

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 16

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John Donne's timeless poetic phrase, "No man is an island entire of itself," perhaps carries more truth than he intended. We all bear the spiritual and material fortunes of our lineages. Though each of us are unique expressions of God, equally true is that we are highly contingent, dependent souls, whose very natures can only unfold within webs of mutuality. Our births occur "in medias res," and we can only know our place in the world through the stories told in our families and communities. A unique history may begin at each birth, but history does not start anew when each of us are born. Every human narrative is framed within the larger story.

While Cindy's birth may appear as an accident of history, the utter improbability of her existence argues otherwise. Her mother, Misa Shimaya, entered the world on July 27, 1930 in Aomori, in northern Honshu. She was born in the ancestral family home, on an estate largely leased to tenant farmers. Though descended from a line of scholars and samurai, (including one distinguished ancestor, Mogami Tokunai, a daimyō, who earned fame by

mapping the northernmost Japanese islands) they made a living mostly by shipping goods down the coast on wooden vessels the family owned. Rent revenue from tenant farmers, and fishing, supplemented their income. In the 1930s, the increased militarization of Japan brought a heavier tax burden. Merchants, tradesmen, fishermen, farmers, and especially the tenant farmers gradually began to feel the economic scarcity caused by the channeling of resources to the Japanese "military industrial complex," as imperial ambitions expanded scope into China and Southeast Asia. Once the Japanese initiated war with America in the Pacific, inconvenience gave way to strict rationing and then to real hunger. At night, the teenage Misa would press a balled pillow into her stomach to relieve her hunger so she could sleep at night. Their tenant farmers fared much worse, often boiling grass for sustenance.



The education system which formed Misa's character was an increasingly militarized version of "Nihon Seishin," or "Japanese Spirit," the educational ideal which had been at the very heart of the Meiji Reforms in the 19th Century. By the end of the war, Misa had been well trained with a bamboo spear, and imbued by her teachers with the Bushidō spirit. She was determined to fight to the death against the American invaders. Had it not been for Emperor Hirohito's surrender speech broadcast by radio, she would have.

Cindy's father, Tomikazu ("Tom") Okada, was born in Fresno, California on July 30, 1920. His father had come to the United States from Nagoya as an agricultural laborer in 1911, passing through the immigration process on Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay. Once settled, he began to make arrangements for a "picture bride" to join him in California. He did so by submitting a picture to the matchmaker, taken of him 10 years earlier. When his bride arrived sometime in 1918, she was shocked to find a much older man. Nonetheless, she went ahead and married a man 10 years her senior. The stories surrounding Cindy's grandmother emphasize her exceptional kindness. They worked hard in impoverished circumstances and saved their money. The California Alien Land

Law had been passed in 1913, and the Okadas were prohibited from purchasing land, as well as facing racial discrimination. With few options, Tom's parents decided to return to Japan and use their savings to start a business.



Thus, in 1934, as Japanese militarism increasingly dominated the political, social, and cultural life of their native country, the Okada family returned home to Nagoya, and opened an "onsen," or traditional bathhouse. Young Tom was 14 years old and very much an American kid. He reluctantly entered Japanese high school and an educational system steeped in militarism, imperial ambitions, and emperor worship. Tom felt an extreme sense of dislocation. He simply did not "belong." Fortunately, he excelled in school, and in 1938, entered Keio University as a law student. This bought him four years of deferment from the draft.

However, after Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Keio University graduated their students early so they would be eligible for military service. Tom was drafted into the Japanese Imperial Army. As he made his way through training, his American spirit made him susceptible to incessant hazing in a cruel system, noted for the sadistic brutality of its NCOs. During the course of routine training, Tom suffered a minor wound to his leg. His immediate superior, an NCO with an unpredictable temper,

refused to allow Tom permission to have the wound treated in his unit's medical clinic. The NCO berated him for being weak in the midst of war - "Every Japanese soldier must learn to treat himself!" Consequently, the wound became infected, then septic. In the face of his superior's unrelenting hostility, a very ill Tom entered the hospital.



His company, minus Tom, shipped out as reinforcements to Guadalcanal, where they met the 1st Marine Division in bitter fighting. Not a single soldier from his unit returned home. Tom survived the Second World War because his NCO detested him.

At the conclusion of the war, Tom went to work for the US Army Air Force at Misawa Airbase near Aomori. Trained as a lawyer, and fluently bilingual, he quickly earned the confidence of his American employers. As his workload grew, he needed a secretary. This being a different era, he placed an advertisement in the local Aomori papers seeking "a beautiful woman as a secretary." The ad failed to note the desirability of secretarial skills.

The youthful Misa Shimaya, recently graduated from high school, read the ad in the Aomori papers and thought to herself, "I'm beautiful." Evidently, she met Tom's qualifications because he hired her. After he courted her, Misa determined that Tom was a good catch. They were married on July 19, 1949. Their first child Shoko, was born on August 15, 1950.

Misa gave birth to Shoko in the ancestral Shimaya home in Aomori. The same midwife who delivered her mother's nine children, by now quite elderly and set in her ways, facilitated the birth. As young Misa, just over the cusp of her 20th birthday, went into the pains of labor, she started to moan. The elderly woman would have none of it. She commanded Misa, "Be quiet! Your mother had nine children and never said a word!!" At this, Misa stuffed her own apron into her mouth so she wouldn't cry out. Four years later, when her second son, George was born on July 9, she made certain to go to a hospital and take advantage of anesthesia.

By the mid-1950s, the Okada family had eked out a comfortable existence in post-war Japan. As a lawyer

working for the Americans, Tom provided a secure economic foundation for his family. They lived in a comfortable home and Misa could hire a nanny for each of her children and a housemaid. However, Tom always wanted to return to America, and would describe the wealth of the country in glowing terms to his young wife. Repatriating to the United States would not be easy. Because he had been drafted and served in the Japanese Army, Tom had lost his American citizenship. The only legal means available to him was the same his father had used. Tom would need to enter the US as an agricultural laborer under contract with an American farmer. He signed on.



In 1956, the Okada family emigrated to Tom's birthplace of Fresno, where there was a fair sized Japanese community. The social situation was not easy. The larger community remained hostile to the Japanese after the war. Inside the Japanese community, the Nisei had been interned in camps and most had suffered the loss of their personal property. Despite their unjust treatment, many determined to prove their loyalty as Americans, had served with distinction in the US military. The most decorated Army unit of WWII was the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, made up entirely of Japanese Americans. As a "Kibei," and veteran of the Japanese Army, Tom did not easily fit into Fresno society. Once again, he found himself an outsider. Misa, used to her comfortable lifestyle in Japan, was forced to work in a sweatshop doing piece work as a seamstress in order to make ends meet. Even then, they were so impoverished, the family could rarely afford meat. Years later, when I asked Misa how long it took her to forgive Tom for uprooting her and moving to Fresno, she had to think a moment, then responded, "Ten years!" Her

older daughter, Shoko, corrected her mother saying, "Never!"

When he fulfilled the terms of his labor contract, Tom went to work for the Toyota Company in the U.S. and moved the family to San Diego. Misa once again became pregnant. If the family had remained in Japan, she would have terminated the pregnancy. She did not want a third child, nor did she feel they could afford one. Fortunately, abortion remained illegal in California and Cindy was born on September 25, 1962. Considering the events of her parents' lives, as noted at the outset, her existence was most improbable.

