



Sometimes we notice a pull—and it suddenly feels necessary to go on a pilgrimage. Perhaps there is a wistful longing for kindly strangers, distant lands or remote villages—places that promise to expand our perceptions and to help us encounter the world anew. We know there is something we need to learn and we seize the opportunity to find out what this is. Religious pilgrimages are always designed to take us to the edge—figuratively, and often literally. This is how I found myself traveling to Japan, alone with just a backpack. I was traveling to my edge. I had no travel companions, no ability to speak the language, and no idea what might transpire.



On the road in Nara, Japan

Despite modern transportation, the journey was not easy. Following my trans-Pacific flight, I took two additional planes on increasingly smaller aircraft until I eventually landed on [Yakushima Island](#) at an airport about the size of an American gas station. Later in my travels, I would journey to the mountain monastery of [Koyasan](#), where I arrived in the dark of night, only able to hear the clinking of gears and pulleys, as I rode a bright red cable car up those final 340 meters. And when I finally made my way to the [Tsubaki Grand Shrine](#), the trip took four trains and a final meandering bus. I was the sole passenger as this small bus traveled up the mountainside through tea fields and small villages. This would be my final destination.

This summer, I was blessed to spend two weeks at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine in Suzuka, Japan. This is one of Japan's oldest shrines and it has been in the care of the Yamamoto family for 97 generations. The generous scholarship that supported my travel was established by the current chief priest, [Guji Yukiyasu Yamamoto](#). Yet the heart of this shrine's interfaith commitment began with the vision of his adoptive father, [Guji Yukitaka Yamamoto](#), whose book, *Kami no Michi: The way of the Kami*, I lingered over during the long downpours of the Japanese rainy season. I felt a special bond with this priest whose relationship with Unitarian Universalism began when he traveled to the General Assembly in Cleveland, OH in 1968. How fitting that I was here, nearly 45 years later, staying at the Tsubaki shrine before I would travel on to the 2012 Justice GA in Phoenix, AZ.

The Tsubaki Grand Shrine is one of an estimated 100,000 Shinto shrines in Japan, but few, if any, are as committed to promoting international and interfaith understanding. Even fewer would invite a foreign woman to live and study with them for a period of weeks. In fact, I realized how uncommon this experience was as—day after day—shrine visitors would stop to ask me questions or take my photo as I swept the grounds in my white kimono. “Ah, *this must be highly unusual!*” I thought. And although I was unable to speak with most of the visitors, I hope that my smiles and my actions helped to further develop the close relationships between the Tsubaki Grand Shrine and Unitarian Universalism.



Sweeping the grounds at Tsubaki



Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto

Thanks to the generosity of those who supported my travels, I now understand more about Shinto and the kami. In Japanese mythology, [Kami](#) are understood as the divine forces of nature and often as guardians of specific places. They are sometimes interpreted as gods, but their status is more complex than that would imply. To me, the most important thing to recognize is that humans are descendants of the *kami* and we are a part of the spiritual realm. We are inheritors of divinity. Rituals of purification, the honoring of traditions, and practicing heartfelt generosity allow us to embody our own holiness. With the following stories, I hope to show how these teachings have enriched my spiritual life.

Purification: During my time at Tsubaki, I went through countless purification rituals. On the day I arrived, I swiftly delivered my backpack to my room and swapped my American clothes for a bright white kimono. Then I was led to the *Heiden*, the sacred inner hall of the shrine where offerings are presented and sacred rituals take place. I was given a simple branch of the [Sakaki tree](#), with small rice paper flags tied among its glossy green leaves. I was encouraged to present this offering to the Kami with the most personal prayer I could muster. As with all prayers, the branch is presented with the traditional two bows, two sharp claps and another bow.



Hall leading back to the Heiden



Ceremonial purification rite known as temizu.

From then on, each morning began with a long period of sweeping. Cleaning and sweeping are two important ritual tasks for Shinto priests. At Tsubaki, there are beautiful wide gravel paths winding through the shrine and the goal is to keep them totally free of leaves. Yet the shrine is located in a mountain forest, so as soon as one path was swept—of course, more leaves had fallen on another. So there is a constant emphasis to steadily work towards the betterment of our environment, in spite of obstacles and setbacks.

Following the sweeping, we would all gather for *Chohai*, the Shinto morning worship. We would chant a series of prayers. Everyone else chanted from memory—while I chanted along using a little booklet that contained English approximations of all the Japanese syllables. Each morning ceremony ended with purification as a ritual wand would be waved over our heads. We would bow low to the ground and only hear a “swish swish swish” as the [Ônusa](#) was whisked over our heads left to right.

So what was I—a religious liberal—to make of all this emphasis on purification? Initially, I struggled to understand. As a young person, I had been taught the theologies of original sin and total depravity. Those beliefs no longer make sense to me and I wondered how Shinto could help me understand impurity in new ways.

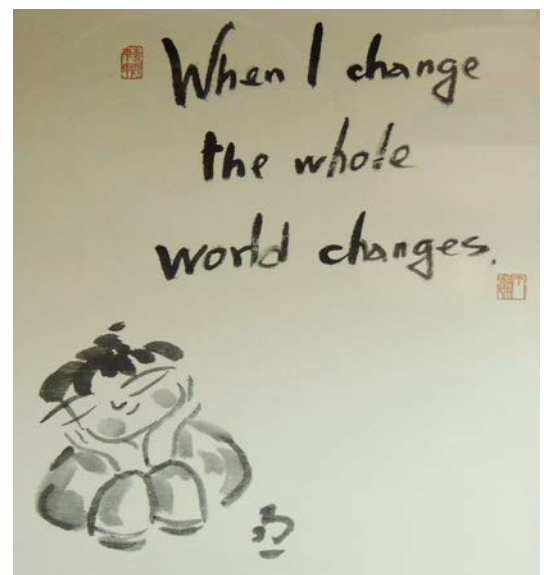


Misogi Harai

Slowly, I began to see that there was something entirely different going on. In the Shinto religion, good and evil are always present. It is impossible for any of us to escape this simple truth, which means there is also no shame in acknowledging it. For instance, I participated in the *misogi* ritual several times during my visit. The first time, it was nearly midnight when I joined nearly one hundred other participants in plunging ourselves—one by one—into a freezing cold waterfall. We shouted a ritual prayer, “*Harai Tamai Kiyome Tamai*,” at the top of our lungs in order to cleanse ourselves and allow our impurities to be washed away. (There were fewer participants than normal this evening, so we were given the special opportunity to stay under the waterfall and repeat the prayer FIVE times, instead of the customary three. My limited proficiency with the Japanese language meant that this recitation took me quite a bit longer than average and I was thoroughly chilled at the end.)

In the hours of preparation leading up to the misogi ritual, we performed a series of physical and mental exercises. One of these exercises involved moving our right arms quickly through the air in sharp, cutting gestures. These motions meant very little to me at the time. Later, I was told that as our arms sliced downward through the air, we were cutting away the bad in our character. And as our arms swept back up towards our heads, we were transforming the bad to good. So not only are we admitting and discarding the wrong-doing, but we are transforming it to right action.

In this way, no situation or person is ever considered hopeless. Even the brother of the Sun Goddess, who committed terrible actions against her, eventually becomes pure again in the mythology of Japan. In fact, larger Shinto complexes often have shrines to the “good and bad” kami, where one can honor, for example, the warmth and comfort of a cool breeze, as well as the destructiveness of typhoon winds. I loved this practice—the idea that we should pay our respects to the harsher aspects of the elements. Similarly, within ourselves, we need first to acknowledge our own struggles and less-than-perfect behaviors. We must see these things clearly and respect the fact that they do indeed have power in our lives. We might even honor ways that they might have once served us. For it is only when we’ve truly acknowledged our insecurities and shortcomings (with compassion), that can we begin the actual process of transforming them.



Small sign in a Kyoto temple

TRADITIONS: Imagine hearing of an immense shrine complex in Ise, Japan that is torn down and re-built every twenty years. The rebuilding of the new shrine takes place on an identical site next to the old, and each rebuilding alternates between the two sites. This is done, not because the structure is failing, but rather for its spiritual significance. As an American who is concerned with the misuse of resources, my first instinct was to question the appropriateness of this practice. Yet one thing I appreciated during this trip was the opportunity to see how my assumptions are colored by my own life experience and by the worldview of my culture.



Ise Grand Shrine (Ise Jingu)

[Ise Grand Shrine](#) is a Shinto shrine dedicated to the Sun Goddess *Amaterasu-ōmikami*, who is still the most important deity in Japan and is honored as the ancestor of the Imperial family. This shrine is certainly one of Shinto's holiest and most important sites.

Rebuilding the shrine every twenty years embodies the process of death and renewal and reflects the impermanence of all things. It is equally striking to me that this process has been—for 2,000 years—a way of passing building techniques from one generation to the next. There are still master builders who are able to re-build this structure in exactly the same manner that it has always been created. All work is done by hand. No nails are used anywhere in the building and some of the beams are larger than I could encircle with my arms. Similarly, jeweled treasures and amulets are created for the Goddess, using molds and techniques that might have otherwise been lost. Daily food offerings are grown by traditional farming methods and forestry officials nurture trees that will not be used for hundreds of years. Indeed, the twenty year cycle was chosen as the ideal length for transferring this expertise between generations. This preservation of skill reminded me of my colleagues who are equally passionate about [re-skilling and the Transition Movement](#), which hopes to help re-train people in things areas such as traditional building methods, resource management, and organic farming.



In the Office with Shiba-san

GENEROSITY: In his book, [The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred](#), Phil Cousineau suggests that we travel to meet people who remind us of the people back home. He writes: “*You knew these things about people and places before you left home, but you had forgotten them. How will you remember to remember when you get home?*” And maybe that’s another gift of travel. Perhaps, over time, we neglect to see the people in our lives for how generous and kind they really are. Perhaps by encountering new models of open-heartedness, we can remember that kindness has been with us all along.

These are just a few of the gifts of friendship I was given...



Hajime, Tisha, Sojiro & Chiemi

While traveling to the shrine and for the two weeks I was a guest there, I experienced enormous generosity and hospitality. My first introduction to the Japanese people was upon my arrival at [Yakushima Island](#). Immediately, I was swept up in kindness. From the moment my feet touched the ground, I was guided and cared for by strangers who would become fast friends. They drove me around the island, showered me with amazing Japanese food and even invited me to stay in their home. In them, I've certainly been given a new ideal vision of how to respond to "the stranger."

Later while traveling by train to *Tsubaki*, I found myself at the end of the train line in a relatively remote city called *Yokkaichi*. I couldn't find anyone who spoke English, so for 30 minutes I paced, unable to find the bus stop for the next leg of my journey. Even those who understood my request were unable to explain the complex directions to me. Eventually, a train agent came out from his post and led me several blocks to the bus stop I needed. Actions indeed speak louder than words.



Practicing Kyudo (Japanese archery)

While living at the shrine, my food and lodging were completely provided. Priests and other staff members took time out of their busy schedules to teach and to create opportunities for me—including arranging times for me to practice the Japanese art of *Kyudo* and the traditional tea ceremony, both of which I loved. Priests took me on day trips to Ise and to Kyoto. Patrons of the shrine gave me permission to attend their weddings, which are generally only attended by the nearest twelve relatives.

Again and again, I realized how much generosity supported my visit. As patrons come to the shrine to pray, they often offer financial gifts in the [Saisen Bako](#) (Shinto coin box) located in front of Shinto shrines. Recognizing that support of the shrine also supported me, I began to hear each little "plink" of the coin in the wooden box as not only a gift to the kami, but as a gift that supported my studies as well. Even the willingness to speak English was an act of generosity that was given to me by so many people. I traveled to Japan without any mastery of the language, so it was truly a gift that so many people were willing to communicate with me in my own native tongue. The Japanese are known for perfecting the art of hospitality and my experience certainly attests to that. I will continue to treasure my stay the Tsubaki Grand Shrine for a very long time to come.