

Memorial Speech

David Weinstein

It is an honor for me to write this forward. My father would have been very honored to be memorialized in this way. The sequence of events that brought my father to Komazawa, and therefore to Buddhism, was so odd that one might think of it as a miraculous event that he ended up being a professor of Buddhism at Yale University. While I cannot comment on his scholarship, I would like to share some details on my father as a person and the path that brought him to Japan, to Komazawa, and to Buddhism.

He was born in 1929 and grew up in a poor family in Brooklyn during the depression. There was much suffering as his father, a factory foreman, lost his job and then their house. My father slept on the couch in the living room in a one-bedroom apartment as he had no room of his own. Violence was common in the neighborhood as conflicts between Jewish and Irish gangs made just going to school difficult. My father's grades were abysmal in everything except languages, as he didn't do his schoolwork. He was an angry child, who was looking for any way to rebel that he could.

And then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. For a twelve-year-old child, who was furious with the world, this act was outrageous, insolent, and fascinating. With a newly discovered passion for foreign languages, he began to pour all of his frustrations into not just learning Japanese, but soon many other languages—Latin, German, Chinese, and even Egyptian Hieroglyphics—all on his own, and very little registering on his school transcript. His parents did not allow him to bring books into their cramped apartment, but he soon learned that if he could get them through the door, he could often mix the new books in with his older books and keep them hidden.

While still in high-school, my father impressed a lecturer at Columbia University with his language skills, who invited him to take a Japanese class

Memorial Speech

at Columbia. His high school counselor, Mrs. Cameron, refused to allow this, arguing that a student with such poor grades should not be allowed to take a class at a prestigious university. My father protested, arguing that he was extremely good at languages and he was at the top of his German class. Mrs. Cameron countered that this was likely because his family spoke German at home. While my father could have countered by trying to argue that in fact his family had originally immigrated from Poland, not Germany, instead he pointed out that he also had top marks in Latin, saying that surely she didn't think that his family spoke that language at home! However, Mrs. Cameron's mind was made up, and he wasn't allowed to study at Columbia. If he were to continue studying Japanese, it would be on his own time.

His poor transcript and little formal training in languages meant college would be a long shot. When all the colleges he applied to rejected him, he said goodbye to all his college-bound friends, and proceeded to find a job. His father got him a job delivering ties. Three months later, he was fired. His father then showed him another ad for a job setting type in Japanese for a printing company that was publishing documents for the US occupation authorities in Japan. My dad showed up for the interview, told them about his happy childhood growing up in Japan, and was hired on the spot. When they soon discovered that he had invented the entire story, they still kept him on because he was so good in Japanese. The job entailed reading handwritten manuscripts in Japanese and setting the type for printing. As my father would sometimes remark, many people can read Japanese, but few can read it backwards!

A year or two after my father started working at the publishing house, he was drafted into the U.S. army. Because he had a formidable command of written Japanese (at this point he still had not ever conversed with a Japanese person) as well as some understanding of Chinese and Korean, he was placed into a military intelligence unit. However, in order to get this posting he needed a security clearance. When a suspicious officer asked him "why he had started studying Japanese in 1942 when he was only twelve?" my father realized that he might have a problem. Thinking quickly and knowing the officer couldn't possibly appreciate the psychological

Memorial Speech

process that brought my father to study Japanese, my father simply replied with his characteristic wit, "I realized that it was my duty to better know the enemy, sir!" He got the security clearance and was sent off to Japan.

He was delighted to be posted in Japan and not in Korea, however his stay in Japan would be short. Just after he arrived, he went to see a fortune teller for the first time. The person looked at his palm and told him that he would soon be taking a bad trip. My father responded that this didn't sound right as he had just been posted to Japan. Two days later he received orders transferring him to Seoul. He never went to a fortune teller again.

In Korea, he headed up a unit that translated captured North Korean documents in search of military intelligence. While in Korea, my father honed his spoken Japanese making many friends among Japanese-American soldiers who worked with him as well as numerous South Koreans, who spoke excellent Japanese, learned during the Japanese occupation.

When his tour of duty came to an end, my father decided to take advantage of the GI Bill, which provided scholarships to veterans, and go to college in Japan. At that time, there were very few Japanese universities that were willing to accept US students, but Komazawa was one of them. My father applied and was accepted.

His time at Komazawa was one of the happiest of his life. Prior to enlisting, my father had married, and both he and my mother (who was a foreign student at the Tokyo University of the Arts) threw themselves into learning about Japan. It was also at this time that my father first began to study Buddhism seriously. Komazawa was also the first place that my father found mentors in his studies: Hosaka Gyokusen and Reiho Masunaga.

My father really blossomed at Komazawa. He worked hard in all his classes, and for the first time in his life, began to excel at school. In the end, he had the highest average of any student in his class and therefore qualified to be the valedictorian of his class. Some people at Komazawa were upset that a foreigner had performed the best in the class and suggested that the valedictorian should be a Japanese person and my father should get a one-time prize for the best (and only) foreign student. Hearing this, professor Hosaka intervened forcefully. He insisted that my father deserved the

Memorial Speech

honor and his argument won the day: my father was named valedictorian and delivered a speech. This act meant an enormous amount to my father, who had never had a teacher fight for him. This was the turning point in his career. It gave him the confidence and ability to go on to study at the University of Tokyo and Harvard and ultimately hold professorships at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and at Yale University.

Professor Hosaka's support, kindness, and tutelage had a profound impact on my father, and he never forgot that kindness. As those who knew him remember, he worked at home in a small study whose walls were almost completely covered by bookcases. There was only one very small sliver of exposed wall, and on it he hung a photograph of Professor Hosaka for the almost fifty years that he worked there. When he published his book "Buddhism under the Tang," my father summarized his feelings of "gratitude to the late Professors Hōsaka Gyokusen and Masunaga Reihō of Komazawa University, who gave unstintingly of their time and energy to introduce me to the vast riches of the Chinese Buddhist scripture. Kind teachers and devoted scholars, they embodied in their own lives the bodhisattva ideal."

I think that he channeled the toughness and the compassion of his Komazawa teachers into his own teaching. He held his students and himself to a tremendously high standard. While students prepared intensely for his seminars in which there was little leniency for those who came unprepared, I also saw that he would spend an enormous amount of time doing his own preparation, so that he would not be embarrassed in front of them.

Looking back on my childhood, I sometimes feel like I was raised in a family with a lot of odd foster kids—also known as graduate students. All would arrive with what struck me as interesting hairstyles—they were bald, had pony tails, long hair, etcetera—and a lot of odd ideas about Buddhism. My father would then proceed to "civilize" them as best he could through a process of a weekly seminars held at our dining room table on reading Buddhist texts, followed by drinks, more drinks, and discussions about all of the social and political issues of the day.

My father cared about his students, not just as scholars, but as people. He often said that he should be judged by his students, but what I

Memorial Speech

think he really meant was that like any parent, he judged himself by their personal and professional successes and failures. Their successes were his successes, and like any parent, he owned them regardless of whether the success was because of or in spite of his advice. Similarly, the trials, tribulations, and sometimes tragedies of his students, weighed heavily on him. He was very proud of his students, and this book would have made him even prouder.

However, rather than me summarize his impact on his students and the field, I think that it would be more appropriate to end by letting them have the final word. My father's students ended up holding professorships at many of the top universities in the world, exposing countless students to serious Buddhist scholarship. This is one of my father's most important legacies. After he died, I was overwhelmed by their kindness to me and their devotion to him. I want to finish by quoting what one of his first students, Tim Barrett, wrote, which I think sums up their feelings:

“Now all [his] learning has in the end gone, leaving his remaining students to regret that none of us succeeded in summoning the specific enthusiasm for Japanese Yogacara scholarship that he did. Perhaps it was not in our karma. To all of us, however, he managed to communicate something less intricate but, as it has turned out, more durable – a love of study, and an appreciation in particular of the intellectual richness of the long tradition of East Asian Buddhism. If we in turn emulate even a fraction of his energy and commitment in passing on what we know to younger generations, that unique love and appreciation will survive. This is the only way we can hope to repay a part of the massive debt we all owe him; this will surely be our best memorial to him.”