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The Late-Blooming Calligrapher

At the first meeting of the *East Asian Calligraphy* class, I wrote down the terms that the teacher highlighted and brought them home for digestion. The list was not long. After dinner, I took my notebook out and repeated each unfamiliar term out loud like a monk at prayer: Stop, sweep, kick; stroke order, balance; eight basic strokes; stop, sweep, kick; from right to left or left to right; from top to bottom or bottom to top; *sumi* is ink stick, ink stone, brushes, paper; stop, sweep, kick; *katakana*; eight basic strokes; stop, sweep, kick. *Konnichiwa* and *Arigatoo gozaimashita*, terms of greeting and departure were already familiar to me from travels to Japan though I rehearsed these too. Then: Stop, sweep, kick. And, one more time. A long-time college teacher, I am now a student in a university level calligraphy course. It is an introductory class. No previous experience necessary. Professor Yoshii is our instructor.

During the early weeks of the term, the teacher had informed us, we would work with pencil rather than brush; however, this did not stop me from taking out the brushes, ink, and the other moving parts of my calligraphy materials for examination. Each was set on the kitchen table; I lifted them individually, ran them through my palms and fingers, inhaled their aromas, trawled the brushes from left elbow to fingertips and back again. I rolled the ink stone in my palms in the manner my grandfather used to soften plug tobacco. Then I went online and learned that calligraphy is not just art; it is also a Zen Practice that can foster harmony and lead to wisdom. I have spent a lifetime seeking both though without much success—perhaps this class can lead me toward enlightenment. Later, I watched videos of expert calligraphers and teachers of the art deftly making the eight basic brush strokes—*eijihappo*—and the more basic strokes—the stop, sweep, kick—that our teacher had demonstrated for us. These are called *tome*, *harai*, *hane* in Japanese. Before going to bed, I took the calligraphy tools out of the containers to hold them one last time.

Though I have earned advanced degrees and am excited to begin calligraphy, I am also nervous as I embark on this new project. Not only have I never previously taken an art class, but I have also spent a lifetime being lampooned for my abysmal penmanship. Will I make a fool of myself? A teacher in elementary school once revealed in front of our class that my cursive “style” reminded him of dogs’ teeth. I don’t think that he had one dog in mind; rather that my handwriting represented the sum of all the crooked canine teeth visible to the

world. Growing up in our small town, no opportunities existed for boys to study art. If they had, I would have been too fearful of failure and of inviting mockery to express interest. The more I think about it, the more my mood darkens, and my stomach begins to churn as the fret, fear, anxiety, and nausea of my schooldays returns. I feel that while this class will draw me into the future with new skills, it might just as quickly bend me backwards into my complicated schooldays when I underperformed as a scholar and absorbed a deep sense of failure that I have struggled for decades to erase. Lighten up, I remind myself. I recall how gifted both my mother and sister Mary are in the preparation and presentation of food and imagine that, with some hard work and a good attitude, my own skills with calligraphy might match theirs in their areas of expertise. Also, I have heard that calligraphy practice can lead to mindfulness. Though mindfulness might not wipe out my negative experiences with learning, it might reframe these more positively.

We work with pencils learning the basics of *katakana*, the alphabet employed to represent non-Japanese ideas and items such as computers, etc. At the same time, our instructor through her weekly lectures unfolds aspects of the history of writing in China and Japan, showing us the work of the great masters of calligraphy from both countries through the centuries. We learn about *kanji* and *hiragana*, the other alphabets used in Japan as well as the different types of scripts used in formal and informal situations. The lectures provide us with a larger sense of the panorama of writing systems employed in China and Japan. Professor Yoshii situates our class in this continuum. Given our skill set, this is rather optimistic. When I am just about to achieve some dexterity in *katakana*, the easiest script because it embodies many right angles, or so it seems to me, we move on from pencils to brushes. For a long time, I have felt that I was falling behind in everything. Magically, week by week, I catch up.

In his essay on calligraphy, Alex Kerr notes that "calligraphy is the one traditional art that is seen everywhere in Japan. From letters, shop signs, newspaper and book advertisements, down to the labels on the little white envelopes containing chopsticks . . . . Calligraphy is one of the defining traits of life in Japan, and you can hardly get though a single day without encountering it." Kerr has been a lifelong calligrapher and, discussing *kanji*, celebrates how each character contains a concept as well as many layers of meaning. Its immediacy makes it a "portrait of the heart . . . and the highest of the arts." Though they are both strangely foreign and seductively artful in many respects, the *kanji* do not frighten me. Eyeing them carefully in my handbook, I find ways to refer these characters back to what I have seen before and understand; specifically, the ornate letterings and designs on the *Book*

of Kells, in the library of Dublin's Trinity College. Aren't the glosses that monks scribbled on the margins of sacred texts like haikus? Isn't the *Book of Kells* as much an artistic creation as a transcription of the *Bible*? Certainly, it is more than a book. As the class progresses and as the instructor's lectures on the history and highlights of calligraphy in China and Japan begin to make more sense to me as they take shape in my mind, I am tempted to read more into this background material. Briefly, I do some research before stopping. This digging for information pushes me to get ahead of myself, makes me nervously busy, thinking too much, and falling under the illusion that I am the teacher and not the pupil. Instead, I spend more time with my paper, brushes, ink stone, and ink seeking familiarity with the materials and ease with the process and execution of calligraphy. I learn to slow down. I develop rhythm. I discover practice. An old kitchen table in the corner of the basement is my workspace. I sit on a hard, wooden chair.

At the beginning of our second class, our instructor handed each of us a card. I threw it a puzzled look. "This is your name in Japanese," Professor Yoshii said to me, before moving along to the next student. One of the practical exercises in class that day, and a part of the week's homework assignment, was to write out that name many times, to become comfortable with writing it, to memorize it: we would be required to write our surname on each completed assignment. Once I became tuned in to the shape of my Japanese name, with molding the characters that formed it, I commenced each piece of written work by writing it out. For a long time, like a fool, I wrote it at the top of the page on the left-hand side rather than further down, in its correct position. I felt that by writing my name in Japanese, I was moving through a doorway into another room, thereby assuming a novel identity. I felt transformed by this new name. I sensed a new sharpness in my face, a renewed fire burning in my eyes. For a moment, I thought I could feel my father's hand brushing my head in approval. Are names important? Are they who we are? Yes/No? But I am the person who stands when my name is called.

I was sure that the quality of the work I produced in the first few weeks was below average. In the front row were seated three young women whose calligraphy was spectacular. The harder the task, the finer the work they produced. The best of this trio was a graphic art major. She would put her finished pencil or ink work to one side, on view for all, and I would admire it for its elegance. I was in awe of her ability to fashion lines, everything on her sheets was shaped so carefully and true. Her work had the clarity and confidence of execution that mine lacked. I found it hard not to stare at her as she shaped her characters; she seemed to work so effortlessly. I thought of her as the "Slowhand" of East Asian Calligraphy, the genius who

makes the difficult look so easy. The two students who sat close to her were simultaneously studying Japanese language, so they had acquired a deeper understanding of the characters, and a feel for writing them, than I had. Because I knew so little of the Japanese language, my purpose was solely artistic.

Looking back to my schooldays, I felt ashamed of myself. Had I worked harder at acquiring decent handwriting, I might have been better prepared for later-life calligraphy. But at no point was I intimidated; my objective was to improve and not to compete. I had not enrolled to seek a good grade; in fact, not once did I think about what grade I might receive for the semester's work. What did help me to improve was the fact that the other students were concerned about their grades: this meant that they set standards that I tried to match. Being gifted my Japanese name by my instructor filled me with irrational excitement; it made me an equal among my young peers. The name provided me with a sense of belonging to Japan at some level; it was a kind of *bona fide*. Is this what the instructor had in mind? Later, as I thought about this gift while on my evening walk, I realized that there was a certain irony attached to it. I have always had two names: my English name was translated into Japanese. My Irish name was secret. It will remain so. Out of a sense of anxiety, I have always preserved a hiding place.

After completing graduate school, I pledged never to take another class—ever. Wearied by decades of formal education, I could not even face the prospect of attending commencement. While others marched in regalia, I downed beers in The Blarney Stone on Times Square when I should have been walking with my peers. Even on that day, when I was to be handed my diploma, decades removed from primary school, I focused more on early failure rather than on mature success: this was the real reason why I did not attend. Walking home from my final Leaving Cert. exam in June 1973, I flung my books into the River Slaney, declared myself done with schooling. This gesture had two results. First, it got me in serious trouble with my mother. Second, this gesture became part of family folklore. It is not the most recited nugget related to my poor behavior—that was the account of me shoving a full ice-cream cone into the mouth of the letter box in the Market Sq. When this is mentioned at family gatherings, it leads to much speculation with respect to the damage I must have caused to neighbors' finances, romantic lives, or ever worse, the loss of important nuggets of gossip. Time passes, resistance lessens. My children have grown up; I have more time; I have thawed out. I am more mature, I surmise.

A landmark day in class occurred when our teacher allowed us to move on from pencil and paper to brushes and ink. I immediately

hauled myself upright in my seat. She pinned a sheet of paper to the chalkboard, and, it seemed to me as I watched in awe, in one quick and graceful movement, she moved from holding her brush, to dipping it in ink, to writing an elegant character on the sheet. Even after she'd reprised it, I thought it would be impossible to imitate. Imagine, I thought to myself, being given a quick demonstration by Seve Ballesteros on how to draw a 5 iron around trees, over water, to a green, keeping in mind a blustery wind, and then being handed the club and asked to follow suit. Impossible. But we were students, an obedient group, so we set about our work. Though we proceeded nervously at first, we quickly found form. I loved guiding wide sweeps of ink across the page, forging many twists and turns, shaping the stops and dots. Our class wrote feverishly, filling many pages of scratch paper with our work. Near the end of class, the teacher asked us to write our names with ink and we did so with confidence. In front of me and at an angle was seated a young woman from Bangladesh. At times, Aabonti would catch my eye, her look passing on to me what was on her mind. With some frequency, she intimated to me that neither of us was that good at calligraphy; this linked us. Yes, I would reply with my eyes, both of us are post-colonials. Don't worry, we will prevail, my gaze reassured her. To my right, Joey sat stoically. Every now and then he would cast his eyes over my work, his look telling me, I am not great at this, but I am better at it than you are. After the teacher had ended class that day, though before we had risen from our seats, Aabonti looked across at me and smiled. I gave her a quiet thumbs-up. What a day it had been. I couldn't wait to get home to my basement to practice calligraphy. Stop, sweep, kick, I intoned as I drove home.

Twice I have visited Kyoto. The first visit was for work, so I did not see as much of the city as I would have liked. I returned a year later to explore the city in more depth. I began on my first morning at the Fushimi Inari Shrine where I marveled at its thousands of vermillion torii gates and ended my explorations on a final afternoon visit to Daitoku-ji Temple and Zen Gardens, the monastery where the poet Gary Snyder had studied and where he and Joanne Kyger had married, both among my favorite poets. For ten days, I traversed the city, eager to absorb as much as I could of that complex place where the ancient and the modern exist in odd and uneasy harmony. Everywhere I went I saw calligraphy: it is as Alex Kerr believes a "defining trait of life in Japan." I could not read a single character. Fortunately, the bus and subway signs were written in English which made getting around the city and the outskirts uncomplicated. Though translation had allowed me to read a good deal of Japanese literature over the years, inside me I felt a deficit: I had no Japanese. The *kanji*

fascinated me. Though they were inscrutable, I found the characters to be beguiling and beautiful. I longed to understand these markings, even at a basic level. If I could achieve this, I might arrive at a beginning point for understanding Japan. Then one day walking through a hallway at the university where I work, I noticed a flyer on a bulletin board advertising a class in East Asian Calligraphy. I emailed the instructor asking if I could sign up. Of course, she replied. I had found my starting point.

Though I was a long way from home on those two visits to Japan, and often swimming in confusion, I was comfortable during my visit to Daitoku-ji—walking through its buildings, gardens, and passageways. As a teenager, my parents had packed me off to boarding school to be educated by Cistercian monks, the school being attached to their monastery. Because I had been performing poorly in school, they thought that the regime of the monastery would be helpful to me. It proved to be a wise decision on their part. A teenager, I resisted the monastery's culture; however, I also found it to be a gentle place; it has had an enduring and positive effect on me. My experience at school prepared me to imagine what life might be like in Daitoku-ji. I recalled how quiet our monastery was, how softly spoken the monks were, how they liked to sit in silence while reading, praying, or thinking, and how at High Mass on Sundays they chanted hymns in a most hypnotic drone. As a teenager seeking kicks, I considered the whole monk business to be a waste of time; however, while I resisted, I absorbed. The monks, I now understand, gave me permission to be a writer, to adopt a way of life that paralleled theirs. Over time our ways of living aligned—with some important exceptions. Unlike some teachers in my hometown, these monks used silence and example rather than violence as tools of persuasion. To spend a day indoors reading was to be productive, the fashioning of an essay or poem into a thing of beauty was a necessity, they whispered to me as I yawned and idly listened. The aesthetic was sacred and vice versa. Standing to one side in a room in Daitoku-ji, I could hear the sweep of a monk's cassock on the tiled floor as he walked in the direction of our chapel, light falling through stained glass. Though I felt comfortable here, I was glad when my companions for the day shouted at me to catch up. Also, I was hungry. Walking toward the gates of Daitoku-ji, I thought I could smell bread, not any bread, but the bread baked by the monks at my old school. If I could be comfortable in Daitoku-ji, might I not find a way to be at ease in East Asian Calligraphy? Yes, I answered to myself.

Posture is important in calligraphy. This is a problem for a sloucher like me. If your posture is perfect or even good, you do not have to work on it. Sitting, standing, or walking, I must remind myself

to push my shoulders back, then lower them a little, look ahead. This is hard work. With my shoulders pushed back, I feel better, more aligned, naturally set. Unfortunately, this moment won't last. I will follow it with a period of slouching. In school, they did not use the term posture. But to be a sloucher was deemed a serious symptom of disinterest, disrespect, and laziness. When I look around me in class, I observe that the three young women in front of me, gifted calligraphers all, have good posture. Professor Yoshii's posture is excellent too, like an ice skater's or gymnast's. Sadly, Aabonti's is almost as bad as mine. I wonder if good posture is like cleanliness, a métier of goodliness and worth.

In class, I sit up straight even when the teacher is not watching me, holding my brush perpendicularly. The seat is hard. It is torture. An aunt told me once that my slight curvature of the spine resulted from poor nourishment in boarding school, a legacy of my final year when I was frequently ill. I recall that zazen is a formal way of sitting in Zen Buddhism and is central to practice. Given my posture issues, I would make a poor Zen Buddhist. Gary Snyder tells us that it is often impossible for busy men and women to sit as prescribed; he believes that sitting in other ways, such as at meetings or laboring on the factory floor, can be alternate modes of zazen. Sometimes when I sit at meetings in work, I have a bad attitude, and this would hardly qualify as zazen. If you look in through the window, you will observe me slouching in a corner. If one sits upright maintaining good posture, others will assume that one's attitude is above reproach.

Writing about his own methodology, Alex Kerr makes it clear that there are alternative ways of doing calligraphy that contrast to the formal one our teacher follows: "when I am planning to do some calligraphy, I invite a friend to come over and spend the night at my house . . . . When at last I pick up the brush, the evening is wearing on, and my friend and I have drunk a fair amount of wine." He finds *seiza*, the traditional way of sitting, to be uncomfortable so he sits in another position or stands. I stick with the formal approach, at least for now. Our teacher is very professional and well-organized. From the outset, I could see that she required complete attention from us. We must be businesslike and work hard. One day in class I was thinking of Algernon's observation about his skills as a pianist in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte." Our teacher would not approve of Algernon's tone. I told myself to keep my mouth shut. However, following Kerr's advice, I have taken to drinking beer while doing calligraphy, on occasion. I am not allowed to bring my ink, paper, and brushes upstairs. In our house, I should note, beer and wine are cooled

in our basement refrigerator, close to the old kitchen table I use as a workspace. It is a most convenient arrangement. Stop, sweep, kick.

One day while working in class, I made an error with a brush stroke. Following inherited best practices, I maneuvered my brush to correct my error by fattening the curve to make it look right. You make a mistake, you own up and fix it, right? I did not notice that my teacher was observing me. She stepped forward. She said NO. You are right, I said, I will not make this mistake again. She said, "You will make many mistakes. You will not make the mistake of trying to correct them." "First Thought, Best Thought" is a Beat/Zen mantra. Alex Kerr explains that "there is no going back to touch up what you have written," a tenet that underlines calligraphy. "It is a thing of the instant," he writes. In this respect, it challenges everything I have been taught from childhood about looking before leaping, and about fashioning good writing through revision, and favoring process over inspiration. In addition to teaching me skills, calligraphy teaches me to think in a different way; in fact, to be a good calligrapher I must put aside much of what I have been taught and, as Joanne Kyger advises us, "to accept that the mind is OK as it is." But spontaneity is hard work. One must work hard to be spontaneous, a *koan* that makes some sense to me. I am unlearning as I write. In *The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery*, Adam Gopnik, a writer in his sixties like me, decides to learn a series of new skills including drawing, baking, dancing, and boxing. Unlike in calligraphy, in drawing "one could fix a line by rubbing it out and implanting another line" though one could also use spontaneous "fencing-like gestures" to short-circuit the kind of overthinking that inhibits expression. Drawing is not a thing of the instant. I think that I might develop some skill at calligraphy; drawing terrifies me.

When I was a child, I did not realize that my body needed to be aligned with my mind for tasks to be performed properly. In our Irish Catholic culture, the body was maligned. We did not hug one another. I never heard anyone say, "My Body." We did not think of bodies as being natural and beautiful; instead, we were taught to be suspicious of nature and to be wary of bodies. The erotic was unstable and dangerous. Bodies were to be kept apart except in sports. Through the decades I have cast off most of these negative lessons. As an adult, it has been through contact with the bodies of others that I have learned the value of my own. It was only after lovers had touched my body that I began to understand its beauty and worth. Each week in calligraphy class, following my instincts, I give more of my body to the tasks; it is not just posture, but it is also how I hold my brush, how and where I place paper, wrist and elbow movements, how I raise and lower a brush, how I change direction as I press and lift. As I work, I think of

lines from Wallace Stevens, "The truth must be/That you do not see/ you experience, you feel." The teacher taught me an important lesson that day. There is no going back in calligraphy class. I must put my whole body to the wheel. Though I go back into my past experiences with education, these no longer confine me.

A recent book that I loved is *On the Plain of Snakes* (2019), Paul Theroux's account of his travels in Mexico. Arriving in Oaxaca, the seventy-five-year-old author signs up for three weeks of Spanish classes to improve his command of the language, particularly the idiomatic Spanish of Mexico, and to engage with the other students:

> Having signed up to improve my Spanish, I arrived there early the first day for the nine o'clock class, with my blank notebook and my plump, untasted Spanish-English dictionary. And the old first-day-of-school anxiety came back, the sense of confinement and submission that I had felt as a student long ago, the uncertainty—waiting for instructions, feeling small and vague and futile, all reminders of how much I hated school . . . . My heart sank as soon as the iron gate clanged behind me at the archway of the Instituto's entrance, and I was, so to speak, walled in. I felt a sense of incompetence—not from any lack of self-esteem, but from a long-ago experience of hectoring and impatient teachers. I also thought, I have been here before, I am too old for this.

A decade Theroux's junior, I was struck by how similar my childhood experiences were to Theroux's but how differently I responded on returning to school in my sixties. I went into the classroom on the first day light-hearted and with a smile on my face. However, the past did return to snap at me on occasion. One night, at the old table in the basement, I was just getting started on rendering an English translation of one of Bashō's haikus into *kanji* when I was struck by anxiety and fear. The white sheet of paper was in front me; the ink was waiting for the brush; the brush was in my hand. Suddenly, I was overcome by a kind of paralysis. Trying to snap free, I looked around my basement—at my computer workstation in the corner, and at various bits of bric-a-brac scattered about. I got up and put on some music and returned to my chair until the music began to irritate me. I rose and turned it off. Some clothes had fallen out of the laundry basket; I got up and tidied them. I looked out of the back window at the traffic moving swiftly on the street below. I examined my neighbor's trampoline, still for a change.

I thought about going upstairs to make tea. I returned to my chair. It dawned on me that I did not have to get it right the first time, even though spontaneity underlines calligraphy. I could use as many sheets as I liked to practice and to fail before committing to writing on

the better-quality paper we used for work submitted to the teacher. I had made my escape from the classroom Paul Theroux and I shared. In primary school, we were beaten quite often. Some masters were kind though most were not. If we mentioned these beatings to our parents, they would say that we deserved it. I was not beaten as often as others; however, I internalized the beatings I witnessed. I lost interest in being successful at school, though I was wily enough to pick up enough to get by and to read voraciously outside school. I loved the culture of home and town and cinema and these sustained me. Even today, almost six decades on, come late August my stomach starts to churn and knot: I think that summer is ending, that soon I will have to go back to primary school. To escape my fate, I will run out of the house and keep walking until I am exhausted. Returning home, I will collapse onto my wife's lap and weep like a baby. It is so shameful and embarrassing. But so good.

Spontaneity was discouraged throughout my formal Irish education. My sister Mary and her husband John own a café in Enniscorthy. Mary is a brilliant cook. She is self-taught. In her kitchen she has employed traditionally trained chefs who both marvel and are aghast at how she creates dishes as she sweeps across the tiles dropping items into dishes like confetti. The results are stunning, the tastes delicious. Each dish resembles a performance of a great play with one night never being quite the same as the previous one. At the heart of Mary's practice is faith in spontaneity allied with a soupÇon of sorcery, the women in our family possessing many gifts. Of course, some work requires consistency. When Mary bakes bread, she follows her recipe, one that deviates only slightly from the one she learned from her mother. She is like a traditional fiddler playing an old tune, the tune taking on some aspects of her personality so that the tune she begins with and the tune she concludes with is not quite the same and is inimitable. When I compare my mother's and Mary's gifts in preparing food to my own sad efforts at calligraphy, I am deflated. But then they whisper to me, and the old monks join in the chorus, that I must not give up; I should work harder, become more patient, and more forgiving of myself in order to achieve spontaneity. Spontaneity was all around us in our homes when we were growing up, though it was undervalued because it was a gift associated with women. It was absent in our schools. Ironically, calligraphy is no longer popular in Japan; however, I have learned too little to begin an analysis of this trend. Pico Iyer, who has lived in Japan for decades, has written that "what we see and smell and hear is real; what we think about that is not." The practice of calligraphy is teaching me to accept what Iyer has defined so simply. I need to get out of my own way.

For our last class, we were required to prepare PowerPoint

presentations. Each of us was asked to choose examples of his/her best work and to accompany these with some narration. The night before I leafed through my pages of completed work choosing those that worked best, that looked the most complete, that revealed something of my “style” as a calligrapher. Though my work was average compared to what was produced by the better students, it was far from hopeless and, in some instances, quite good. More used to teaching and public speaking than my classmates, I was able to make more of my work than it likely merited. As each of us unveiled a PowerPoint, I looked towards Professor Yoshii. She was pleased with us. We had made her happy. I wanted to cry. Writing about his efforts to become a boxer, Adam Gopnik wrestled with “the question of achievement versus accomplishment” before pivoting to something less elaborate but more profound, “the joy I found in boxing—not in mastery of boxing, of course, but in the building up, bit by bit” was what was important for him to convey to his family and readers. The practice of calligraphy brought me great happiness. It also allowed me to weigh my past as a student in ways that were more realistic and positive and less one dimensional than was the case heretofore. Calligraphy lessons gifted me a clearer and cleaner sense of my own worth.

Friend, come to my basement some evening. I have an extra set of brushes and many sheets of paper that we can use, of both low and high quality. Would you enjoy a glass of wine, a beer, or some Jim Beam? We can talk of the things that matter to us most of this moment. Books and music and food. But please no politics. When night sets fully in and we have calmed, we will reach across the table, pick up our brushes, and prepare them for calligraphy. Stop, sweep, kick.