



IKEBANA

Not just branches and flowers, a
way of life through the ages.

By Alexis McBride

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I began my study of Ikebana twenty years ago, on a mere whim. But the passion persisted. At this point in time, I have invested hundreds of dollars and hundreds of hours on this 'hobby' which has become much more than a mere hobby. April of 2007 found me branching out, researching and writing a paper for a Dominican University (San Rafael, California campus). I then realized that Ikebana is greater, grander, more universal than just beautiful blossoms and bountiful branches. It is a movement or a 'path' that provided its adherents with a complex system of symbols through which they experienced, form, order and meaning. There is evidence that Ikebana has served this function for over a thousand years for people in such dire, and different, circumstances as the summari fighting during the Japan civil wars then mustache later, the hundreds of Japanese-Americans interned relocation camps during World War II.

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A whim became a life long study leading to fascinating discoveries of another culture.

Prologue

During the earliest days of research for the paper I discovered one of the strongest statements describing the role of Japanese flower arranging. It was found in Japanese Garden and Floral Art written in 1966 by a woman who referred to herself as Mrs. Paul Kincaid. “Since ancient times flowers have been as acceptable a medium to the Japanese artist as paints to the European and marble to the Greek.” (Kincaid 20) That is profound, a medium equal in power as as paint to a European; marble to a Greek.

The art of arranging flowers, known as Ikebana, is an aesthetic achievement unique to Japan. Its goal is to represent life in nature enabling man to grasp nature at its loveliest and so to elevate the mind to spiritual beauty. It is paradoxical and, almost impossible to comprehend, that a flower arrangement made by my hands using exactly the same container, branch material, and flowers as another flower arrangement fashioned by the hands of another, could have an entirely different meaning, leading to spiritual beauty quite at odds with one another. | The journey of the paper written in 2007 was an attempt to explain the phenomena. You shall be led down that garden path, then be led on down another path. This book is being written in 2023, the core of the book is the paper prepared for a class assignment in 2007. The path branched forth in a wholly different form. That pathway will be described in the Sequel.

Chapter 1 The History of Ikebana

Ikebana is written in Japanese with two ideographs:
ike, from *ikera*, to make live and *bana*, from *hana*,
“flowers”.

A free translation is “living flowers” but a better translation is “making flowers come alive.” The book, The Japanese Way of the Flower suggests that a less familiar word “kado” (the Way of Flowers) is more apt description because Japanese floral art is more than simply, a skill ,but actually

is a” Way” (or path) studying the essence of life itself.

“Kado is one of numerous Japanese art forms--among them *chado* (tea ceremony) and *shodo* (calligraphy), with appellations ending in the character “do,” meaning “the Way.” (Davey,

The Beginning

The origins of Japanese floral art were closely intertwined with religion. The introduction of Buddhism to Japan from China, in the sixth century, brought with it the practice of presenting offerings of flowers to Buddha. This practice did fall on fertile ground in Japan because from prehistoric times Japanese religion was animistic. Japan has never entirely outgrown this primitive animism. The then prevailing religion, Shinto, was , and is, is a complex system of beliefs in which natural objects-rocks, trees, caverns, springs--are regarded as having nearly human qualities. “The worship of such objects has its counterpart in that delicate sensibility to the beauties of nature which is one of the most endearing characteristics of modern Japan.” (Masters 27) Shinto was a religion of love, not of fear, the universe is myriad, each part being conscious. One of Japan’s earliest written records says, “Every plant well expresses itself,” an attitude that is basic to ikebana.

One must understand the religious tenor of the time in order to understand the significance of the flower. The coming of Buddhism (usually dated to 538) was at a time, when, according to legend, Buddha had a flower in his hand when he reached the ultimate enlightenment.” The religion

took hold in Japan, becoming almost a state religion, displacing the native Shinto, during the reign of Prince Shotoku (578-622) , regent to the Empress Suiko..

The flower in Buddha's hand is believed to be a lotus, although there has been no formal confirmation. It is known that the sacred lotus flower has provided Asia with a source of beauty, sustenance of purity of mind and contemplation, as well as spiritual inspiration for over two thousand years, most probably even much longer.

(Servomaa 23) "Exactly how these flowers were arranged before the Buddhist icons in early times but it is assumed from later evidence that the typical arrangement consisted of flowers or branches arranged artlessly in a narrow necked vase." (Sato 18) A ninth century statue and a tenth-century embroidery show Buddhist deities holding similar vessels in which there is a lotus blossom and a lotus leaf. Therefore, the sacred lotus was intimately connected with Buddhist lore as a symbol of the universe. These simple arrangements evolved and over the centuries acquiring more elaborate forms.

One 'school' the Ikenboko "family", a succession of priests and flower artists, traces its history back to 621A.D. when Ono no Imoko, later known as Abbot Semmu, was sent as one of the Prince's first emissaries to China. He returned with valuable knowledge concerning temple and landscape

architectures and Chinese flower arrangement. Among his few remaining writings is a precept offering the wisdom that flowers offered to Buddha should not be just stuck in a vase, instead the relation between man and nature should be harmonized to express spiritual vitality.

Abbot Semmu, returning from China, took up residence at a small temple by a pond in Kyoto. The proper name of the temple was Rokkakudo but Semmu's hermitage became known as *Ikenbo* which means literally "priest's residence by a pond." and this word was used as a surname for the resident priests of who succeeded Semmu. The Rokkakudo Temple is still recognized as the birthplace of Ikebana. Semmu's arrangements expressed his adoration of Nature, the ultimate Divine, offerings these to Buddha during his moments of worship. (A scroll dating from the 8th century contains one of the earliest pictorial references to the use of flowers as religious offerings. In two episodes, first the viewer can see the devil asking the meditating Buddha many difficult questions. The Buddha's answers were so wise that the Lord of the Earth was filled with admiration, advanced toward Buddha with an offering of flowers in a vase. Then, in the next episode the Lord is bowing to Buddha, the vase of flowers is at the Buddha's side.

This was the beginning of a tradition, still practiced, of *kuge*, of placing flowers in vases on the altars in Buddhist temples as offerings for worship. This was the origin of Ikebana. At its outset, Ikebana was practiced mainly by monks and the aristocracy.

Flower arranging was originally imported from China nonetheless the Japanese imposed a discipline making it distinctly their own. Abbot Semmu, for example, firmly

adopted the principle of the trinity and made it a practical guide. He said that floral offerings to the Buddha should be made up of one long-stemmed flower flanked on either side by one with a shorter stem. These evolved into a discipline and into a style known first as *tatebana* and later as *rikka* (both terms mean standing flowers).

The development of Ikebana was not dependent on its religious origins alone. Flowers are so beautiful demanding an equal awareness, perhaps more conscious than instinctive, of their beauty. Early scroll paintings show flowers and blossoms being appreciated, not for their religious connotations but simply because they are pretty to look at, to admire. The literature of the eleventh and twelfth centuries is filled with this appreciation.

Japanese Renaissance and Baroque

Ikebana was recognized as an art form during the reign of the eighth Ashikaga shogun Yoshimasa (1435-1490) a great patron of Zen Buddhism. The oldest book on flower arranging Shendensho, written in 1445 dates from that period, illustrating that flower arranging was highly developed, giving detailed instructions for differing arrangements made for various occasions - annual festivals, a man's coming of age, or entering the priesthood. The idea of suiting the arrangement to the season or event was firmly established. The Shendensho was a brief treatise with rules and explanations instructing

the use of specific flowers for special purposes, the placement of the vase, the use of flowers for the tea ceremony, and last but not least what combinations should be avoided. There are only two words used for the components of a flower arrangement: *shin* (main branch) and *soe-mono*, secondary branches.

Flower arranging entered a period of quiescence during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Japan was torn by internal warfare with countless small landowners fighting to obtain dominance. A succession of generals unified the realms, beginning in about 1550, by the late sixteenth century there was a period of general prosperity. Prosperity saw members of the upper class attempting to outdo one another in terms of ostentation. Opulent flower arrangements were used to impress, to outclass the competition. The upper class constructed huge castles and palaces, the interiors of which were decorated with lavish colored wall and door paintings. The *tokonoma* with its hanging scroll, art object and flower arrangement played the prominent role. The formidable size and bold decor of these places demanded large and opulent floral arrangements. The style of the time, *Rikka*, was perfect for these times - it was big, colorful and elaborate. The *Rikka* arrangement was codified into not two, not three but seven parts or branches.

Not as ostentatious was the tea ceremony dating from the twelfth and thirteenth century. It acquired many devotees by the time of the fifteenth century. It too had a profound influence on flower arranging. Sen-no Rikyu, living during the sixteenth century, was considered the greatest tea master of all. He was also a noted flower arranger, believing

in austerity in all things. The naturalistic flower arrangements became a feature of the tea ceremony, small naturalistic arrangements, sometimes consisting of no more than one flower. Such arrangements were known as *Chabana* or tea flowers. Their austerity and simplicity represented the antithesis of the *Rikka* style. Then along came *Chabana*, a general class or school of flower arranging known as *Nageire* (literally thrown in) *Nageire* was not so much a style, as an absence of style, a spontaneous way of putting together a flower arrangement.

Both of these styles flourished during the seventeenth century. This dichotomy is explained by the fact that the rich lived in lavish homes but retreated for spiritual comfort to diminutive tea houses which would feature the small precious *Chabana*.

In the long run the *Nageire* style proved more popular. The *Nageire* style could be put together in a short period of time and could be a thing of beauty even in a humble setting. *Rikka* was complicated requiring many materials, many techniques requiring an enormous amount of space for display. *Rikka*, was limited to large houses, reception halls or religious displays, unable to find their place in the ordinary Japanese home where the *tokonoma* was only a recessed alcove.

Edo Period: Stagnation in Ikebana and the Arts

During the Edo period (1615-1868) Japan was almost entirely cut off from the rest of the world. The Tokugawa shogunate, seemingly to protect the nation against foreign invasion and the infiltration of exploitation, forbade all

intercourse between Japan and other nations. Thus, the Tokugawas managed to stay in power for two and a half centuries, limiting changes that might result from foreign influences. Architecture and art definitely stagnated it is certain, the effect on flower arranging is not known because none of the arrangements are still in existence, nor is there a record contained in books or the art of the times.

This suppression and stagnation made the arts and flower arranging ripe for change in the second half of the nineteenth century. The West marvels at the speed with which Japan adopted Occidental ways without realizing what gave rise to this impetus. The change in flower arranging was first manifested by the development of a number of free styles known as *biufin-ik*. (arrangements by men of letters)

At first, the change in flower arranging was relatively minimal. Western flowers were added to the repertoire but unlike painting or architecture there was no organized Western system that could compare with the highly developed Japanese systems, this was readily acknowledged at the time. Nevertheless by 1907 flower master Unchin Ohara was widely using Western flowers, initiating a new school which featured shallow containers with ree placement of branches. The style that Ohara created is called Moribana (literally piled flowers).The Ohara school remains the largest and most prominent school of remains the largest and most prominent Japanese school of flower arranging.

Ikebana Today

The Showa period (from 1926 to the present) saw the Moribana style giving birth birth to still freer and more

imaginative forms, such as *Jiyu* (free flowers) and *Zen-ei-ka* (avant garde flowers) (Soto 30) These styles incorporate dried materials, pieces of metal, glass stone. Some with no flowers at all resembling abstract art. Traditionalists complain (as traditionalists always do) but others say: “Quit complaining, even the wildest of abstractionists are educated and firmly grounded in the ancient traditions. Millions of people in the Japan of today are literally studying Ikebana and delighting themselves with their work. No other art displays has as much vitality, this vitality has been rapidly transmitted to Western countries. “Ikebana is becoming not a Japanese but a world art.”

Chapter 2 SPIRITUAL CONTEXT OF IKEBANA

The history of this movement, although important, did not, in itself, provide the answer to the question of the meaning of Ikebana to Japanese culture. How has Ikebana been used as a symbol to convey meaning and to establish structure?

A starting point is to contrast the difference between Western traditions and the oneness of nature experienced by the Japanese. Masao Watanobe explores the differing world views: Western man's place in the scheme of things versus the harmony found in the Japanese culture.

“Although the idea of structured universe was alien to the Japanese mind in the 15th century

the composition of the flower arrangement may be compared with Western cosmology to illustrate differing views of man in nature. (Watanobe,279)”

Traditional Western cosmology initiated in the Middle Ages. It was a creation of Christian theology, taking its form by the adoption and modification of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic theory of world structure. Not only did it represent the physical setting of the visual world, but it was also symbolic of spiritual truth. The entire medieval cosmology mirrored man's hope and fate. Although its structure was later altered by the Copernican revolution the basic idea of man, center to the universe, remained little changed and continued to play an important role in the history of Western thought.

Watanabe contrasted this orientation to that of the Japanese.

“Because the Japanese people did not adopt the sort of cosmology that can be expressed in terms of a geometrical structure, the form of the flower arrangement could be considered most comparable to the structure of Western cosmology. A comparison of the two reveals that they represent very different ideas of man and of the world. It is true that in either case, man's place was intermediate between heaven and earth. In the Western system, however, heaven and earth were, by definition diagonally opposite, forming a dichotomous world in

which man's place was absolutely crucial. On the other hand, there was no such dichotomy in the traditional Japanese ideas. There, nature was a unity, and man lived in it as part of this unity. In the Western idea, man was not an ordinary part of nature. He was a specially privileged creature, and nature was subordinate to him. He was the master of the natural world, which was at his disposal to analyze, examine and make use of. Nature for Japanese was different. It was not an object of his mastery but rather of his appreciation and it was his best companion.

Although this was an excellent description of the differences between the Japanese and Western cultures, more help was needed to reach clarity. Another method of determining what is important to a culture is to look at the individuals who are most revered, examining the qualities that endear them to their people.

Ashikaga Yoshimasa, a shogun, was one of Japan's military rulers in the feudal period (1449-73). He was known for his prowess in governmental affairs. This is only one part of the story. He is admired equally for his relinquishment of power and his retreat from the world. He left government, retiring to a small temple to lead a life of meditation and aesthetic pursuits, principally flower arranging. This "retreat" or renunciation is possible under the theory of *furyu*, a Japanese term which somewhat literally means "elegant amusement" but the concept is much deeper than that. "To understand *furyu* is to grasp the spirit of flower arranging." (Nishikawa 1)

Issotai Nishikawa explains that the Japanese are an essentially artistic and impressionable people who,

when aroused, will persist in their pursuits regardless of gain or loss. On the other hand, to balance this intensity and to seek relief from the tension they go to the other extreme and enjoy a peace of mind that comes from a world free of earthly desires. Such a life of renunciation is one realization of *furyu*: both *chenoya* (tea ceremony) and Ikebana are expressions of this phase of life. The characteristics of this phase: shunning all strife and worldly desire losing oneself by expressing a profound love for the beauty of nature. Thus passion and renunciation are both necessary, these opposites must co-exist within a man to make him great.

This is, in part, a function of *in* and *yo*, words that symbolize the cosmic forces that shape the world.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF In and Yo

In and Yo are the Japanese terms for the Chinese characters of Ying (the positive force) and Yen. (the negative force) The phenomenal world is viewed as being pervaded by two contrary, yet complementary energies. Both forces are always present. Unequal and incomplete in themselves, together they provide a perfect balance of inequality and make possible the existence of all things. Order reigns as long as there is a perfect balance between the two; disorder results when there is a predominance of one over the other.

In and *yo* are used to express many other paired associations : darkness and light, passive and active, weak and strong, evil and good, left and right, earth and heaven, moon and sun; material and spiritual, These forces are forever opposed, forever united.

This way of seeing the world is incorporated into, and is the basis of, flower arranging. The part of the plant facing the sun is (*yo*) is the front and positive side; and the part

facing the earth is (*in*). Balancing the positive and negative side of plant materials is one of the fundamental secrets of flower arranging. The application of the concept of *in and yo*, already in use in other forms, became foundational to the art of flower arranging.(Kincaid 145)

LEVELS OR LAYERS OF SYMBOLISM

The transcending, transforming aspect of flower arranging is intensified by assigning symbolic meaning to the construction of the arrangement and the materials used.

Placement of the branch materials are assigned universal meanings in the major flower arranging schools. *Shin*, the largest, defining and most important branch is known as *shin* (heaven); a smaller, still very important branch is (*man*) and the last branch usually facing forward, at an angle greater than *shin* is *hikae* (earth). After these three lines are in position then additional branches and flowers, called *jushi* are added.

Other writers have defined interpretation of this three elements in different terms. Coe, in Ikebana, defines them as:(in the order above) as spiritual truth, harmonizer, and material substance. She describes that these deeper interpretations are necessary in that man, in his flower-arranging, strives to harmonize spiritual truth with material substance; that the Oriental artist is not studying art for art's sake but rather striving to gain enlightenment. (Coe, 43.) Further, in order to become proficient the goal should be akin to that of the Japanese.

The relationship of these three branches to one another (heaven, man ,earth) or spiritual truth, harmonizer and material substance is central to the appreciation of a flower arrangement.

This was news to me! My efforts (pronouncing the Japanese names correctly, arranging the branches after being properly cut at the correct angle) was hard enough. Now there was even more?

There is. There is also a ritualized and proper etiquette for the appreciation of a flower arrangement found in the *tokonoma* of a Japanese home, a recessed alcove which is the center of the home. This *tokonoma* remains the most important feature of the home and the room with the *tokonoma* was considered the most important place in the house, used primarily to entertain distinguished guests and for special occasions. The *tokonoma* in the average home has become a kind of shrine dedicated to the exercise of aesthetic sensitivity (whatever that might be). No crowding, as only three objects are allowed at any one time. These three objects are the *kakemono* (a scroll painting) a flower arrangement and a small metal container (often an incense burner).

The prescribed etiquette resembles genuflecting in a Catholic church. When a guest comes into the room he should stand three feet in front of the *tokonoma* and kneel on the mat (*tamari*). The guest bows first to the host and then to the *tokonoma* in recognition of the effort the host/hostess has made. Next he should look at the *tokonoma* and then in a few minutes his eye should rest on the flower arrangement. He first looks at the *shin* stem, then the *shoe* and then the *hakai*, and finally the container and the stand. The guest complements the host/hostess commenting on the relationship of the branches and on the cleverness of the design noting how it fits in with the scroll and other elements of the *tokonoma*.

I can not imagine any of my friends, relatives or acquaintances performing in such a fashion, no being capable of such scrutiny. Perhaps I need a whole new set of friends and acquaintances, perhaps I could be adopted by a Japanese family? The most recognition my arrangements I ever get, from anyone is: “ That’s pretty”. .

The search tirelessly continued. Some Japanese authors were able to describe the symbolism of flower arranging in terms they feel their Western audience might more readily understand. For example, Issotsei Nishikawa, in Floral Art of Japan compares flower arranging to a drama or a novel

As in the the drama or novel a foil is necessary to set off the leading character in high relief, so in Japanese flower arrangement a foil is employed to emphasize the characteristic form of nature. This is represented by the method of grouping or combining the items. One of this groupings is that of a pine tree with roses. The pine tree is generally considered to be manly and very strong, its trunk being robust and powerful like the muscular arms of a laboring man and its evergreen needles thriving through summer’s heat and winter’s severe cold. It stands sturdy and bold like a giant unmoved by the affairs of the puny men around it. No one fails to see its dignity, which makes the Japanese prize it above all other trees. A rose, on the other hand, is very bright-colored, but very frail and ephemeral, like a beautiful but slender, and witty yet nervous woman. When the rose is arranged with the pine, we

can behold in them an old hero with a tender lady in the intricate complications of life and love, as in the play of Othello by Shakespeare. (19-20)

Unlike the play, flower arrangement calls for no action performed, no word spoken by the actors or actresses in the plants or trees set in the vase. They all sit or stand quietly in the vase, and keep their poses unchanged forever, just as in pictures. But even so, if one has eyes to see, one can discern the expressions manifested in their delicate figures. Some of them are aglow with joy and gladness, while others are buried in dark sorrow. Again, some feel lonely, while others are gay with love and life. And to one who fails to distinguish these various expressions, Japanese flower arrangement will remain forever a sealed art. (Ibid at p. 20)

Not sure that I, nor anyone of my acquaintance, is capable of distinguishing the plant and tree expressions - Japanese flower arrangement may remain a sealed art.

The next step in the learning process was learning the symbolic significance of individual flowers. Depending on the purpose and season of the flower arrangement certain flowers are either suggested or frowned upon. Some examples shall follow.

A. New Year Flower Arrangement

The New Year is an important time. The flowers used for this occasion are mostly those symbolic of longevity or of

a prosperous posterity. The traditional triple combination of pine, bamboo and Japanese apricot symbolizes longevity, strengthened beauty. Another ikebana ornament for the New Year is a branch of drooping willow arranged in a vase and reaching down to the floor. The willow leaves and long, drooping branches suggest longevity and the wisdom of practicing frugality. Some fruit-bearing branches are also appropriate because the red berries of these plants symbolize the prosperity of one's offspring.

B. Wedding and Other Ceremonies.

For auspicious occasions chrysanthemums, peonies, orchids are used in addition to pine, rose, Japanese apricot and omoto. Associating ideas often bans the use of certain flowers for festive occasions. For example, the camellia is avoided as this flower falls to the ground suddenly, thus suggesting a sudden fall in prestige, a sudden death, a fall from grace, or plain bad luck. The drooping wisteria is avoided for the simple reason that the Japanese word *sagaru* (droop) means "decline, sink, retrograde, as well as hang, or dangle," The lotus is avoided, because of its close association with Buddhism and Buddhist services. No groupings with four or six leaves or flowers, no torn leaves can be used, for the Japanese word "*shi*" (meaning four) has unpleasant associations since it also means death, while the ideograph for six is a homonym of *mu* meaning nothingness, dead and gone. Flowers of thorny trees such as the quince are avoided. For some reason flowers which bloom once in spring and then in the fall are to be avoided.

C. Flowers for Buddhist Services

White flowers are always used for Buddhist services. Occasionally dead leaves are used, because they suggest

loneliness. The most common flower used in Buddhist rites is the lotus (Nishikawa 126)

Chapter 3 Examining the Source of Books and Material Used.

A word must be said about the vast array of materials consulted . Sources were Marin County Library, Dominican databases and library as well as many out of print books obtained through Amazon books. The books were from strikingly different times and genres.

Four of the books consulted were written by Western (American, British or German) women who began their studies of flower arranging in Japan, during the late 1940s and early 1950s. (Kincaid, Cole, Allen Herrigel) All were prodigiously energetic women, studying often under several masters, in different schools. After their homeland homeland return these women they continued their practice, establishing schools, active in forming branches of Ikebana International in several countries. They published books to acquaint the West with flower arranging. All spoke respectfully of the Japanese culture and its values, with deep reverational respect for the Masters responsible for teaching them the Art,, These early books spoke of the philosophies and practices; the colored pictures and detailed “how to” instructions were very limited. The earliest book of that genre Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement, describes in detail the lessons of Gustie Herrigel’s at the feet of a Master during the 1920s. While her husband taught at Her husband

taught at Toyku University , while German Hendai, Herrigel intensively schooled herself in the art of Ikebana.

Two books, dating from the same period of time, were written by Japanese men for Western audiences. They carefully attempted to explain the symbolism, almost courtly in their approach. Again, very few “how tos” and very few pictures: perhaps these Japanese writers did not think that flower arranging was a possibility for the Western woman reading these books.

An entirely different approach was taken in a more recent book, written by Kyo Kwan. It attempted to “interpret and express the universality of the Christian message in the light of a local cultural expression----the art of flower arrangement, ikebana.” The author used the “way of the flower” (perhaps understanding the significance of flower arranging for the Japanese)made the following disclaimer: “We need to state clearly that although we admire the flower and appreciate its beauty, we do not worship it. We intend to worship God as creator and sustainer of the whole cosmos through the flowers of the field.” (Introduction) The book then “copies” the Japanese style by arranging the expression around Christian rather than seasonal themes. Creation, Eve, Christmas, the Empty Tomb, Resurrection, the Cross become the rather unlikely titles and theme for the arrangements. The arrangements themselves were quite beautiful but the ‘naming’ seemed a bastardization of the art.

The modern books are often sleek “coffee table” oversized books filled with color photographs of arrangements. Although there is often an introduction explaining the significance and history of Japanese flower arranging the goal of these books seems to be the encouragement of copying the designs, with little thought being given to the

underlying symbolism of this art form. My most recent source, Keiko's Ikebana published in 2006, was the most extreme in the regard. I copied one of the arrangements from the book but the imitative, almost rote experience is but a shadow of the intense involvement that traditional Japanese flower arranging demands.

CONCLUSION: DID I EXPERIENCE A LEAP OF FAITH ?

“Leap of faith” became the operative phrase in the Dominican University 5001 semester. Did I make that leap? This is the test: does the awareness of the symbolism alter my practices, do I now practice Ikebana to gain spiritual enlightenment? I fear not. I can intellectually understand the meaning of the symbols but this does not bring enlightenment.

Sonja Servomaa, returns to the principle of the triad to discuss the varying levels of appreciation of nature, and, by implication, flower arranging. The first level is one of apparent beauty, the natural way of being, also a notion for technical skill or appropriate material and mode of presentation (*hana*). The next level, known as *yugen*, means sublime elegance, delicate fineness of skill, creating an ambiance of mystery as well as calm resignation to spontaneity, ambiguity in suggestiveness. The third and highest level is *rojaku*, quiet, spiritual beauty which can only be achieved after long practice and complete devotion. “Achieving this level, the artist can truly move the heart of the viewer and heighten his soul to heaven.” (Servomaa 33).

Realistically , the highest level I might achieve is f *yugen*. This comparison comes to mind. Picture a non-Christian stained glass artisan working at a cathedral during the Middle Ages. His beautifully executed art may move the heart and heighten the soul of the observer; particularly if that observer is an illiterate Christian believer and the stained glass window, with its symbols and depictions, enables him to comprehend more fully the message and the story of Christ. However, for another viewer, and perhaps the artisan himself, the appreciation is limited to the craftsmanship. The beauty and craftsmanship does not have spiritual meaning.

The most profound and rather startling. example of the meaning found in the Japanese practice of flower arranging took place in America during the 1940s. Japanese detained in relocation camps during World War II revived cultural practices, such as Ikebana. These had fallen into disuse in the USA and Canada. The avowed purpose of the concentration camps was to “Americanize” the Japanese, however, by steeping themselves in the cultural and religious symbols of Japan the detainees were able to preserve their families from total disintegration and maintain their ethnic identity and solidarity.

“The ideals of filial piety and ancestor worship, and of the closeness of man, gods, and nature were manifested in the wider network of cultural resistance in the various aesthetic expressions.” Thus, “resistance was rechanneled away from open rebellion into ethnic beliefs and practices, which because of the nature of the oppression, themselves constituted resistance.” (Okiihiro 223)

Ikebana is a powerful symbol in that situation, both a form of resistance and a form of expression. That something

as ephemeral as flowers should have such power is truly amazing.

The Promised Sequel (chapter)

In the words of a song: “My life has changed in oh so many ways” The year is now 2023, sixteen years hence. No longer living in California, now happily residing in Canada, the land of my birth. Way back then I was a fledgling author, my major was Travel Writing. Fledgling has the most expressive synonyms: emerging, arising, sunrise, dawning, beginning; developing, in the making, budding, burgeoning, growing, embryonic, nascent, incipient; promising, potential, up-and-coming. There I was a promising, up-and-coming, incipient, sunrise, dawning author. The exact opposite, an antonym of fledgling is declining. I am not that.

I have, by anyone's standards, arrived! Read by thousands, if not millions the world over. Not my books but a blog alexismcbride.com London, USA, UAE, Canada and Beyond. In case you wondered, with blogs the statistical measure is views - not readers, not followers - viewed. Began the blog in January 2017, not looked back. Hunting around for a daily topic, decided in February of 2023 to write about spirituality., remembering my Ikebana days. Each and every blog arrives equipped with a title describing the contents This one: A Discussion of Spirituality; Leading to a Discussion of the Different Practices of Spirituality ; Ikebana Became the Source and Expression of My Spirituality; Ikebana, Not Just Branches and Flowers; Photographs of Recent Offerings. This is what I wrote at the time. (I admit to recent editing.)

First and most importantly, it is necessary to define spirituality. Wikipedia provides an excellent overview of the topic: “The meaning of *spirituality* has developed and expanded over time, and various meanings can be found alongside each other.[Traditionally, spirituality referred to a religious process of re-formation which “aims to recover the original shape of man, ”oriented at “the image of God” It is exemplified by the founders and sacred texts of the religions of the world.”

After a lengthy explanation of the history of the many world faiths Wikipedia brings us up to date. “In modern times, the term both spread to other religious traditions and broadened to refer to a wider range of experiences, including a range of esoteric and religious traditions. Modern usages tend to refer to a subjective experience of a sacred dimension and the “deepest values and meanings by which people live”,often in a context separate from organized religious institutions. This may involve belief in a supernatural realm beyond the ordinarily observable world, personal growth, a quest for an ultimate or sacred meaning, religious experience, or an encounter with one’s own “inner dimension”.

So spirituality can, and does, in these modern days exist outside the religious connotations and connections. Wikipedia tells us: “Those who speak of spirituality outside of religion often define themselves as *spiritual but not religious* and generally believe in the existence of different “spiritual paths”, emphasizing the importance of finding one’s own individual path to spirituality. According to one 2005 poll, about 24% of the United States population identifies itself as “spiritual but not religious. Lockwood draws attention to the variety of spiritual experience in the contemporary West: The new Western spiritual landscape, characterized by consumerism and choice abundance, is

scattered with novel religious manifestations based in psychology and the Human Potential Movement, each offering participants a pathway to the Self.”

Here is the good news, particularly if you are spiritual. “Various studies (most originating from North America) have reported a positive correlation between spirituality and mental well-being in both healthy people and those encountering a range of physical illnesses or psychological disorders. Although spiritual individuals tend to be optimistic,[report greater social support, and experience higher intrinsic meaning in life,[strength, and inner peace, whether the correlation represents a causal link remains contentious.” The last sentence of this quote points out that this is difficult to prove scientifically because of the different and diverse meanings of spirituality and whether all of the positives led to, other than being the result of, spirituality.

Then more about spiritual practices. “Spiritual practices may include meditation, mindfulness, prayer, the contemplation of sacred texts, ethical development, and spiritual retreats in a convent. Love and/or compassion are often described as the mainstay of spiritual development.”

But where does that leave me, and why is this of interest to me (or you, for that matter)? Of course I want the benefits of spirituality – mental health, optimism, social support, inner peace. Who would not want that?

During most of my long life I cannot be said to be innately or even remotely spiritual. I was an atheist, first refusing to acknowledge the existence of God at the age of 19. This denial , continued up to, and until, my entrance into the Islamic faith at the age of 77.

How was I able to exist, and to some extent thrive, without religion. I shall reflect upon this.

It seems that my need for spirituality, my expression of spirituality, was met in other ways. Most notably, in a way not common in the West. I immersed myself in the study of Ikebana. It did not begin with a desire for spirituality but for another, actually absurd reason. My third husband never, and I do mean never, gifted me with flowers. I saw that classes in Ikebana were offered at a San Rafael community center and enrolled because I knew that few flowers were needed, and, they would be provided at class. There I met the woman who was to become my sensei (teacher) for the next twenty years. She was born in Japan, coming to the USA after her marriage to a military man who had been temporarily stationed in Japan. Over the years we grew closer, laughing together, even traveling together. We went to Japan together in 2011. The study began with an enthusiasm that did not leave me for years.

Wikipedia explains: Ikebana, “arranging flowers” or “making flowers alive” is the Japanese art of flower arranging. “It is also known as Kado “way of flowers” The tradition dates back to the Heian period, when floral offerings were made at altars. *Ikebana* reached its first zenith in the 16th century and has grown over the centuries, with numerous distinct schools extant today. Wikipedia traces its complex history. The eighth *shōgun*, Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436–1490), was a patron of the arts developed concepts that would then go on to contribute to the formulation of rules in *ikebana*; one of the most important being that flowers offered on all ceremonial occasions, and placed as offerings before the gods, should not be offered loosely, but should represent time and thought. *Ikebana* has always been considered a dignified accomplishment. All of Japan’s most celebrated generals notably practised flower arranging, finding

that it calmed their minds and made their decisions on the field of action clearer; notable military practitioners include Toyotomi Hideyoshi, one of Japan's most famous generals."

(Laughingly, I look back at those years realizing that flower arranging did calm my mind and made my decisions in the fields of action clearer. My fields of action were the Marin County Civil Courts where I fought off defendants and opposing counsel with zeal.)

Continued reading into the nature of Ikebana revealed that . "Ikebana is a disciplined art form in which nature and humanity are brought together. Though *ikebana* is an expression of creativity, certain rules govern its form, such as the idea of good and evil fortune in the selection of material and form of the arrangement. It is believed that practice of flower arranging leads a person to become more patient and tolerant of differences in nature and in life, providing relaxation in mind, body and soul, and allowing a person to identify with beauty in all art forms."

It was so, relaxation in mind, body and soul, identifying beauty in all art forms. I achieved knowledge of the effect in an unusual way. I went back to graduate school after I retired from the practice of law obtaining a Master of Fine Arts in Humanities from Dominican University in San Rafael, California. As it is a Catholic university, it required religious courses; one examined the search for meaning in religious faiths. The professor, Dr. Novak knowing of my Ikebana absorption encouraged me to explore meaning in Ikebana. The resulting term paper was titled *Ikebana: Not Just Branches and Flowers*. Research led to an understanding of the spiritual aspect of this practice, it was fascinating.

Flower arranging was abandoned when I went to London, then Vancouver, then San Francisco but when I returned to Marin in January of 2020 and retrieved my possessions (including containers and other paraphernalia) began to fashion flower arrangements, displaying them on the patio of my apartment in Corte Madera. Needless to say, the Ikebana paraphernalia were not considered essential when I fled to the UAE and then onward.

I blessedly no longer rely on Ikebana for spiritual inspiration. October 20, 2020 found me reverting to the Islamic Faith. However, in an inspiring and beautify way, Ikebana could be said to be my first step on the journey to the Straight Path.

About the Author



I am a writer, a blogger, and unapologetically now living in Penang, Malaysia. The journey began in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada the place of my birth. There were numerous detours, California, London, Saudi Arabia etc etc etc. The study of Ikebana was one step, bringing me from almost life long atheism to the Islamic Faith.