

SEVEN TIMES DOWN, EIGHT TIMES UP

by MARY TSURUKO TSUKAMOTO



The author holds a Daruma doll, which inspired the title of her article.

When I was a toddler of two in San Francisco, I tried to follow my sister across Geary Street. A trolley car came clanging down the steep hill, unable to stop, and hit me. Caught up by the protective net underneath, I escaped with only minor bruises.

How often I've heard my uncle tell about this event. Always visibly shaken by the near-tragedy, with tears and laughter, he vividly told the details. People had pressed around us to see. Doctors and nurses exclaimed in amazement, "What a lucky baby!"

I grew up often pondering what happened that day. In time I believed that perhaps God had a special plan for me. It became my quest to find God's plan for me.

Another "miracle" happened to me on Geary Street, when I was almost three. Kind missionary ladies of the Reformed Church came along, found some of us playing on the street, and out of faith in Christ's teachings started a nursery school and kindergarten for the children of Japanese immigrants.

My youthful parents had a busy laundry business. They had very little time to care for their children or bother about this strange Christian religion. Nevertheless, Mother felt deeply grateful for the friendly missionaries who came to take their children off the street. Father was delighted we would receive this unexpected early start on valued schooling. They did not realize this was to be the first step toward Christianity for the entire family.

As the struggle to survive took

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us to Turlock, to Fresno and finally to Florin, God's hand seemed to follow us. Though my parents and only uncle and aunt were then non-Christians, they had been profoundly influenced by those favorable contacts in San Francisco and sought to enroll us in a Protestant Sunday school wherever we moved.

A Teacher Touches My Life

The miracle in my life continued when Mable Barron became my high school public speaking teacher. I was disqualified from the Annual All-Community Oratorical Contest sponsored by the Native Sons of the Golden West because my parents were not Caucasian. Mable became outraged by this unfair ruling, but nothing she or the school could do changed it.

Fortunately, the University of California Japanese Students Club sponsored an oratorical contest. Mable enthusiastically spent long hours helping me write my oration. She coached me until my delivery became polished. She made an unsophisticated, deprived child speak lofty words:

"The great sacrifice and indomitable courage of my parents. . . . Cherished heritage from their rich cultural background. . . . Moral and spiritual values that must permeate our Christian homes. . . . Educated to become strong leaders, responsible to build a bridge between the two cultures of Japan and America. . . . Eventually strive to create an atmosphere for international understanding, help cement world peace."

I won first place. Coaching me on these words, Mable instilled in me an intelligent, broad outlook on life. My creed echoed her beautiful attitude of faith and confidence.

Mable's compassion for a shy, frightened child, reminds me of the beautiful princess ball story. I found this printed explanatory statement when I purchased a princess ball.

A princess ball is called *himetemari* (in Japanese, hee-me-te-mah-lee). It is created by a loving mother when her little girl is born. Often after her loved ones are asleep, she begins her faithful vigil. Her busy, tired fingers wrap within each turn of the thread, all her prayers for her daughter's growth. She focuses on qualities important to molding a lovely person: patience, courage, beauty of character, essence of gentleness.

Each year as the daughter continues to grow in grace, guided by her mother's noble dream, the ball keeps growing in size.

Finally, on a special day of great importance, her daughter is ready to be married. This magnificent ball now of considerable size, splendid in color and design, is presented to her. It is the most cherished gift she will receive, for in it has been wrapped all the devotion for her growing into loveliness . . . all the prayers for her nurturing years . . . visible evidence of her mother's boundless love.

From my Christian heritage, come other words, adding to my understanding of life: "Fill your minds with those things that are good and deserve praise. Things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and honorable. Put into practice what you have learned and received from me, both from my words and my deeds." (Philippians 4:8-9)

One unforgettable Sunday December 7, 1941, our world suddenly became enveloped in darkness. No one ever imagined that all of us Japanese Americans would also face a nightmare following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Before spring was over, we were forced off our farms. "All the darkness in the world cannot blot out the light of one candle," preached our brave Japanese minister.

It was inconceivable to us that we were distrusted, accused of being potentially dangerous. There were 110,000 Japanese involved in a mass evacuation from three West Coast states: Washington, Oregon and California. Seventy-five percent of us were American citizens. We were innocent of any crime, except the

unforgivable fact that we were born of Japanese parents.

Faith Restored in a Concentration Camp

We found ourselves interned in the mite-infested swamplands of southern Arkansas. One of ten hastily constructed American concentration camps politely referred to as Relocation Centers, Jerome housed 10,000 bewildered evacuees.

How vividly I remember an evening a year later when we were stirred out of our deep despair. E. Stanley Jones, eminent preacher of our day and missionary to India, had come to Jerome to lead a week of services to bring Christ's message of hope to the evacuees.

"This is the message of wisdom and courage God has for you. Use this terrible experience. Turn it into an opportunity. You will soar someday, higher than you ever knew was possible," he said.

"One evening as I stood facing the majestic peaks of the Himalayas, I saw an eagle flying above the tall trees. It was then I noticed ominous dark clouds approaching. Anxiously I wondered how soon it would dart safely into the protection of the cave below. I was utterly amazed at the unexpected behavior of the great bird. This brave eagle braced itself with all its might as it faced the fury of the storm winds. I lost sight of it momentarily. What a great relief it was, to spot the eagle again, a tiny speck soaring, triumphantly, high in the vastness of space. Using the energy of this violent storm, it had made a glorious flight soaring higher than ever before."

I sat listening under the stars to these inspiring words. I became aware of the dark shadows made by hundreds of barracks, standing in neat rows, and painfully remembered they housed thousands of Japanese people, each wrestling with agony and frustration.

There in the darkness, where no one could see our tear-stained



Mary Tsukamoto displays a silk-wrapped princess ball within which is hidden a music box.

faces, I wept with overwhelming gratitude. I felt God closer to me that night than ever before.

My husband felt keenly his responsibilities as head of our family. The parents were aged Issei (first-generation Japanese). My husband's sister was ailing with tuberculosis. I was suffering from painful rheumatoid arthritis. Our little daughter was ready to start first grade. We were desperately afraid. But courage flickered into a tiny flame that night. Whatever happened, we would walk with assurance that God was with us.

Interestingly, I stumbled upon a *Daruma* doll that symbolizes for Japanese the determination to overcome adversity. In Japan, sometimes called the "Land of Dolls," the *Daruma* is by far the most popular doll. A roly-poly papier maché doll with no arms or legs, it is painted bright red with dark, bushy eyebrows, a mustache and wide-open eyes. It is weighted at the bottom, so that it bounces back when knocked over. A well-loved poem clarifies

the *Daruma's* message:

Such is life,
Seven times down,
Eight times up!

The *Daruma* has helped me visualize how faith in God requires exertion of will throughout life. Only by meeting people who manifest faith, who inspire our lives with their magnanimity, do we begin to understand our Creator's great dream for our lives. Reflecting upon my 65 years as a Christian, I am grateful for the wonderful, loving friends who "happened along" at crucial moments to teach me how to live bravely, serenely, and to trust fully.

At last, today in America, it is "okay" to be myself. No longer need I pretend to become part of the American "melting pot." My ancestral heritage, once despised and denied by my fear and shame, is now valued. The Japanese veterans of World War II who returned from the battlefield engaged in an even bigger battle, that of fighting racial bigotry in

America. Though the work is not yet finished, we are on the way, having reversed anti-oriental sentiment scattered by alarmists over a century.

Four years ago, after my retirement from 26 rewarding years as a teacher in the public schools, I found a job that suits me. I am a director of *Jan Ken Po Gakko*, a private, cultural heritage school. It is a school that gives me, a second-generation Japanese (Nisei), the honor of sharing the struggles and contributions made by my grandparents and great-grandparents. I can share the *Daruma* determination with which our immigrant parents coped in America. Thus the miracles that happened to me in my lifetime are part of the thrilling story of the Americans of Japanese ancestry in the United States.

"We were afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." (2 Corinthians: 4:8 RSV) ■