

DANCING IN JAPAN

Heather Hill

Dr. Heather Hill works as a dementia care consultant and a dance movement therapist. She has written numerous book chapters and articles and is author of "Invitation to the Dance".

I have from time to time joked about my hope that someone some-day would pay my trip overseas to dance with people with dementia – preferably in Paris and in a cafe! – never of course imagining it would happen. Well, it wasn't Paris, but in mid-March 2012, I suddenly received an invitation to present on dance and dementia – in Japan. The invitation (to me and to a colleague at the Alzheimer's Association of Victoria) arose from a project funded by the Japan-Australia Association and initiated by Dr. Mari Miyake of Kansei Medical University in Osaka, the purpose of our visit being to share Australian knowledge of aged care with people working in this field in Japan. Mari, who has a fitness/diversional therapy background, had taken a particular focus on dance and created a DVD which included a song and accompanying dance she had created to be used with people with dementia. A little over a month later, I found myself on a plane to Osaka. We spent two weeks in Japan, and what an amazing, jam-packed two weeks they were.

Presenting on dance and dementia

On the 27th April we did a presentation (using an interpreter – a new experience for me) at Kansei Medical University for students, aged care professionals, and some academic staff. After this, many of us went out for dinner. I was placed at a table with the three dance therapists – with small amounts of English and no Japanese on my part, but with lots of gestures and movement, we managed to communicate surprisingly well. It was amazing just how much our experiences were similar – even the all too common experience of having people interrupt our sessions! On this occasion, as on many other occasions during the trip, I was surprised at how differences in culture did not trump love of dance and love of working with people with dementia. These provided a bond and an understanding that transcended language and culture.

Then on 1st May was the major event – a public lecture and launching of Mari's DVD. After the speeches, Mari had her dance performed in different ways to show how it could be adapted – in couples, in group dance and in sign language.

On the morning before the lecture, Mari asked if

I and one of the dance therapists, Setsuko Yoshimura, would also perform an improvised version of the dance on stage! While we all danced on stage, the audience of mainly health/aged care professionals were literally dancing in the aisles. This was not the only time that my image of reserved Japanese culture took a battering!



Heather dancing at the after party

Dancing with people with dementia

We had a wonderful time going to various day centres, nursing homes, hospitals, where we were warmly welcomed. There were spontaneous moments of dance with residents and staff, and in one facility we participated in traditional Japanese dance along with volunteers who danced or who played traditional instruments.

The open-ness and warmth of everyone was really striking, and the cultural aspects fascinating. I was very much impressed by the sense of aesthetic that Japanese people seemed to have – often creating beautiful and tasteful environments. I was also aware of the strength of traditional culture in giving people with dementia meaningful activities to be involved in such as the art of origami. At one hospital, we were served the traditional tea ceremony by the hospital's nutritionist.





Dr. Mari Miyake, Dr. David Sykes (AAV Victoria) and HH dancing with residents at IGL home in Hiroshima

Sherborne Developmental Movement in Japan

In the 1980s I was privileged to attend SDM sessions run by Veronica Sherborne in Bristol, and I have continued to keep my connections with those in England who have carried on her work. Through these contacts, I was able to get in touch with an SDM trainer living near Osaka – Misako Sekiguchi, and she was able to organise for Setsuko Yoshimura (dance therapist) and me to attend SDM sessions at a kindergarten in Sando for children with disabilities. As it happened, that day they had the mothers stay on to participate, and I was struck by the enthusiasm and lack of self-consciousness of the staff (kindergarten teachers who had had some SDM training). This communicated itself to the mothers and children and in no time, there was just a mass of bodies climbing over and under each other with lots of laughter. It was a delight to be part of.

Teaching dance therapy at Mukogawa Women’s University

On the afternoon of the day at Sando (yes, it was a jam-packed schedule!), the three of us went on to Mukogawa Women’s University where Setsuko teaches and where I was scheduled to run a dance therapy session for 40 music education and music therapy students. Misako joined us as she was interested to see what dance therapy was about. Yukari Sakiyama*, another dance therapist who works in the Early Childhood Department of the university, very bravely undertook simultaneous translation. Of course, it helped that she was a dance therapist and understood the kind of experiences I was offering. After the dance experience, I showed the students a variety of DVDs from my work – with older people, intergenerational groups and pre-schoolers. There was the university news

reporter present and he subsequently put some pictures and an article in “news” on the university’s website. While the students were rather shy and not inclined to ask questions, I believe they really enjoyed the session and I was pleased that one student (quoted on the university website) remembered one of the key points I made, namely that I don’t dance with diagnoses, I dance with people. “I was impressed by Ms. Heather’s words about how she works with each patient as a person. I learned something new.”



From left: Yukari Sakiyama , Misako Sekiguchi, HH, Setsuko Yoshimura at Mukogawa Women’s University.

Dancing the foreign experience

Towards the end of my trip, I travelled down to Fukuoka by bullet train and stayed for three days with Tamah Nakamura, an American whom I “met” online through the old ADTA listserve (she wrote an article for the DTAA on her work in Butoh). She organised a couple of private Pilates sessions for me (delicious!). She also organised for me to run a dance session for a group she belongs to who are all foreign wives of Japanese nationals. We danced together in Tamah’s Pilates teacher’s studio – a beautiful light and airy space which gave the women I think a much needed space for themselves. There was so much in Japan that was new and different, and apart from the scheduled visits, there was time for some sightseeing, attending cultural events and sampling all sorts of different forms of Japanese cuisine. For survival’s sake, my use of chopsticks improved rapidly!

As someone fairly ignorant of Japan and Japanese people, I came away with a real sense of heartfelt connection. I found among the Japanese people more of a sense of the relational/social, as well as a sensitivity to the aesthetic which we Westerners could learn a lot from. Perhaps the following, an extract from the mission statement of Mukogawa Women’s University, captures some of this:

To develop a:

Sensitive and broad mind

*To sense beauty when seeing flowers;
to appreciate and be impressed by
works of art: it is important to have
great sensitivity in our modern society,
which is fraught with tension. A
graceful mind that loves beauty and
gives pleasure and serenity to the
human soul enriches our lives.*

(http://www.mukogawa-u.ac.jp/english/mwu/edu_ideal.htm)

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*Yukari co-wrote an article with Nana Koch on touch and dance therapy in Japan which is well worth reading. It highlights some interesting cultural differences regarding mind/body and the use of touch. The reference is: Sakiyama, Y. & Koch, N. (2003). Touch in Dance Therapy in Japan. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 25 (2), 79-95.

