

2024 Tsubaki Scholar Essay

By Cara Fortner

When I received the email telling me I had been selected to go to the Tsubaki Grand Shrine (TGS), I was on break during my Jewish Thought and Theology class. I was immediately excited, but my first thought was, “I can’t go!” Life was too busy! Class, kids, church, how could I leave? After talking with my partner, I knew I couldn’t pass up this incredible opportunity, and I’m so glad I didn’t. The shrine was flexible to my schedule and were able to host me in May, a beautiful time of the year where I got the experience two of the many festivals they celebrate throughout the year, the blue dragon festival and the rice planting festival. It was an honor to learn through this immersive experience and to spend time in contemplation, observation, study, and service to the greater purpose of international and interfaith understanding, appreciation, and mutuality. Pluralism is one of the most precious values in this free faith tradition of ours. Being immersed in the life of the shrine was such an exquisite experience in the name of learning more about the many splendid expressions of the divine and seeing the face of Great Nature in the rituals and expressions of the people who practice Shinto.

I was unsure of what to expect out of my time here, but I knew I would have to surrender to the process and to the otherness of the experience. The shrine was a busy place, and it worked as a well-oiled machine, everyone knowing what their roles are. I was the first UU candidate in five years to visit the shrine through this 30+ year relationship between the UUA and TGS. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many changes in the shrine, though they never moved to live-streaming their rituals online. I slept on a bed, not a futon, at the keitan (the guest house) and the shrine grounds all had WIFI and/or cell service and calling home was easier than it had been for other UU candidates in the past. People wore masks regularly and the break room is still assembled with everyone facing the same direction to mitigate the risk of spreading the virus. Despite these changes, everything else seemed to remain the same, the dedicated staff attended to their visitors and to the kamisama, the deities.

An essential aspect of Shinto belief is that people are, as our truest selves, good – we all have inherent worth and dignity. There is a Japanese saying, “In their heart of hearts no one is really evil.” Things happen to us throughout life that affect us, sometimes poorly, and these “impurities,” as they call them, attach themselves to us. The way the Shinto priests handle tending to these “impurities” is through deeply embodied ritual, with worship elements like washing, chanting, drumming, swishing, dancing, and bells. These elements, through ritual, are tools to rid ourselves of these impurities. Ceremonies in the main sanctuary run all day long starting at 8:45 am with the Guji (the head priest) leading. We, the staff and visitors, chant the Oharae together (I was given a booklet with the words to chant along with them). Kotodama is a word meaning that the sound of the words spoken – their tone and vibration – hold meaning, more so than the literal meaning of the words. The language and characters used in the Oharae are so old that a lot of the words are unfamiliar to modern Japanese people, but saying them is important. I couldn’t help but

see a similarity to the Jewish tradition of reading out loud from the Torah in Hebrew, and that the tone is a large part of the sacredness of it, and many people who read it do not understand the literal meaning of the words. I thought many times throughout my time at the shrine about the similarities I witnessed between Shinto and Judaism and other faith traditions, as well.

The expression of Buddhism at the shrine is unique in that it is distinctly Japanese, a blending of the kamisama of Shinto and the ideals of Buddhism. My favorite place on the grounds was down by the Buddhist sanctuary and koi pond; I spent a lot of time there sweeping leaves and praying. Right next to the koi pond is a little shrine to the kami of child-rearing, who is also the kami of keeping away bugs (these two paired together gave me a good laugh as I don't know how many times I have had to rid our basement of spider crickets so the children could go play). I went to this kami every day, praying for my role as a parent, for my partner, and for my children whom I missed terribly. The otherness I felt at the shrine was real, though the people were incredibly friendly and welcoming. Two of the priests, both young women, were particularly warm to me and our language barrier only mattered so much. The translation apps on our phones made communication possible, though slow. There is also an app through Google that translates written words and once I downloaded it I was able to read all the inscriptions and prayers throughout the shrine. The whole place was saturated with the holy, the buildings and worship elements deeply interwoven with nature and our dependence on it, and the place was visited by so many seeking a sacred experience to help them with the worries and celebrations of modern life.

I had the opportunity to go to Kyoto and to Ise, cities with large Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. It is said that if you are Japanese, you are to make your way to Ise at one point in your life. Pilgrims come from all over Japan to worship at the two main shrines at Ise, to the kami of the sun, Amaterasu. The most profound practice at the shrines at Ise is the regular demolition of the sanctuaries and other holy buildings & items (every 20 years) and their ritual rebuilding. The intention here is rooted in keeping the ancient ways alive, teaching and passing on these old ways to the next generations. I couldn't help but think of how we don't seem to do that at all in our UU tradition, as GA was approaching and the vote on Article II was in my mind. I cherish our commitment to progress and to learning from new information and I see the incredible value of preserving the old ways, remembering them, practicing them, and teaching them. It feels like a perfect example of why it's so important to have many ways in which we express ourselves as humans seeking an embodied way of living in line with a movement towards love. Keeping the past and the ways of our ancestors alive is important, and acknowledging the present so we can move more clearly into the future is important. Both are true and I am so grateful we live in a world in which these many splendid ways are expressed and lived.

My time at the shrine will stay with me the rest of my life. I am so grateful to have one more view into the holy experience of living on this earth. I want to catch them all, as if these lenses were Pokémon, knowing I couldn't possibly. The pursuit of mutual understanding is so important in this world that just keeps getting smaller as we keep realizing we are one people of the same earth. May I keep the divine way of Great Nature in my practice and may we learn from one another in holy respect and love.

(P.S. - I posted pictures and a daily journal of my experience at TGS on my public Facebook page, Cara the Seminarian.)