Three

Barrier Free

A computerized female voice recites the name of the train stop. Then, a short three-note jingle sounds.

Alone, as I ride the Tokyo subway, I repeat to myself what I hear as if I am listening to a language-learning tape. I learn how to pronounce Japanese by listening to the train announcements. But I do not know what the words mean.

And I don’t understand any of the scroll-like ads dangling alongside the hold-on straps: smiling women’s faces; phosphorescently cute mascot-like creatures; ethereal landscapes of placid rivers, cloudless blue skies, and snow-topped mountains.

Trying to discern what I see and hear, I am forced to depend on what I sense, not on what I understand.

Later, when I ask someone who knows Japanese what mamonaku tsugiwa means or what the advertisement with a turquoise turtle-like cartoon creature is selling, I still keep my imagined meaning in mind. What I imagine somehow seems, to me, more real.
In the days before my meeting at Todai’s Barrier-Free Project, I find out as much as I can about Fukushima-sensei, the head of the project. He first became blind at the age of nine. “I wasn’t too shocked because sound was still left for me, even if I lost my sight. However, when I shifted from the state of total blindness to the total deafblindness, an enormous shock overtook me.”

Fukushima-sensei could no longer “cherish the beautiful scenery of the starlit sky or the sea at sunset.” He “could no longer awake in the morning to the song of the birds that comes afloat through the open window or delight to the beautiful melody of Bach and Mozart that comes forth from the audio system.” But what gave Fukushima-sensei the greatest pain was “not the loss of sight and hearing itself but the vanishing of communication with others.”

Until he acquired the skills of touch-Braille, until his friends also acquired the skills, and until he received interpretation services, Fukushima-sensei despaired. But once all three were in place, he was once again able to enter the world of communication. In 1983, with this support, he was able to become the first deafblind person to study in a university in Japan. He studied pedagogy for deafblind children and continued these studies in graduate school before becoming a university professor, eventually holding his current job.

In the Todai conference room, I sit across from Fukushima-sensei. He is flanked by two interpreters. I notice the interpreter on Fukushima-sensei’s left lightly holds his hand. Nagase tells me that one interpreter will translate my English into Japanese; the other will translate the Japanese into touch-Braille for Fukushima-sensei: “Everyone present who can hear can speak and understand English.”

I nod my head slightly to show I understand.

It is Fukushima-sensei who speaks first, in Japanese. I wait for the interpreter to interpret: “Welcome to our office at the University of...”
Tokyo in Komaba. We are honored to have you with us and look forward to learning about your research today. Nagase has told us about your work in the United States and we thank him for arranging this important meeting. We hope you can let your colleagues know about our work here in Japan. Please have copies of my writings on the history of disability studies in Japan. These are papers I have given at conferences, which are mentioned at the top of each paper.”

A staff member hands me a sheaf of papers.

“Arigato gozaimashita,” I thank Fukushima-sensei.

“You know some Japanese.”

“Sukoshi.” Very little.

When Fukushima-sensei is finished telling me about the history of the project, he asks me to tell him about my work.

“I wrote my first poems about disability in 1988,” I say. I’ve never spoken abroad about my work before. I realize I need to speak slowly, to wait for the interpreters to interpret, first into Japanese, then into touch-Braille, before moving on.

“When finding a publisher for the poems, I was asked by an editor if I’d be interested in writing my story as a memoir. I said I would do anything for money.”

When this is interpreted for him, Fukushima-sensei laughs.

“Then, I began writing my book about Darwin, Wallace, and evolution, and I realized that my shoes were an apt metaphor for variation and adaptation.”

“Who is Wallace?” asks the research associate on my right.

I tell him about Alfred Russel Wallace, the often-forgotten co-founder of the theory of natural selection, who was in the Spice Islands, what is now Indonesia, when he wrote to Darwin about his evolutionary theory of natural selection.

“I began to see the story of evolution as an example of the social model of disability, how there is no such thing as ‘normal,’ how each of us adapts to his environment.” I look around the room at the rapt listeners.
“But there are many things I, as a blind person, cannot do,” says the research associate to my right.

I know that in formal meetings, agreement and consensus are very important in Japan. Disagreement should be avoided in a public setting. But I want to find out from where his feeling of limitation comes. Is it something he actually experienced or has he internalized what society teaches?

Here, in my first formal meeting in Japan, I have a choice to make: to point out there is another way to think about what had just been said or to let the comment go and move on.

“I’m not sure about what was just said,” I hear myself say, making sure to choose my words carefully and to avoid asking a direct personal question.

Then, I realize that Fukushima-sensei will not hear my actual words. My words will be translated—not once but twice—changing in nuance, context, and connotation, as they are transformed by the interpreters, first from English to Japanese, and then from Japanese to touch-Braille.

“Everyone has limitations,” I continue. “It’s just that society views some limitations differently, as being more important, more limiting, than others. Might thinking that disabled people are more limited than the nondisabled be something we internalize without looking at how true it is?”

I pause to make sure the interpreters have the chance to translate my carefully chosen words as accurately as possible. As the touch-Braille interpreter finishes her translation into Fukushima-sensei’s hand, everyone is silent.

Finally, the translation is complete. Fukushima-sensei nods his head. “I think what Fries-sama says is not only correct but is an advantageous way of viewing things.”

I exhale deeply, realizing I have, in this situation, made the best choice. Also, Fukushima-sensei used the honorific sama when referring to me.
I ask how the research staff, some of whom, like Nagase, are not disabled, became involved in disability studies and the project. Everyone but Nagase had previously been a personal aide to Fukushima-sensei. This surprises me.

“This is interesting. In the United States, there is usually a great educational and, most of the time, a class and/or racial divide between the disabled and their aides. Do you think this isn’t the case here because Japan is a more homogenous society? Or is helping the disabled, like teaching for that matter, given more respect here in Japan than in the West?”

“That is a very good question for us to think about,” Fukushima-sensei says. “We thank you very much for coming to see us today and having this very important discussion. Please let us know if there is anything we can do for you during your stay in Japan, and I want to read your new book when it is published.”

I look at the clock: 1:00 p.m. Though we did not get to discuss, let alone answer, my question, it is time for the meeting to end.

In Japan this will not be the last time that my questions are not answered directly or not answered at all. Will my time in Japan be a series of unanswered questions?

One night, after MM and I finish eating noodles, he hands me a small green book: *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, by Lafcadio Hearn.

“*Domo arigato gozaimashita,*” I thank MM both verbally and with a slight bow of my head.

Why did MM give me *Kwaidan?* I remember MM mentioning Hearn’s story of Hōichi, a blind *biwa hōshi.*

During the early history of Japan, blindness, often caused by disease, farming accidents, or poor nutrition, was very common. By the eighth century, blind storytellers roamed Japan, chanting narratives in exchange...
for alms. Accompanying themselves on the four-stringed fretted lute called a *biwa*, the *biwa hōshi* (lute priests) spread news, popular songs, and local legends.

Hōōchi lived in a temple near the Straits of Shimonoseki, where the last great battle between the Heike and the Taira clans was fought. One night, the head priest is called away and Hōōchi, left alone at the temple, hears someone calling him.

“I am blind!—I cannot know who calls!”

The voice tells him there is nothing to fear. His lord has heard of Hōōchi’s skill in reciting. The voice orders him to come with him and perform for his lord.

After his performance in what seems to be a garden, a woman’s voice tells him her lord desires Hōōchi to perform before him for the next six nights. He is warned to tell no one.

But on the second night, Hōōchi is discovered returning to the temple. The priest asks where he had gone. Hōōchi answers, “I had to attend to some private business; and I could not arrange the matter at any other hour.”

The priest does not ask any further questions, but he fears that his blind acolyte had been “bewitched or deluded by some evil spirits.”

So, on the third night, temple servants follow Hōōchi. But on this dark and rainy night, they lose him. Finally, in the cemetery, they hear the sound of the *biwa*. They discover Hōōchi sitting alone in the rain before a memorial tomb, loudly chanting of the battle of Dan-no-ura. Surrounding Hōōchi are “the fires of the dead . . . burning, like candles.”

The temple servants laugh at him, seize him, and return him to the temple. Knowing he has alarmed and angered the priest, Hōōchi confesses what has happened.

The priest responds: “Hōōchi, my poor friend, you are now in great danger! . . . Your wonderful skill in music has indeed brought you into strange trouble. By this time you must be aware that you have been . . . passing your nights in the cemetery, among the tombs of the Heike. . . . All that you have been imagining was illusion—except the calling of the
dead. By once obeying them, you have put yourself in their power. If you obey them again, after what has already occurred, they will tear you in pieces.”

The priest tells Hōichi he will protect him by writing holy scriptures on his body. With their writing-brushes, they trace the text of a holy sutra on all parts of his body.

The priest tells Hōichi to sit on the verandah and wait. When he is called, he is not to answer and not to move. He should sit still, as if meditating.

His biwa beside him, Hōichi sits still on the verandah for many hours.

Then, he hears steps coming. A voice in front of him calls his name. Hōichi does not answer.

The voice, now displeased, comes closer. “Here is the biwa; but of the biwa-player I see—only two ears! . . . There is nothing left of him but his ears. Now to my lord those ears I will take—in proof that the august commands have been obeyed, so far as was possible.”

Hōichi feels an awful pain in his ears but does not cry out. The footsteps recede and then cease. Hōichi feels on either side of his head a warm trickling but dares not lift his hands.

The priest returns. He slips and cries out in horror. By his lantern’s light, he sees Hōichi sitting in meditation, blood oozing from his wounds and onto the floor.

Hearing the priest’s voice, Hōichi cries and tells the priest what has transpired.

“Poor, poor Hōichi,” the priest exclaims, “all my fault! . . . Everywhere upon your body the holy texts had been written—except upon your ears! I trusted my acolyte to do that part of the work; and it was very, very wrong of me not to have made sure that he had done it! . . . We can only try to heal your hurts as soon as possible. . . . The danger is now well over. You will never again be troubled by those visitors.”

Hōichi soon recovers. The story of his adventure spreads throughout Japan. The nobility travels to hear him recite; he receives many gifts and
becomes wealthy. From the time of his adventure, he becomes known as Mimi-nashi-Hōichii, Hōichi-the-Earless.

Hōichi-the-Earless is the first disabled cultural icon I encounter in Japan. I am surprised that the familiar Western character of the blind seer, like Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex*, who has the means to negotiate between the seen and the unseen world, is also deeply rooted in Japan.

The next time I see MM, I tell him I read “Hōichi-the-Earless.”

“Did you know Hearn had only one eye?” MM asks.

“How did he lose an eye?”

“A playground fight as a child. In Japan nobody mentioned his face looked . . . twisted—is that the right word?”

Was Hearn’s attraction to “strange things” because of having one eye?

In August 1890 Hearn abandoned his contract with *Harper’s* and moved to Matsue, a traditional castle town on the Sea of Japan in the remote northwest corner of Honshu, the largest island of Japan, to teach at the boys’ high school.

In Matsue, Hearn found “survivals” of an undisturbed old Japan. He taught by day and began cataloging the festivals and folkways of Matsue at night. He hired translators to provide him with literal translations of Japanese poems and folktales. He looked for *kokoro*, a Japanese word difficult to translate, best understood as “things of the heart,” which could reveal to him the deep roots of Japan.

But what haunts me is Hōichi’s vulnerability. To Hōichi, there is little to distinguish between the living and the dead.