The Ties That Bind: The Honor of Friendship

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When we are young, we wonder what kind of life the future holds for us. We ponder destiny, the gods or one God (or both for some of us), the lessons of our parents and other elders, the counsel of good teachers, and our own fears and aspirations. Sometimes due to family, economic, or sociopolitical circumstances, our dreams are deferred or harder to achieve, but, through our own determination and discipline, we meet these challenges head-on and prevail over them.

My life was shaped in this vein and while my circumstances were quite different from those of Professor Iwao Yamamoto, the methodology of dreaming and certain conditions in each of our lives possessed similarities. As my friendship with Professor Yamamoto has evolved, these similarities have allowed our association to be rich in meaning and to contribute to the worth of each of our lives as well as our work as literary scholars.

While Professor Yamamoto grew up in Japan and I grew up in the United States, we both understood how significantly society and its politics can effect communities and individuals; and how important writing could be to impact social change. We both had a transnational view of the world that embraced Japan and U.S. societies, and their impacts upon the global village. On a more personal level, we both lost our fathers at an early age and witnessed our mothers' astonishing fortitude in raising their children on their own—and raising them to be respectable citizens with something to contribute to the legacy of

their societies. In my case, my mother was an immigrant Japanese meeting the challenges of survival in a small Midwestern community in Kansas. Not only did she have to confront anti-Japanese prejudice, but also the prejudices of the white community against biracial Nikkei children, particularly children who were also of African and Native American Indian heritage such as myself and my sister. Furthermore, she did not have the support of her family in Japan because she had married an American. In Professor Yamamoto's case, his mother raised her children in a society where a single-parent widow must not only face economic challenges, but also the stigma of being on her own in a society in which the two-parent family was the (expected) norm.

Eight years ago, I received a telephone call from my friend and colleague Roberta Uno, a Sansei professor, artist, and activist. She wanted me to meet a professor from Japan whom she described as a very kind man who was interested in my writing, but who might not contact me directly because he did not wish to disturb my privacy. She told me about his work and, given my interest in Japan due to my own Japanese heritage, I promised to call him. That man was Professor Yamamoto. During his visit to the Los Angeles area, I called him and we met in Little Tokyo at the Mitsuru Café along with my friend, Dr. Yuko Kurahashi, a professor of theater, and my then one-year-old daughter, Kuniko-Leilani. Over soba and somen, we discussed each others' work. He was familiar with two of my plays, "Tea" (which has been produced for NHK radio as well as in Tokyo and Osaka) and "Asa Ga Kimashita" (which has been produced at universities in Japan). In particular, we discussed the mixed-race Nikkei experience and the fact that many mixed-race Nikkei are writing about their heritage in vari-

ous genres such as prose, poetry, and playwriting. Ms. Uno had been correct. Professor Yamamoto was a genuinely kind and sincere human being whose style, knowledge, and intellect reflected intelligence and depth of character. In addition, he was extremely patient with and caring towards my young child. I felt privileged to meet him and, even then, I knew that I would know him for the rest of my life. By "knowing" him, I mean not merely knowing that he exists in the world, but that I would see him again, meet his family, and continue to communicate with him through letters and e-mail. This we have done and continue to do.

When I lived in Kyoto in 1999, Professor Yamamoto took time from his busy schedule to visit the shrines, temples, and museums with us—Kuniko who was then almost three years old, my son Kiyoshi who was twelve, and me. We also were privileged to meet his wife and son, and to visit their home in Uji-shi. We also were invited to the Kyoto Museum to observe the beautiful calligraphy exhibition of his wife's work. Those days spent with Professor Yamamoto further cemented our friendship.

As I experience my Japanese mother's aging, I also discuss the nature of aging with Professor Yamamoto who will be sixty-five as he bids farewell to his thirty-five-year academic relationship with Ritsumeikan Daigaku. This is a big turning point in Professor Yamamoto's life, but not the ending of a career, merely a transition into a new chapter. I know that he intends to devote time to writing essays about writers, particularly Nikkei writers of mixed-race descent, which was the original impetus for his interest in my literary work. As a literary artist and as a scholar, I am deeply moved by his

commitment to a literary voice that deserves more attention in both Japan and the U.S. As Professor Yamamoto's friend, I am doubly moved by his determination to transition his energies into further contributions to the field of literature, an investment that will enrich this new chapter of his life and reap tremendous value for his intellectual health and well-being.

In California where I live and work, exquisite old buildings often are not valued. They are torn down too readily to make way for a sleek office building, the architecture of which lacks the character of the old structure. New things are wonderful and society must have them in order to continue evolving, but it is also important to treasure what has already been built, so to speak, and what it contributes to the identity of a society. As Professor Yamamoto leaves the institution of Ritsumeikan Daigaku, his contributions must be treasured. New ideas will evolve, new scholarly efforts will come to pass, but the foundations that past contributions have provided must be valued. Former students and present colleagues would do well to be invested in the past and present, as well as to be aware of what unfolds in the future. Creativity does not cease to exist at retirement.

Beyond the boundaries of age, race, culture, and nation, Professor Yamamoto and I have built a friendship of great significance to us as individuals. It exemplifies international understanding in a way that all the politics in the world cannot achieve. For the world grows closer and the global village grows more meaningful not primarily through the workings of governments, but through the one-on-one contact between individuals. While I have met many of my Japanese family members, it is my friendship with Professor Yamamoto and a select

few other Japanese with whom I have become friends over the years that I have been culturally enriched. They are not blood ties, but art and literary ties: friendships created through the literary arts and sustained through a genuine, mutual humanity and respect for each other.

Because of knowing Professor Yamamoto, my respect and admiration for Japanese culture has grown; and I have been enriched personally as a human being.

I congratulate him on his contributions to literature and look forward to supporting his future literary projects.

Thank you.