit in emerged from my own history. That history became apparent to me in Japan.

The descriptions of entry reflect an intense desire to fit in and be accepted by those around me. Once I realized this was impossible I performed resistance behaviors to assert my identity. My reaction to both the Japanese view of me as a foreigner along with my experiences as a young woman trying to resist being objectified made me become defiant. This defiance was manifest in my resistance to Japanese culture by violating Japanese rules for conduct, both in public and private contexts. It was also evident through my desire to control my body by constantly monitoring my consumption both at home and in Japan. My resistance was not necessarily obvious to anyone but me, but it helped maintain a feeling of control in environments that were confusing to me. Performing resistant behaviors (overeating, under eating, eating in public in Japan, etc.) allowed me to assert my personal and cultural identity. It was as if they gave me presence and made me visible to myself. The descriptions of immersion reflect an acceptance of my experience as a foreigner and as woman. Immersion is the place where the concept of wabi-sabi came together for me.

The Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi refers to the imperfect and temporary nature of things. According to Leonard Koren, “wabi-sabi—deep, multidimensional, elusive—appeared the perfect anecdote to the pervasively slick corporate style of beauty” (9). Wabi-sabi is in direct contradiction to the desire for permanence and perfection. For me, discovering wabi-sabi allowed a keener awareness of the ways in which my body both at home and abroad was a product of what I thought it meant to look perfect. My identity for so long was tied up with my body as separate and measured by standards created by others. For example, I desired the perfect gymnast body and the perfect Japanese body. The more I tried to get it to fit a prescribed form the more it didn’t measure up. The tenets of wabi-sabi freed me from that. The notion that things are impermanent, imperfect, and irregular allows me to see myself and my experience as inherently unique and therefore beautiful.

The concept of Wabi-Sabi has implications for identity, performing resistance, performance and narrative. Wabi-Sabi as a political concept is evident when one is performing resistant behaviors. Whether it is a public or a private act of resistance, these acts make a statement about asserting identity in a new cultural environment. Once I recognized that integration was not possible I began to act out in order to literally take a stand against a culture that I felt would

not fully accept me. I wore my cowboy boots inside of my apartment (a major violation of Japanese decorum). They made noise and made me feel as if I was on solid ground despite my unstable surroundings. With resistance came guilt. I felt constantly guilty about not being the perfect foreigner. My body was the abject body open for scrutiny and judgment. The body itself is imperfect and by performing resistance, I was able to reclaim it. Wabi-Sabi allowed this to happen, and provided an opening for me to make a statement about accepting the imperfect nature of experience. I recognized through the concept of Wabi-Sabi that the more irregular the body is, the more beautiful it becomes.

Because Wabi-Sabi has no interest in permanence or completeness, there is no need to lament about what could have been done to make something more perfect. In performance, Wabi-Sabi is manifested in the cracks in the façade of perfect replication. Because each performance is unique (the unexpected laughter of the audience or the dropping of a line), the cracks allow for improvisation in solo performance and the saving of each other in communal performance. The performance is not permanent and it will go away like great art and literature (Koren, 1994). Everything is in a constant state of becoming obsolete. This is true for the performance of cultural rituals like the Japanese Tea Ceremony. The Japanese took the ceremony from the Chinese but in order to make it their own, the Japanese purposely broke the tea bowls and cups and filled the cracks with gold. This made the ceremony unique as each object was unique. This was in direct contrast to the Chinese whose stylized ceremony was popular. Because the objects are not mass produced there are no two alike. This is Wabi-Sabi.

In terms of narrative, this essay embodies the spirit of Wabi-Sabi. The narrative form is imperfect by Western standards: nonlinear, no perfect structural balance, no easy happy endings, and contradictory images; undoubtedly, critical readers can find more. This narrative emerged from a situation that can never be repeated. It is through the narratives that I discovered and made sense of my experience standing out in Japanese contexts. Through wabi-sabi I accepted my experience as unique. What a relief to know that imperfection of experience is what makes it so valuable.



**Work Cited**

Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge, 1994.



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