

YES. NO. IT'S A LITTLE DIFFICULT.

An example:

At the start, when I first went there, I might have said, without thinking much about it, "the colour you are looking for is 'red'".

Now? I'd suggest differently. Crimson. Rose. Cardinal. Salmon. Fire truck. Scarlet. The colour of old blood. Fresh blood. Your blood.

Shades and hues. Nuance and subtlety. It's a difficult thing.

No, it's not.

It's...the only thing.

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I liked Yoshie from the scorching July we first bowed to and at each other. She would sit and angle her slight and aging frame to be sure to catch my movement, gauge my disposition, and try to please the confident educator that I was then masquerading as.

Though Junko, Toshiko, Chie, and the few other students whose names elude me now, also comported themselves in some response to my quirky language practices and wishes, they always held Yoshie, their group's natural leader, in their peripheral view. For if she twitched for better or worse then the whole group spasmed and shifted mood together and I had not much significance in that process.

I had swung into Japan, earlier in the year, had been interviewed by the management of a language school of dubious history and uncertain destiny, and offered a shaky role handling an array of erstwhile scholars who were following the trend of trying to pick up someone else's native tongue and culture by interacting with visiting foreigners.

Included in my disparate *mélange* of Wednesday students were Yoshie and the rest of the 'Golden Agers'. An ancient crew - more motley than masterly - of learners, they had my attention and awe from the start. They were 'hibakusha' - survivors of the atomic bomb. Helping them felt like solemn privilege rather than duty.

Having come through the infamous devastation of their city and decades of post-war stress these women were never ever going to be troubled or shaken by any classroom duress that I could subject them to, I thought. Surely.

Somehow, when we are younger, we get these things wrong. Our timing is awry. An older me wants to now, occasionally, chide a youthful me.

A 'sensei' - teacher - in Japan is accorded a clear deference or obedience, and all kinds of leeway that educators in other pedagogic worlds may never know. So a sensei asks and a sensei gets because they, their age notwithstanding, are 'the ones who have gone before' and are expected to know all sorts of things about measuring twice and cutting once.

In early August, in the days following the A-bomb Memorial Ceremony near the device's Ground Zero point, I asked for, firmly though not unkindly, my Golden Agers' first-hand narratives of what happened on and about the 6th of August, 1945. Ever so slightly they pivoted towards Yoshie. It was her say-so. Her lead.

She lowered her voice, tilted her head to one side. She paused and breathed this: "Sensei. Chotto muzukashii desu." Teacher, it's a little difficult.

In the years that followed, I was to learn exactly what this meant. It was a clear but polite 'no', in Japan. But I was not quite ready or able to hear that yet. After all, 'difficult' was not 'impossible', it seemed.

"If you tell me your stories I will feel your experience better."

"If you share your narrative I will faithfully pass it on to the generations I will meet in my future teaching life."

"If you help me understand what it was like I may know more about the futility of war. Can teach the futility of war."

"If you do this thing."

If YOU do this thing.

And we began.

In the following hours I learned of mayhem, noise, fire, pain, stench, horror, shock, dread. Of loss, uncertainty, pathos, lethargy, futility, grace, fatigue, desperation, luck, generosity. Of the business of being appalled.

Of grief, of grief, of grief.

When the time was up, when tears were wiped and the tissues discarded, they left together. Smiles back in place. Lace parasols and paper fans set to handle the fierce things that the Hiroshima summer can surprise the unwary with if they're not setting sentries for them.

Two weeks later Toshiko succumbed to the radiation-induced leukaemia she'd done battle with all the time I knew her, and many years before that. Nobody in the class said a word about it. They merely tilted her chair against the table edge and we went quietly through our afternoon's practise and never mentioned atomic bombs again.

Just so. It had been a little difficult.