Life Lived in Long Engagements with the Cultural Symbols of Japan

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Entering

It was a hectic late-night drive through Tokyo. We had borrowed a car from a friend of my husband's who had two young children of his own. Our original thought was to use the Tokyo public rail system, still running this late at night. This was in the days when it was trendy to think of childbirth as natural to the extent that one could go about usual activities up to the birthing part. Fortunately, we reconsidered and did not attempt to go to the small maternity hospital on the Tokyo public transit rails while I was in labor. I thought I was still in early labor, and according to the books I had read, this stage was not so difficult and things would become overwhelming in the later stages. It already felt overwhelming so I was not sure I could deal with the later stages. (I actually already was in the later stages, but did not realize that.) According to my obstetrician's plan, I should have checked in to give birth earlier in the day. I had gone in for a check-up and she declared I was in labor and should come back with my bag and check-in for the week stay, a typical stay for birthing in maternity hospitals in Japan then. I did not myself sense that I was in labor.

The doctor ran a small maternity clinic with one tatami (rice straw) mat room for women in labor, while nonetheless assisting with the births of several babies a month, averaging one a day. I had been told by Japanese women friends that doctors often tried to induce births by some means to schedule the births to accommodate their clinic times. Young Japanese women I knew, while seeming to go along with authority figures such as doctors, had their own forms of quiet and subtle resistance. I had early been advised that it was a good idea on one's first visit determining pregnancy to indicate the date of one's last menstrual flow as a bit later than it was to avoid being scheduled into an induced labor on the date expected. These "inducements" were not necessarily severe, and as in my case (as I realized afterwards), might simply take the form of being given a natural "cleansing" element such as castor oil to take orally. My check-up appointment that day had been near my due date. It was on the 4th of the month, and four was still strongly considered an unlucky number to be avoided in Japan as one sound for four, when written with another character, is a homonym for death. It was also not one of the calendric lucky or auspicious days noted on Japanese calendars desired for life transition activities. Even though if asked, Japanese would indicate they did not believe in such things, behavior was affected by them and I, as a non-Japanese resident would be easier to schedule in on a double non-lucky day.

When we arrived at the clinic that night, the doctor had to be called to come in. Pregnancy and birth were not covered under the Japanese National People's Health Care System (Kokumin Kenkō Hoken Seido) then, on the grounds that pregnancy was not sickness ("*byōki de wa nai*"). Later, I learned that we had to pay an additional "delivery fee" on top of the other charges for not having the birth during the prescribed hours. The clinic receptionist—whom I mistook for a nurse or some sort of medical practitioner due to her white outfit—lets us in, but was not keen to have this happening on her shift as she was basically the night watchperson.

We entered the tatami room where a woman in labor and her spouse, if desired by the couple, spend their time during the labor process. There was something comforting about the natural feel and scents of the rice-straw tatami mats. On the walls surrounding the room were alcoves decorated with things such as the dolls displayed during the Hina Matsuri, or Girls' Day Festival, colorful carp streamers known as *koinobori* (flying carp) and cases of warrior helmets displayed for Boys' Day (now also celebrated as "Children's Day"), emblems of 7-5-3 (Shichi-go-san) annual holiday celebrating children of those ages, and representations of the elegant kimono worn by young adults, of 19-20 years old on their Coming of Age Day (Seijinshiki). There were also stylized arrows such as those purchased with blessings during a New Year shrine visit as people, including youth, think about aiming for their future goals such as entry to desired universities.

The doctor arrived and checked to confirm I was fully dilated and ready to give birth. With her coaxing and coaching, along with that of my Japanese husband, I did so. This was still at a time when it was not common for people to know the sex of their child before birth. It was usually the person delivering the baby who got to make the momentous and long-awaited announcement of the sex as the child came forth from the birthing crouch. As she grasped the baby, who was entering its new social world, the doctor made a proclamation, but it was not "it's a boy" or "it's a girl" as I expected. She made no mention of sex at all. Instead, her proclamation was solely to me and was, "You have become a mother" (*Okaasan ni narimashita*).

By that time, it was after midnight, hence my child was born on the 5th of the month. Five is considered a lucky number in Japan, in contrast to four. I found out later that my Japanese father-in-law had spent the time since hearing of his grandchild's impending birth at a shrine praying that it would not happen until the fifth; I had done something right as a daughter-in-law. After a lengthy rest with my newborn beside me, a clinic employee brought in my first meal after the birth. I did not then know that the dishes served for a mother's first meal after birth often included foods Japanese recognize as celebratory symbols. I thus did not realize that the fish, *tai*, was chosen because the name coincided with the last part of *omedetai*, suggesting congratulatory sentiments. I just thought of the miso soup and fish as typical Japanese fare until I removed the lid from the rice container. It held *sekihan* (red rice). A thrill went through me upon seeing it. My engagements with the cultural symbols of Japan, even then, had been long enough to know that *sekihan* (rice with beans mixed in such that it gave a reddish tint to the rice) was emblematic of celebratory occasions, and I experienced the sense of joy that my baby's birth and entry into a Japanese social world, along with my entry into motherhood within that Japanese social world, were symbolically enwrapped in such celebratory food symbolism.

The Life Cycle, Lifecourse, and Long Engagements

This essay is in part a tribute to the life and work of David Plath, to his enduring scholarship on Japan and its continuing influence on others. A recognition of his work and life seems particularly apt as David Plath himself wrote extensively on "work and lifecourse in Japan," something which became the title of one of his edited volumes (Plath 1983). Even his early work on leisure in Japan, exploring "the after hours" of Japanese farmers, merchants, and white-collar workers, and others seeking enjoyment to offset their work involvements, was also about the integration of life, leisure, and work as leisure, and were shown in their interconnections as not

two separate spheres of activity, but intertwined and affecting each other (Plath 1960). Another significant sphere of his scholarly work dealt with the idea of "long engagements," with others, with culture, with one's own life pathway to maturity, and most noteworthy (at least for myself as an anthropologist and my own work and life, as I have reflected on these) with the cultural symbols surrounding experience in a society. Other anthropologists have also written about the importance of long-term involvements with a culture, with Yano (2013: ix), for example, emphasizing the "*longue duree"* of her research on Hello Kitty. However, I have found Plath's emphasis on "long engagements" to somehow more pivotally reflect the depth of the ethnographer in anthropological involvements.

In his later work, David Plath devoted himself to expositions of cultural meaning through media and film. In this essay I focus on his written scholarship in the three works dealing with life, work, leisure, and long engagements in the symbols of a culture and society mentioned above. It is the idea embedded in the last of these, long engagements, which is already present in the writing of the other two, and hence a development of the work he had been doing before, from which I have drawn particular insight over the years of my own life and scholarship. Hence I have come to value the resonance of it, and the reflections it can induce. It emphasizes long engagements in the cultural symbols for members of a society, for those socialized into the cultural symbols (which in the case of Japan can include long existing communities of people not considered ethnically Japanese), but I feel it also pertains to those of us who study a culture and present it to others. Often as scholars we struggle with this contradiction, the recognition of the need for long engagements in Japan, while the requirements of maintaining our jobs often demand quick or continual output. There is a common thought reiterated in Japan, that nothing of significance can be accomplished without a long time frame, but in the Western systems within which we work and publish, speed is required.

This need for a lengthy commitment in our work as scholars, has been reiterated by other Japan specialists. As mentioned, in her work on Hello Kitty, Chris Yano (2013: ix) expounds on her involvement in the "*longue duree*" as the background to her serious work on Kitty, a cute pop culture icon not always seen in such serious regard by laypeople. While "*longue duree*" perhaps gets to the same conception of involvement over a long duration of time, the phrasing of "long engagements" seems to add more, people not just experiencing things over a lengthy period of time, but doing so with an extensive and intensive involvement; they are deeply engaged with the activities and symbols surrounding them and engaged with them through the flow of time. Long engagements more easily allow considering changes in how people interpret or guard the symbols of culture as they flow through it in time, change ideas, attitudes, perceptions, as their understandings of the cultural symbols grow or as cultural processes evoke change. Plath (1980:3) sums up the intersections of maturing in a society, development of the self, and long engagements in a culture's symbols by writing; "the self must enter into long engagements with the cultural symbols that identify experience, and with others in society who guard the meanings of the symbols."

In considering David Plath's own work on work, life, and long engagements in culture symbols, I began this essay with the birth of a Japanese citizen (my son), since birth is often conceptualized as the beginning of life within a system of cultural symbols for an individual.[1] Cultural symbols pertinent to baby, child, and person in Japan surrounded the birth, and indeed

were visibly displayed for the woman becoming a mother, and if present her partner. I was already aware of the meanings of the display items, Girls' Day dolls, Boys' Day warrior helmets, flying carp. I later gave birth to a daughter in Canada. Cultural symbolism was also displayed in the rooms and halls of the maternity area of the hospital in Canada where I gave birth that second time. In Canada, the walls and halls were filled with pastel-colored images of baby toys, baby blankets, rattles, and other cute, sweet, huggable baby paraphernalia. The symbols clearly evoked ideas of babies, along with the toys, joys and wonders thereof. Even at the time, I reflected on the symbols surrounding my birthing experience in Japan, where babies were suggested but not solely or even primarily. The cultural symbols suggested a lifecycle and lifetime from infancy through youthful early adulthood, special occasions such as Boys' Day and Girls' Day, the 7-5-3 customs recognizing the development of children of those ages, up to the blush of adulthood at entry to it recognized in a person leaving childhood behind (supposedly) with the Coming of Age ceremony in the year a person turns 20. The cultural symbols surrounding that birth in Japan were not solely emphasizing babyhood, but rather they were emphasizing the process via which that baby, just entering a new social world, would be guided through the stages of that social world from infancy through childhood and into adulthood, both the pathway and task being assumed for baby and parents.

In addition to the social emergence of the baby, another life transition was more directly enunciated in my experience in Japan than I have heard of in North America. Rather than announcing that the child was a boy or a girl, I was, it seemed to me rather emphatically, given the announcement, "You have become a mother." This served as a marked reminder that it was two lives that were in status transition in the social world in that moment: that of my son who was entering a new social world he would come to know although at the time he might not have so easily been able to reflect on his own life transition, and that of myself who was clearly informed by the doctor as a keeper of the cultural symbols of my life transition with the expectation that I would reflect upon it and allow it to guide my future. Plath (1960: 7) writes that, "To become human is to become particular and to know it." Each of us, he continues, must live the meaning of our own lives. However, he also notes that we must do this in conjunction with others with whom we share a culture and its symbols. Plath (1960: 6) writes: "Culture in one of its anthropological usages can be thought of as a legacy of idioms and values that give point and purpose to living, a collection of recipes for human cultivation." Japan has been characterized as a "wrapping culture" (Hendry 1993) and some of the most extensive wrapping is in symbols of values and idioms that surround the idea of motherhood (Fujita 1989, Creighton 1994). As Allison (1991) makes clear in her work on children's *obento*, or meal boxes, which in the children's case are brought to school, mothers along with their children are continually watched, judged, and molded according to the expected symbols and idioms for both roles. While we may be the authors of our lives, others are also involved in authorizing our lives. Plath (1980: 9) writes of a very active Japanese woman who initially wished to reject the designation of "grandmother" when her first grandchild was born, but her cultural consociates (as Plath calls them) would not let her forget that she had undergone a status change in her life. Likewise, the doctor attending my first birth, although as a doctor with her own clinic she was clearly herself someone with a career orientation as well as a mother, pointedly let me know of the major change in my own role, of my new status in life, and associated duties from that moment on.

Leisure and Work, and Work and Leisure

David Plath's early work focused on "leisure" and he is still known as a scholar who worked on leisure activities in Japan. His book, *The After Hours* (Plath 1960) was published at a time when scholarship, as well as popular commentary, on Japan was already focusing on work, and particularly the work of corporate employees and Japan's so-called permanent employment system guaranteeing a stable job, for men who could attain such jobs, from initial employment once one's education was completed until retirement. The system only ever applied to about one-fourth of Japan's work force, and was enabled by the treatment of women as expendable and not really to be taken as a stable part of Japan's work force (justified on a male or system's view that "after all women would get married and hence did not need money" no matter how erroneous or problematic for women this may have been), and by the approximately half of men who did not make it into permanent employment tracks and had to survive on other types of employment contracts. The focus in Japan Studies on work and work cultures, particularly those in the permanent employment realm, including that of scholars who pointed out its fallacies and complications or tried to address the absences of women's work continued for the next few decades (Abegglen and Stalk 1985, Cole 1971, Dore 1973, Kondo 1990, Ogasawara 1998, Rohlen 1974, Skinner 1983). Plath can be considered a bit of a trail blazer researching and writing on leisure in an era of scholarship on Japan dominated by work studies.

However, Plath was not really writing about "leisure" in contrast to "work." Even his title, *The After Hours*, positions leisure in reference to work. The examples from the book show what people did after non-work hours, but that in many cases involved socializing that further tied employees to their work lives. Plath challenged ideas of Japanese "groupism" that suggested a lack of individuality among Japanese and even contested this in reference to studies of men in organizational settings who seemingly, to some other researchers, merged their identities with the company as the corporate "group." He later characterized the Japanese "Organization Man" as in the following:

> Competition for promotions, or for assignments that offer more power or excitement, is as familiar to the lifetime employee as to his colleague overseas. He may be loyal to the organization, he may serve it with diligence. This does not mean he deposits his mind in the company safe. He must maintain a healthy detachment, sustain a sense of personal continuity amid what he is likely, in his organization role, to experience as a planless tangle of reassignments and delays (Plath 1983:9).

Plath's work on leisure not only adds to research on leisure studies, but it also links to his later writing on work. In the process, leisure and work as a dichotomy unravel and instead the two are shown as intertwined. *The After Hours* involves leisure that is premised upon certain routines, structures, and expectations embedded in work lives as they intersect with domestic and family lives.

Plath's work on work in Japan, likewise follows his emphasis on seeking out long engagements in the cultural symbols surrounding endeavors. His work would often reiterate the idea that to mature in a chosen work path, as in other paths, it was thought necessary to undergo hardship or *kuro*. In Japan it is believed, as Kondo (1985: 292) puts it, that; "Hardship polishes the soul as well as one's technique." Plath emphasized that mastery of a work occupation was a lengthy

commitment. His noted edited volume dealing with work in Japan reflects this in its title, *Work and Lifecourse in Japan.* For that volume, Plath presented contributions from those who focused on work in company lifetime employment, and also from those dealing with work in other contexts. While including studies on the then commonly imaged permanent employment system for men in those tracks, Plath nonetheless showed that job security over the employment lifespan was not necessarily a guarantee, and that individuals in the system attempted to balance various life commitments. Included were contributions by Kenneth A. Skinner (1983) involving a work ethnography of white-collar males in a public corporation who sense "aborted careers" (Plath 1983: 9), and did not feel the promised rhetoric of permanent employment necessarily applied to them. Another contribution by Paul H. Noguchi (1983) on a work ethnography of blue-collar male workers in the former Japanese National Railways (JNR), shows that these men felt the strains of being in a declining industry, and felt side-tracked in their own careers.

Plath made sure to consider, and to include authors, on the work and life involvements of women at a time when many work studies done in Japan were much more focused on men. Plath himself often wrote in what was a common and unchallenged norm at the time, of male-based generalized language (i.e. the use of "he" for the "example person") which I find regrettable but recognize as a likely element stemming from the context of the time of some of his publications. His volume includes both women's work on women's work, and men's work reflecting on women's work and placement in dominant employment contexts.

For example, Karen C. Holden's (1983) contribution explores the changing employment patterns for women by the 1980s, patterns that have continued to evolve and to do so along with changing patterns of family life. Another included example focusing more on women, was James McLendon's (1983) chapter on employees searching for marriage mates within their companies. For women up through the 1980s this was again, a particularly imperative engagement, one in which if they succeeded they would retire from the company to "embark on a household career instead" (Plath 1983: 11). Plath (1983: 8) notes the problems and predicaments for women in Japan's previously dominant systems of employment and that women seemed to wish they were not as strongly constrained into household and domestic roles despite cultural assertions supposedly upholding the values of fully engaged motherhood. Plath also points out that the concept of "career" would serve better if more broadly understood. Plath (1983: 98) writes, "In its wider sense, "career" could be used to mean any course or path of action that has a recognized direction, speed, and sequence." In this manner he grants validity to women's household careers, but he nonetheless, as mentioned, also recognizes indications that Japanese women desired greater possibilities of careers in the more commonly understood arena of professional or paid work. In mentioning that the concept of career should be broadened he was also speaking to the lifetime involvements of people in other types of activities and endeavors.

Plath also collected for his edited volume on work and lifecourse in Japan, examples that were different from the numerous studies on corporate employment and lifetime employment in private companies. These include contributions from Susan O. Long (1983) on phases in a doctor's career in Japan and John Singleton (1998) on potters. Plath notes the following about people in such positions:

> … They have a form of lifetime commitment, but it is to the profession or craft or calling rather than to a particular organization. Their career timeline is set by continuity in professional performance; to sustain performance they may have to hire out in a variety of organizations or perhaps become self-employed. (Plath 1983:10)

In the various types of studies Plath wished to include to represent work lives in Japan at the time, and in his extension of "career" to include other forms of sustained and committed involvements over time, Plath revealed his view of work as broadly encompassing. He also attempted to delve into the symbols of work that workers bore on their bodies. One of his talks I remember well, focused on callouses. He emphasized that work is not just an idea to be discussed in intellectual terms, but that an understanding of it needed to address the experience of working, that often found symbolic as well as actual expression in callouses people who work in certain endeavors came to bear on their bodies. He later published a chapter entitled, "Calluses: When Culture Gets Under Your Skin" (Plath 1998) in *Learning in Likely Places: Varieties of Apprenticeship Education in Japan* (Singleton, ed. 1998).[2]

In Japan it has often been suggested that people work at their leisure, meaning that the strong Japanese work ethic is taken into one's leisure or recreational activities, complicating the work-leisure dichotomy to which we in North America are accustomed. People pursue activities and *shumi* (a word most often translated as hobby or hobbies which seems insufficient to convey the concept because it tends to downplay the cultural value assigned such pursuits in Japan) that are thought to be self-educational and thus develop the self. Whether Japanese are really so involved in "working at leisure" or not, it does seem that cloaking leisure activities in the pursuit of self-education and self-development is more likely to gain social acceptance for them in Japan, rather than projecting them as a "vacation from work," or, even worse, self-indulgent frivolous fun (Creighton 1998, 2001, 2024). People may be pursuing fun and enjoyment, but it is better to cloak this as engaging in the cultural symbols, idioms, and values pervasively associated with "work" in Japan. These *shumi*, too, are careers calling for long engagements in the activity and with others.

Plath was a forerunner in exploring leisure time while much focus was directed more specifically at what was conventionally thought of as "work." There would later be an expansion of scholarship on Japan focused on activities usually construed as "leisure." These include extensive work on tourism (Guichard-Anguis and Moon 2009, Seaton and Yamamura 2017, Graburn and Yamamura 2020). Leheny (2004) explored the expansion of leisure identity in relationship to Japanese national identity. Creighton (2001, 2024) explored weaving workshops engaged in for "leisure" that often seemed to mirror schedules, routines, and attitudes found in work settings. Creighton (1996) also researched department stores showing the recreation in retail shopping, and also the work of it. For women "shopping" could be part of leisure but it was also part of creating social ties, procuring material goods for families, and assuring status through the selection, giving, and receiving of appropriate gifts for Japan's established gift giving occasions. For men a department store outing was partly leisure on a day off from usual employed work, but also work as part of "family service" expected of men on a Sunday during the heyday of permanent employment, so that one day a week (or at least on some weeks) usually absent fathers and husbands could engage in reinforcing their domestic and family identities.

The dedication expected between company as employer, and workers as employees meant a near full time involvement for employees, but it also meant companies often provided them with "leisure" in such activities as after hours drinking, the chance to use the company *besso*, or vacation area housing, and retreats. In her work on a Japanese sweets factory, Kondo (1990) portrays a company retreat from their work for employees as more "work" than that encountered in their usual work routine. Employees are expected to rise early, attend workshop sessions, and focus on their obligations through a recognition of their social ties, beginning with the sufferings endured by their mothers while birthing them. Despite taking most employees away from their families, and for men their wives and mothers of their children, for long periods, even in company employment the idioms surrounding motherhood in Japan re-emerged. This thus shows another example of companies providing leisure, that can really be about work, and the reiteration of pertinent symbols frequently culturally highlighted within these company offerings.

A pertinent example of the fuzzy division between leisure and work in Japan is William W. Kelly's (2018) ethnography of the Hanshin Tigers, one of Japan's best known baseball teams. Going to a baseball game, cheering one's favorite team, eating ballgame snacks suggest to most people a fun leisure outing. For the Japanese, baseball, sometimes considered Japan's national game, is seen as a leisure outing for fans, but also a form of serious work for many of them. Kelly portrays *oendan*, fan clubs, often intensively organized, as devoted to their teams, and disciplined in their cheering work. In the world of Japanese baseball fandom, unpaid cheering squads practice their parts with at least as much rigor and dedication as the athletes at work on the "playing field." Just as teams have a manager orchestrating their work, each fan club usually has a manager orchestrating the cheering squad's work, making sure they attend practices and are in the stands ready for their work at the games. Kelly's research on the Hanshin Tigers portrays the intricate "interplay" of work and leisure.

Other scholars of Japan have explored the false separation of leisure and work worlds. Leisure for some, or course, requires the work of others. An outing to Tokyo Disneyland, MGM Universal Studios Park in the Osaka area, or any other of Japan's amusement parks offer a sought out leisure activity for a Japanese family, a couple, or a group of friends. In a scholarly portrait of Tokyo Disneyland, Raz (1999) attempts to balance on stage and back stage performances, in other words portraying both the on stage world set up for visitors, involving entertainment as they stroll the park, view attractions, engage in amusement rides, and dine, with the back stage world of the workers, their recruitment, their training, their indoctrination into the working routines of Tokyo Disneyland, and their working days at it. In the resulting portrait, Tokyo Disneyland can no longer be seen as solely a place of leisure and entertainment, but also as a carefully constructed arena of work.

The work of some more recently emerging scholars of Japan, likewise reveals the false dichotomy of work and leisure. In *Ryokan: Mobilizing Hospitality in Rural Japan*, McMorran (2022) provides a portrait of a Japanese inn in the popular tourism town of Kurokawa in Kyushu, noted for its natural hot springs and traditional style of hosting guests. McMorran's ethnography of a rural hot springs inn is both about work and about non-work or leisure. For most Japanese, staying at a *ryokan* is a leisure activity where they can gain a sense of separation and recuperation from their usual work and enjoy themselves by soaking in a hot springs bath, eating the delicate dishes provided, and possibly having a hike or walk in the surrounding natural setting. However,

McMorran also delves into the other world of traditional resort inns, revealing the work culture of those who work at such inns, the gendered and hierarchical nature of their work, and the constraints that brought many to such work. McMorran positions his own study as focusing on the hospitality industry, something associated with leisure, to bring out the nature of work. He writes: "By focusing on how hospitality is mobilized across time … I have tried to let readers feel the rhythms, constraints, and possibilities of *ryokan* work" (McMorran 2022:169). The various studies mentioned here follow in the trajectory of Plath's scholarship in showing the interconnections of work and leisure.

Cultural Symbols of a Japanese Mirrored World View

Reiterating one of Plath's emphases on long engagements with the "cultural symbols that identify experience" (1980:3) this essay began with the entry into a Japanese social world initiated by being born and some of the Japanese cultural symbols surrounding this. It thus seems fitting that the symbols surrounding the transition of exiting that social world through dying also be considered. To understand the cultural symbols associated with death, we need to recognize that the worlds of the living and dead are "mirrored," as if viewing a landscape on land, and its mirror image in a river or pond.

The cultural symbolism of mirroring appears in a variety of contexts in Japan. The most important holiday, Oshōgatsu, or New Year, is permeated with such symbolism. As one year exits (dies) and another enters (is born) they are portrayed as 'mirroring' each other. People put up what are called *kagami mochi*, or "mirror rice cakes," over the year-end and into the New Year period. The *kagami mochi* are created by placing one slightly larger white rice cake as the basis with another white rice cake on top of this, usually with a *mikan* or Japanese small orange on top of them. Bamboo is a frequently used element of year-end to New Year displays as well. Symbolically bamboo also suggests this mirroring of the years that comprise time and life because the *fushi* or knobs found on bamboo separate and also join segments of the bamboo to each other in the way that years both separate segments of time while also serving to join them.

Rivers and waterways generally are rife with the sense of mirroring in Japan. Rivers divide spaces, places, and people conceptualized as different while they also serve to connect such spaces, places, and peoples. River symbolism reflects a traditional ethos and constitutes space through separating and conjoining differently the living and the dead in a community. The dead in some sense remain members of a community, but believed to "dwell" on the other side of a river or sea (or in some cases, in the mountains). In some rural communities their graves are physically located across a river or waterway. By seasonal visits to the graves of the dead at times such as Obon, the summer period for dances and festivals in honour of those deceased, the living learn this will someday be their future place when they "crossover" the river or otherwise enter through the looking glass to the world of the dead.

The mythic Japanese story of Urashima Tarō depicts the story of someone who leaves his community and is unwittingly absent for decades in the time frame of the community by going into the mirror world under the waters. Urashima is the Japanese analog to the Western story of Rip van Winkle, but whereas Rip van Winkle's wrinkle in time occurs because he falls asleep under a tree, Urashima Tarō's loss of the sense of time comes about because he has unwittingly

gone under the waters, thereby entering another sort of community dwellers under the waterways. The Japanese version reiterates the concept of rivers and waterways creating mirrored worlds of dwelling and being.

Customs surrounding Japanese clothing and the wearing of it, also reflect a Japanese ethos of mirrored worlds. With Western clothing whether the left or right side is worn under or above is often a marker of gender. In Japan it has always been the custom that both women and men wear kimono with the right side under the left while living, and the reverse or mirrored way when dead. Clothing thus also reflects the idea that the world of the living and the world of the dead are mirrored. Depictions of *yūrei* or ghosts in Japanese popular culture dramas or films are shown with their kimono overlapping with the left side under the right side in reverse of the way kimono is worn by the living; ghosts belong to the other world of the dead which is depicted as a mirrored image of this world that the living inhabit.

Exiting

Since this essay began with a birth as an entry into a Japanese social world and the symbols that are part of it, it seems fitting to complete a cycle with the exiting of that social world with death. Just as the birth marked a transition of the baby's parents, especially the mother, death means transition to a changed status of the deceased and for those still active in that social world. Plath (1980) describes the long engagements with the symbols of a culture and the cycle from birth through death enacts a sense of the lifetime and lifecycle involvement in those symbols.

A Death, A Wake, and a Funeral in Rural Shikoku

It is another hectic car trip for my Japanese husband and myself, this time from one of Japan's urban centers where we are residing, Osaka, to a rural area of Shikoku. The drama we are hurrying to be part of this time is not a birth but an impending death. My husband and I do arrive at the hospital hospice area while his father is still alive. My son, now an adult man not the baby first entering this Japanese social world to which he has become well accustomed, had already flown in from Canada some days earlier to be with his grandfather. My daughter, who was originally to come not long afterwards for her grandfather's 90th birthday (something his life span ended up being just days short of) was still in Canada. Gathered near my father-in-law are the three of us, his wife, the younger of his two daughters, his younger brother and his brother's son-in-law. The resident doctor is new and has much formal education, but still limited experience. He knows the death is impending but not when it will likely occur, and he had other duties and patients with which to attend. Doctors tend not to like to suggest a set time of death to family members in case the actual time varies, but in this case, it seemed more that the doctor himself was still too inexperienced to know when to return to be present to mark the death. My father-in-law's younger brother, a farmer and fisher, tells the doctor a time. The doctor returns just before that time, to clock in the time of death which occurs just at the time indicated. I later ask about this. does the Japanese proclivity for order and doing things on schedule suggest one should die on time? Geertz (1988) considers the intersections of works and lives in understanding the tensions of anthropological research and the contributions of some of its researchers. In considering interconnections of the work and life of my father-in-law, he was predominately engaged as a farmer; while the work and life of his younger brother, who also had a trucking business, was predominately a farmer and fisher. The younger brother had not been educated in medical matters,

but had a lifetime education through farming and fishing and based the time he gave on his understanding of the tides, their rhythms and interconnections with human life, including their conjunctions with births and deaths.

Death, like other life junctions in Japan, is surrounded by cultural symbolism and customary practices. While grieving occurs there is work to be done. Part of this is preparing the dead for their final journey, while also reaffirming networks of relationships among the living and acknowledging the changing status of the newly dead in those relationships. The family, along with a funeral specialist, prepared the body and the household for the gathering known as *tsuya*, similar to a wake. *Tsuya* references the idea of "through the night," it is a social gathering for acquaintances, neighbors, friends, and relatives who come to say a last farewell to the newly dead person prior to the funeral. The family has prepared snacks and alcohol. Like a wake, the *tsuya* can have a party feeling, with people eating, drinking, and reminiscing. The dead person lies in their midst as the *tsuya*, night vigil spent with the dead continues. The dead person has been laid out with head facing north, as is customary, and why in maintaining differential symbolism for the living and the dead, the living sleep with their heads any other direction but north.

The dead person has been given new clothing for this major life cycle event. A brand-new kimono has been bought and the dead person has been dressed in it, initially in the customary way for those alive with the right side of the kimono under the left. It is not an elegant kimono such as those often acquired for weddings or coming of age day ceremonies, but a practical one of cotton. The dead person also has a new pair of woven traditional footwear and a staff. The clothes and accoutrements with them can be seen to symbolically reflect cultural ideas about death in Japan. It is thought that the dead first go on a journey—hence the rational for practical walking clothes, traditional foot wear and staff. Tobin and others have pointed out that to achieve maturity in Japan, it was thought that one must first embark on a journey (Tobin 1992, Creighton 2009). Hence becoming a fully recognized adult, also meant one had left one's first home, and had gone on a journey. This idea is again reiterated for the dead; the newly dead person in Japan can only become mature in his or her new status by first going on a journey.

The representative from the funeral establishment is also at the *tsuya*. He had helped dress my newly deceased father-in-law and tends to his body during the gathering. Then, well into the conversation and the eating and drinking of those gathered, the funeral functionary performs another service towards the body of the dead. While we are gathered in clear view of the body, the funeral representative goes to the body, and competently shifts the clothing, adjusting it such that the left side of the kimono is now under the right side—the manner in which kimono are worn by the dead. The shifting of the kimono shows the symbolic imaging of the world of the living and world of the dead as in a mirrored view. The shifting of the kimono also symbolically highlights that the person is no longer among the world of the living and is now really truly dead. I remember well the extent to which this particular moment washed over me. Like the others gathered for the wake of this Japanese elderly man, whom I had known—with great fondness--as my father-in-law for over 25 years, I too had now had long engagements with the cultural symbols of Japan. I knew well what wearing of the kimono with right side under or with left side under signified. The moment of the switching of the kimono sides was thus the moment of significant and undeniable recognition of the passing of a close member of our social world.

The *tsuya* was held at the deceased person's home. The funeral was held at a funeral location on a subsequent day, with attendees close to the family gathered inside, and crowds of others who had known him gathered outside. After speeches, the body was brought to a cremation area within the funeral location complex. At the suitable time after cremation family members were allowed to participate in taking those bones to be kept by grasping them with special chopsticks for this purpose. The chopsticks are afterwards placed in a standing position in the ash, a symbol of this act and hence as part of involvement in the cultural symbols of Japan one is not supposed to put chopsticks upright in a standing position in one's rice bowl while eating or in usual daily life. Although a meal occurs usually without reference or thoughts of a death, the symbolic undertones of everyday meals are that chopsticks placed sticking upwards connote death and thus this is not something done with rice which symbolically connotes life.

A New Name for a New Social Status

A Buddhist priest from the local temple attended the funeral, chanted sutras at expected points, and announced the *kaimyō* or Buddhist after-life name given to the newly deceased person, replacing the name they were known by in life. The name he has chosen means "fallen cherry blossoms." Perhaps this after-death name given by the priest for the person newly exiting this life is suitable for someone whose birth into this life was recorded as April 1, the opening of the month associated with cherry blossoms in Japan, and whose death occurred just before the beginning of April as cherry blossom season was emerging, with some already in bloom or even with fallen flowers. As my father-in-law had transitioned into a new social role and status, he acquired a new name. He was exiting the world the living knew, and entering the world of those who had gone on. I felt and considered that the name was also meant to be a message to those attending of our own lifecycle and lifespan, with the reminder—which the priest explicitly enunciated—that at some point the rest of the cherry blossoms will fall as well—or that all of us will someday be on the same path as the newly dead person was now.

Conclusions and Continuations

This essay has in part been an attempt to consider the work of David Plath on Japan, focusing on his earlier involvements in written scholarship (while leaving his later engagement in media to others to assess). It has also reflected on the ways in which David Plath, and his approaches to scholarship on Japan, have influenced my own involvements as a scholar of Japan. In particular, I have long been aware of his emphasis on the necessity for long engagements with a culture and with the symbols that establish or underlie meaning for those socialized into that culture. It has been a thought I have returned to over and over again. I also wished to emphasize his approach to life, work and leisure, and in looking at his early work on leisure suggesting that it as well reflects an understanding of the ways in which leisure and work are intertwined and mutually constructed, and how together they operate as templates via which those engaged in a culture attempt to construct meaningful lives and cohesive stories of selfhood.

Pertinently, Plath did not just advocate for "long engagements" when studying a culture, but for entering into long engagements with the cultural symbols that identify meaning for those in a culture. Good anthropology and good ethnography are not just about collecting facts about a culture to reiterate to others. As an interpretive anthropologist emphasizing the search for meaning, Geertz (1983) has cautioned well that, as he put it, "It is not worth going around the world to count

the cats in Zanzibar." Given such as emphasis on symbols and the construction of meaning, I have woven into this essay a look at some of the pertinent symbolism in Japan, particularly that surrounding lifecycle transitions, recognized and reiterated at a person's entering a Japanese social world at birth, at becoming a parent within it, and exiting it upon death. I have also looked at a Japanese form of "punning" with words that reflect symbolic associations, red rice (since the color red is associated with celebration) as celebratory, the fish *tai* (also commonly served for a mothers' first meal after a birth) likewise celebratory because of the association of the fish with the "tai" of *omedetai*, a word meaning congratulations or that something is to be celebrated, the number four as unlucky as a homonym with death (an association also found in Korea and China). I have also interjected into the essay ways in which symbolism of mirroring occurs in a Japanese ethos, and how this is reflected in the idea of this life and that of another world, how it incorporates a sense of rivers or waterways as symbolically suggestive as mirrors reflecting life and death, how it participates in the manner in which kimono are worn (with the right side under when a person is alive, and the left side under when the person has entered the other world of the dead), and participates in common customs such as not sleeping with one's head towards the north, as the died are laid out with the head to the north, or standing chopsticks upright in one's rice bowl.

Contemplating long engagements in the cultural symbols of Japan along with a life and work approach, allowed me to also reflect on my own long engagement with Japanese culture and society. Work and life are intertwined and for anthropologists as well as those they study, Geertz (1988) has highlighted both the pertinent connections of works and lives and also how the two intertwined elements often have inherent tensions. In my own case as well, work and life have not always been easily compartmentalized but often intersected and merged. There has long been discussion about the inherent contradictory nature of anthropology's main approach and method of participant observation, in that the greater one's involvement as a participant becomes the less likely it seems one can pursue purely scientific engagement as an observer, and being the observer—to the extent it requires detachment—lessens the prospect of valued participation. In attempting to present something of the symbolism of Japanese culture through the lifecycle, along with my own engagements in Japan, I utilized a birth and a death. Both the birth of my son, and the death of my Japanese father-in-law did allow me to participate and sense the symbolic reiteration of the lifecycle in Japan. Giving birth and becoming a parent in Japan also allowed me to participate in the cultural symbols surrounding that common life cycle transition. However, these were not just part of my scholarly interest in Japan, but my own life as it was unfolding. I think it likely that for any of us who have entered into long engagements with the cultural symbols of Japan (or another culture) we sense the way our involvements may also change as our grasp of the cultural symbols and the extent they penetrate people's activities, change and grow. I think it likely that David Plath experienced such shifts that became part of his own life and work, and his growing reflections on Japanese culture and society as these were undergoing change.

I recognized at some point, that I learned much about the symbols underlying Japanese culture from my father-in-law, who perhaps because he was one of those individuals with a certain philosophical and reflective nature, opened my understandings to consider further symbolic depths behind the customs underlying Japanese activities and engagements. From David Plath I felt the encouragement to allow myself to contemplate the deeper nature of a culture's symbolic world through his reiteration of the human task to aim towards maturity through entering into the symbols of a culture and those who guard their meanings. While, as an anthropologist, Plath spoke about

members of a society socialized from birth into its cultural symbols, I believe the message also speaks to us as anthropologists. Our task should, if possible, also involve such long engagements and strivings to further grasp and convey the symbols of a culture and how they operate in the engagements of humans attempting to construct meaningful lives.

I wished to consider in the final section of this essay, not just conclusions but continuations. David Plath, and my father-in-law have both left this world of the living and embarked on their journey to another world. Their lives and their understandings will, however, continue to influence and inform others. In my father-in-law's case this will at least be true of myself and possibly through my work, understandings gleaned from him may be communicated to others. In the case of David Plath, a corpus of work on Japan will continue to influence and help guide other scholars of Japan including those to come. I end this essay with the Buddhist thought, often enunciated when a person is about to pull back the rope attached to the log that is then used to hit a large metal bell at a Buddhist temple. It is said that a person's life can be thought of like the sound the bell makes. The sound will be heard not just at the moment the bell is hit but for some time afterwards. The sound will then eventually fade away, but the sound wave created can still exist and reverberate through the universe forever. This metaphor exemplifies the possibility of the influences of people's lives to likewise reverberate through the universe even after death, and suggests to me that the lives of David Plath and my father-in-law, Kagami Eiichiro, have not simply concluded but will continue to resonate.

Notes

[1] This is not to eliminate the possible consideration of one's social existence extending before birth such as recognized in Japan around the time a pregnant woman begins to wrap her abdomen with the customary pregnancy sash (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984:181-184) once pregnancy seems stabilized and the fetus begins to be part of the surrounding social world. Nor does it exclude consideration of one's existence being philosophically recognized as starting long before birth as reflected in the Buddhist dictum to imagine what your face looked like before your grandparents were born.

[2] As someone who worked on work and leisure in Japan, Plath could interject a very Japanese-like way of reaching out in social relations that reiterated the context of work, and also supplemented his mentoring of others. Once in my early years in a newly appointed university professor-track, I received at my work address unexpectedly, a card from David Plath. Enclosed was a photo of myself that he had taken while I was presenting at an academic conference. The note joked that I could show the photo to my tenure committee as proof I was fulfilling my work expectations. This was at a time before everyone had digital cameras and easily sent photos to others electronically. It was at a time when it was common for Japanese to take photos of those with whom they associated and give them to the people in the photos as part of reaffirming social ties. I recognized in that gift from David Plath, both the way it reflected his reflected his long engagement with Japan by doing something Japanese then often did, and the reiteration of his interest in other people's work and lives, including those he knew and mentored.

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