



Features and Profiles

I have been fortunate enough to be able to meet and interview some extraordinary people and write about some compelling topics. Here are just a few of my favorites.

[How Holistic Land Management Inspires, Keeps Hope Alive](#)

Feature article for *Mother Earth News*

Reed Beauregard Turner (or Beau, as he is universally known) is one of the most influential and proactive conservationists in the world. He has been charged with the task of acquiring more than 2 million acres (spread out over 21 properties in 12 states in North America and three in Argentina), and then deciding where the millions of dollars allocated to research, restoration and land management programs will be spent on those properties. Turner serves as chairman of the trustees for the [Turner Endangered Species Fund](#) and director of natural resources for [Turner Enterprises, Inc.](#), positions where he is regularly part of the global discussion about how to balance care for the planet with political and economic agendas.

Discovering a Passion

Despite his heavy workload, however, Beau's approach to life and work remain firmly rooted in a simple lesson he learned at the age of 5.

“It all goes back to the land.” He says, “I spent most of my time outdoors as a kid, hunting and fishing with my dad and other mentors.” “I can still remember the day I caught my first fish at the age of five. From that moment on, I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to protect the land and the animals on it.”

Oddly enough, Beau never thought he would be working with or for his father, media mogul Ted Turner.

“My goal was to find a way to make money and buy the land myself,” he says. Beau preferred being outdoors to focusing on books and eventually realized that he would have to give school his full attention if he hoped to realize his goal. “I really took college seriously and did quite well. I knew I had to do well in school to do well by the environment. That was my passion and I was totally hooked.”

However, the elder Turner recognized vision when he saw it and made a pact with his son.

“My father and I shook on it,” Beau says. “I said if he would do something related to land acquisition and restoration I would come work for him. He said ‘absolutely,’ and really let me have the reins. In fact, looking back, I still can’t believe he trusted me as much as he did.”

That pact came to fruition in the early 1990s, when Ted put Beau in charge of finding and purchasing huge parcels of ranch land. Together, the father-son team became arguably the largest private landowners in the United States. They then set about restoring biodiversity, reintroducing native plant and animal species, and generating income. Beau calls this “holistic land management,” and the results, which include everything from preserving longleaf pines and protecting Black-footed Ferrets to raising bison and reintroducing Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, have been impressive.

Beau sees land management as a bit of a juggling act — trying to find a balance between preservation and the need to make a profit.

“People ask me all the time about property and how to protect the land but still have it pay for itself,” he says. “I always break it down by asking this question: Where do you get the biggest bang for your buck with the least amount of impact?” Beau outlines what he calls his “hierarchy of impact,” starting with the least destructive — hunters and fishermen — and moving up to farming (distinguishing between small and large farms), timber cutting, and mining. “If you think about trying to restore land that’s been used in each of these ways, obviously land that has been mined would be the toughest to bring back. We need to use that hierarchy as a gauge, a reality check, and ask ourselves, is the impact worth it?”

More Than Money

Beau is quick to point out, however, that no amount of government oversight or influx of money will result in the kind of lasting change that is needed.

His solution is simple and direct: community involvement.

“Instead of just throwing money at groups, we have to empower people,” he says. “It all comes down to communities. We’ve got to get local communities to understand that land is a resource, and they can’t over utilize it. We have to give them the tools to manage their resources. If we don’t do those two things, permanent change just won’t happen.”

By way of illustrating his point, Beau points to the [Beau Turner Youth Conservation Center](#) in Jefferson County, Fla. Opened in April 2008, it’s designed to offer young people the opportunity to connect with the natural world and learn about land stewardship. Activities at the center include fishing, archery, shooting sports, hiking nature trails and viewing wildlife.

[Nature deficit disorder](#) is another concern for Beau.

“I see that as a huge threat to today’s kids,” he says. “We’ve become such an indoor society. Kids aren’t getting outside. Why should they? Inside is cooler and easier. They’ve got video games to be their babysitters; just plug the kids in. It’s really alarming. Kids don’t know where food comes from. I find that frightening. I wanted the youth center to address that, to give kids a chance to get outside and make a connection to the land.”

From the moment its doors opened, the Beau Turner Youth Conservation Center has been enthusiastically embraced by the local community — a fact that still amazes Beau.

“I never thought this youth center would take off like it did,” he says. “I couldn’t pay people to work there. It had to be a volunteer thing. All I did was put out a table with a nice kind of Thanksgiving dinner on it. I thought maybe three or four people would want to volunteer, but since the center opened we’ve had hundreds of volunteers come through.”

Looking Ahead

The interest and energy the people of Jefferson County have brought to the Center are proof to Beau that he is on the right track.

“If I had lost some of my hope for the future, this center has restored it. When it started, and I watched this community jump all over it, I was stoked. They just can’t get enough of it, and this has given me real hope. It’s a real burst of adrenaline.”

Beau’s plans for the future include continuing in his role with the [Turner Foundation](#) and pushing the idea of community involvement with young people. If you want to talk about getting people engaged with and excited about the environment, then you have to get them when they’re kids,” he says. “Communities need to be involved with their kids. My son, for example, has had a huge impact on how I live and interact with this community. The people here have become my extended family.”

Looking back on his childhood, spent with people who taught him to hunt, fish, and learn from nature, Beau is convinced that the connection he forged with the land shaped the person he became.

“Basically the first fish I caught woke something up in me — a love for the land, a desire to protect it and to give back by helping others. If we can do the same for some of these kids at our youth centers, then we will have passed the message along. We will have kept the hope alive.”

The Man in the Moon

Profile of Michael Monagan for The Music Road Trip

“There are patterns in fingerprints and stars in the sky. We often do things and don't know why. And waiting for the chance to be set free. A firefly, a firefly, in a jar.” - Michael Monagan

Michael Monagan has been given many nicknames during his 40-year career as a singer/songwriter. Some of the most memorable include, “Circus Boy,” “Cool,” and “Bananaman.” But the one that has stuck – the one that has become his moniker in both physical and virtual realities – is Moonman.

Ironically, Michael claims to have no memory of when and how he became known as Moonman. But once you've heard his story and listened to his music, the nickname will make perfect sense.

The first thing you need to know about Michael is that his story spans several generations. It is rooted in the lives and music of his ancestors who thrived through a combination of hard work and public service. By the time Michael appeared on the scene in 1951, his father (a graduate of Harvard law school) was practicing law and serving as an alderman in the town of Waterbury, Connecticut. He would go on to run for Congress and serve in the House of Representatives for 14 years.

Michael remembers his father as a serious and formal man with a fun-loving streak when it came to music. “My parents absolutely loved getting friends together for a music party-something that I have inherited,” Michael says. “Dad and mom and their friends would sit around the piano and sing everything from old Irish tunes and songs from the *Great American Songbook* to opera and classical music.”

Though his parents had high expectations (majoring in business was often mentioned), it's important to understand that Michael and his siblings were byproducts of their times. Michael put words and music to his experiences in songs like “Runnin with the Boys,” and “Soul Survivor.” In them he chronicles the process of evolving from a young boy flattening pennies on railroad tracks, to a socially awkward teen with zero dance skills, to a college student grappling with the reality of a war gone horribly wrong. “I argued with my dad about how his generation was torpedoing the country's future,” Michael says, “because the brightest kids I knew were all dropping out of society.”

The combination of disillusionment with politics and his growing desire to write and perform his own music (he'd taught himself to play the guitar by then) led Michael to do two things. First, he

decided to earn an elementary school teaching credential at Boston University. Thanks to a misunderstanding about requirements, however, his only option became a secondary credential. This would have allowed him teach high school in the Boston area and complete the elementary credential in his free time were it not for the fact that Boston schools were in the process of integrating their faculty. Suddenly teaching was not an option. Frustrated and still hoping to find a way to launch his music career, Michael made his second decision – start a new life in California.

The Kids of Widney High

“Music is clearly an end unto itself as well as a building block in the development of any student.” - Michael Monagan

Michael arrived in Los Angeles in 1979, but the only teaching position available was at an inner city high school. There he received a rude awakening that would stay with him throughout his career. “A student of mine was shot and killed when he walked out of my math class into the school yard. His body lay there all day and still hadn’t been removed by quitting time. I’d heard the expression, ‘life is cheap’ before, but this made it all too real.”

The lessons learned at that first school stuck with Michael. When he was offered a position at Widney High - a high school serving students with severe disabilities – he had no idea that he would be staying more than 28 years or that he and his “special needs” students would open the hearts and minds of people around the world. What he did know was that in Widney High he’d found a place where he could make a difference. “People are afraid. They have preconceived notions about kids with disabilities,” says Michael. “It’s incredibly rewarding if you can put those prejudices aside and embrace this part of our population that is in many ways no different than we are.”

Michael began his teaching career at Widney by introducing his students to poetry using Garrison Keillor’s *Writer’s Almanac*. His goal was to help them understand how words can be used to translate their thoughts and feelings into lyrics and music. “The kids would come up with an idea, and then we’d sit down at the piano and discuss how to approach it - the style, rhythm, and meaning - until we had it worked out,” Michael says.

Then one day, while watching another teacher perform plays with her students, he had an idea. “I thought it would be fun to do a musical. So I had my students write some songs for the play. They’d start with a topic they liked and flesh it out. They had all these great ideas. Towards the end of the year I thought, ‘We should really record these.’” It was then that the Kids of Widney High (KOWH) became an official group.

Music is Personal

“Someday, love will find me, someday love will find me. I have faith and hope that someday love will find me.” – Michael Monagan, [Someday](#)

While Michael’s teaching career was taking off, he continued to write and perform his own music and play in pick-up bands around southern California. It was while playing in one of these bands

for a wedding at Wildwood School that he met Gaili Schoen, a music teacher. “Gaili knew Patrick, our drummer, so it was natural for us to meet. She stuck around after the show and we started talking.”

One thing led to another, and Michael and Gaili were married in 1989. The impact their relationship has had on Michael professionally and personally is profound. He’s not only distilled his experiences into songs like “[Waterfall](#),” “[Me ‘N U](#),” “[Green Eyes](#),” and “[Boogie Woogie Baby Girl](#),” but applied his insights into what it means to be a partner and a parent to his work at Widney.

“I’m so grateful that I spent time as a child visiting Widney High and making friends with his students,” says Kylie Monagan, Michael’s oldest daughter. “I think those experiences made me a more inclusive person. I’m so proud when I tell people about his time there. I wish some of our political leaders could spend just a day there and see what a difference a great teacher like my dad can make in the kids’ lives.”

Super Empowerment

“Surround me. Throw your arms around me. Surround me with your light and we will fight for our love.” - Michael Monagan, [Surround Me](#)

As Michael and the kids began to record their work, they started to attract the attention of others in the music community. Jackson Brown offered Michael and the kids recording time in his studio; Jose Feliciano conducted a sing-a-long with the kids; Kurt Cobain became a fan; Mike Patton, lead singer in the band “Faith No More” asked the kids to open a show for him; and Michael and the kids were featured on CBS’s “Sunday Morning,” and NPR’s “All Things Considered.” Michael himself was the recipient of many awards including the Los Angeles Music Centers BRAVO award, and named Los Angeles Unified School District’s Special Education Teacher of the Year.

Though gratifying, the response to the Kids of Widney High was not surprising to Michael. “A lot of those cool, popular musicians used to be outsiders too. A lot of them were unpopular growing up and understood what a difference it can make when you find a way to channel your energy artistically.”

The Kids of Widney High released their first CD, “[Special Music From Special Kids](#)” in 1989. It was produced on a shoestring but almost immediately started to get attention. Undeterred by their disabilities, the kids cheerfully branched out into other creative endeavors including a clothing line called, “Better Bacon,” radio appearances, filmmaking, and compilation albums. The second album, entitled “[Let’s Get Busy](#)” was released 10 years later in 1999 and the kids were subsequently featured performing [Pretty Girls](#)” (a KOWH original) and a special version of the 60s classic “[Respect](#)” in the movie “The Ringer.” Michael and the Kids rewrote “Respect” as a call to arms for people with disabilities.

Act Your Age

“We’re here to kick ass, rescue your summer, and chew bubble gum.” – “Pee Wee”

In 2010, a new and ambitious plan was proposed. Michael and the kids would tour the west coast, starting in Los Angeles and working their way up to Seattle, Washington. The kids would not only play at venues in each of the towns and cities they visited, but would be shadowed by a video crew with a goal of creating a feature-length film.

Michael had this to say about the endeavor. "Your first reaction is to want to protect them. But on the other hand you want to get them out there, give them a chance to see what they can do. Sure, they might fail, but if they do they can always try again. This is called 'the dignity of risk.' So I said, 'Let's give it a try.'"

The full-length documentary made by Matthew Klickstein and Jesse Alba of the KOWH's west coast tour is entitled "Act Your Age" (see the [official trailer](#) here). It's both hilarious and deeply moving. In it, the kids are clearly having the time of their lives and are warmly received at each of their performances. However, there are sobering moments that underscore the tour's purpose. Luis "Pee Wee" Fernandez, one of the group's most outspoken members, often opens shows with this demand, "Stop associating us with our disabilities," and Elisa del la Torre's readings from her book about her experiences dealing with disrespect often bring tears to people's eyes. However, it the kids' lively performance of the reworked version of "[Respect](#)" that drives the tour's inherent message home:

What you want, baby,

I got it What you need,

you know I got it

All we're asking for is a little respect

What's up, what's up, respect!

What's up, what's up, what's up, respect!

Don't ignore me, when you walk by

I'm not that different, and that's no lie

All we're asking for is a little respect

What's up, what's up, respect!

What's up, what's up, what's up, respect!

Please don't tease me, and treat us like dirt

You don't know how much it hurts

All we're asking for is a little respect

What's up, what's up, respect!

What's up, what's up, what's up, respect!

Becoming the Man in the Moon

"Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars." – Norman Vincent Peale

Michael retired from teaching in 2014 after 30 years in the Los Angeles Unified School District. "When I retired, there was no one else who could run the music program at Widney, and the administration didn't show any enthusiasm for performing arts."

The principal of Widney High had this to say about changes that would be made once Michael retired. "We're going to shift the focus to be around more job skills, whether it is audio visual or setting up PA systems - things they can do in their community for a job - so they can contribute."

"It's a curious and very frustrating thing," Michael says in response to the administration's plans. "I created and made an entire music program available for them to use after I left, but they chose to bury it. Instead, the kids are going to get plodding, uncreative academics. Even though the administration knows and can see how important the arts are, it's like they pretend they don't exist."

Since retiring, Michael has been focusing on doing what he loves best - writing and performing music. He's embarked on an ambitious solo career recording three albums – "[Echo](#)," "[Soul Survivor](#)," and "[Restless](#)" - featuring a crack band of LA musicians known as, "The Sound." Members of The Sound have played with a wide range of artists from Beyonce to Rod Stewart. He currently hosts a weekly sing along party – reminiscent of those hosted by his parents long ago – on ZOOM and a front porch music concert with his wife Gaili each Friday.

Finally, just for fun, and because the idea intrigued him, Michael signed up for an account in the virtual world of Second Life and has been doing live performances there as the avatar Moonman several times a week. "In a way I'm doing what I described in my song, "[Open Your Heart](#)," Michael says. "The song is a plea that appeals to a higher calling. I think of it as a meditation on love, as a way to connect us all. To me, that's what love is – the inexplicable and all encompassing connection with other human beings."

Batman - The Making of an Ordinary Superhero

<https://www.braidedlives.com/post/batman-the-making-of-an-ordinary-superhero>

The Came Trader and the Therapy Dog - Profile of a Disability Rights Activist in VR: Part I

<https://www.braidedlives.com/post/the-came-trader-and-the-therapy-dog>

Living Beyond Your Means - Profile of a Disability Rights Activist in VR: Part II

<https://www.braidedlives.com/post/living-beyond-your-means>

Spotlight on an Engineer - Tristin Novak

“When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this - you haven’t.” — Thomas A. Edison

Device Solutions engineers are part of a long and storied tradition dating back to the 17th century when the English scientist William Gilbert coined the New Latin term “electricus.” They are curious, persistent problem solvers, who like nothing better than a good challenge. As part of our commitment to honoring the past and contributing to the future of this tradition, Device Solutions will be showcasing and sharing the stories of the engineers who spend their days doing what Thomas Edison described as, “...finding out what the world needs and trying to invent it.”

Spotlight on an Engineer - Tristan Novak

Tristan Novak, one of Device Solution’s most recent hires, likes to say that he was born to be an

engineer. “My dad is a mechanical engineer with Timken and my mom is a total techie. She can

fix anything. She and my dad work hand-in-hand, so I spent most of my childhood working on projects with them.”

For this reason, Tristan always assumed he would follow in his father’s footsteps. He enrolled in

Clemson University’s General Engineering program with a goal of majoring in mechanical engineering, but by the end of his first semester had decided to switch to electrical.

“Electrical

engineering just seemed really cool, especially the part about building circuits that do things,”

says Tristan. “It was, and still is, a very exciting, growing and widespread field.”

Tristan went on to get his Masters of Science degree in Electrical Engineering from NC State, where he did a variety of internships and worked as a teaching assistant for the university’s

“Senior Design Experience (ECE Senior Design).” It was on ECE Senior Design Day, an event

held at NC State at the end of each semester to showcase student projects, that Tristan met Greg Patterson, the CEO of Porticos, a product design company. Although Patterson wasn’t

hiring electrical engineers, he offered to introduce Tristan to Device Solutions’ CEO, Bob Witter.

“Tristan is a great example of the power of networking with our partner companies,” says Witter.

“Porticos is one of our Mechanical Engineering partners at the NC State’s Senior Design

Day. Tristan followed up with Greg about employment opportunities, and Greg sent him to me

because he thought Device Solutions would be a much better fit.

Tristan was interviewed both by Witter and Michael Pail, the Hardware Engineering Manager at Device Solutions. "I knew about halfway into his interview that we would want to hire Tristan,"

says Pail. "His work ethic, his engineering experiences in both undergraduate and graduate

school, his love of "tinkering" and his attitude were the perfect mix for a Device Solutions' hire! I

remember telling Bob Witter that we should hire him, and we should do it soon before he accepted a job elsewhere."

Witter, who doesn't ask technical questions during interviews, had other things on his mind when he talked to Tristan for the first time. "My biggest concern in hiring people fresh out of

college, is understanding their long-term goals. Working for a relatively small engineering firm like Device Solutions takes a different breed. We don't have sophisticated training programs for our new hires. We throw them in the deep end, encourage them to ask a million questions, and make sure they are getting answers. The environment is very fast moving, sometimes chaotic, and always an adventure. So when I interview young candidates, I am looking for self-starters, folks who are most of all adventurers!"

To say that Device Solutions was a good fit for Tristan would be an understatement. He left his interviews thinking, "Wow, this company actually does tangible, hands on engineering. I want to

work here!"

Tristan began work in May of 2015, and according to Pail has "flourished with the fast-paced,

collaborative environment here at Device Solutions. He not only seeks guidance, but now is often a source of information for others; just way we like it here, the team growing stronger with each addition."

Witter, who says, "adventure is what Device Solutions offers," is not surprised. "From the

interview on, Tristan asked lots of questions so I knew he would not fail at Device Solutions.

And, I could tell from the activities he enjoys, that adventure is part of his DNA."

In addition to being an adventurous engineer, Tristan is an avid rock climber, hiker and cyclist. He is part of the Device Solutions cycling team known as "Team on Draft," which raises funds to

combat Multiple Sclerosis. "I like the nature of this small company," says Tristan.

"There's not

much bureaucracy, everyone is accessible, collaborative and willing to help. They're also realistic about getting things done. Everyone knows we have deliverables and deadlines to meet."

Pail's final comment about Tristan is a testament to both the company and Tristan himself. "The

only difficulty with Tristan is keeping him busy," says Pail. "While being incredibly thorough, he is also a very fast and efficient worker, and usually is not satisfied if only working on one project!" Now that is a difficulty worth having!

- Jena Ball for Device Solutions

The Power of Storytelling - An interview with Terry Tempest Williams

<https://www.motherearthnews.com/sustainable-living/nature-and-environment/the-power-of-storytelling-zmaz07jjzsel/>

Patagonia - An interview with Yvon Chouinard

Mother Earth News

<https://www.motherearthnews.com/sustainable-living/nature-and-environment/patagonia-clothing-zmaz09djzraw/>

Connecting with Nature

Mother Earth News

<https://www.motherearthnews.com/nature-and-environment/connecting-with-nature-zmaz06onzraw>

For Love of Bats

E The Environmental Magazine

<https://emagazine.com/for-love-of-bats/>

The Decade of the Wolf

Backpacker Magazine

<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/18636836/decade-wolf>

Business Features for The Business Press

(scanned copies available upon request)

Example 1 - Mapei: Adhesives firm hires world-class architect

Example 2 - Games for Fun: Merchant enjoys full platter with juke box business

House Beautiful: Stranger in a Strange Land - A lonely American in Japan discovers that a single friend can do much to make an outsider feel at home

It's well past 9 PM when the taxi driver pulls to stop before my new home. A round-faced, gregarious man with gold eyeteeth, he's been practicing his English all the way from the station with a cheerful disregard for grammar. The combination of jet lag and Japanese-English has my head spinning. I look out the window at what appears to be a two-story cement building in the middle of an empty field.

"Here?" I ask with disbelief. The glow from a single flickering street lamp casts long shadows across the field and reveals row upon row of gunmetal gray doors. It looks more like a self-storage warehouse than an apartment building.

"Hai, kochira desu." "Yes you are here," says the taxi driver. "Daijobu," he adds as he pops the trunk and gets out to unload my luggage. From my two-week crash course in Japanese I know that "daijobu" means, "It's okay," but I feel anything but reassured.

Reluctantly I open the car door and follow him into the warm summer night. The air is moist and heavy with the smells of newly fertilized soil and diesel fumes. The singsong "me, me, me" of cicadas rises and falls in rhythmic abandon as I shoulder my duffel bag and follow him to the last door on the right. He knocks, and a short, chubby American woman with ash-blond hair and owl glasses opens it. A filter-tip cigarette dangles from the corner of her mouth.

"Hi there," she says, taking the cigarette from her mouth and extending a plump, white palm. Her nails are impossibly long and painted a dark shade of crimson. "You must be Jena. I've been expecting you all day. My name's Sharon. Let me get the key to your apartment. Do you need change for the taxi?" Her words wash over me with hardly a pause for breath. "Thank you for fetching our new teacher," she says to the driver.

Sharon's monologue continues as she leads the way up a steep flight of metal stairs to the door directly above her own on the second floor. "Here we are," she says, inserting the key and giving a determined shove with her hip. "Of course it's nothing like an American apartment, but I think you'll be comfortable." As the door opens with a metallic groan and I get my first look at my new place, I stop listening to Sharon. I'd been warned by the recruiter in the U.S. about the size of Japanese apartments - one tiny room with an alcove that passes for a kitchen. I know about the tatami mat floors, squat toilets, and bathing protocol (wash before - not after - getting in the tub), but nothing has prepared me for the stark ugliness of these accommodations. Bare olive-gray walls streaked with greasy black soot, cracked and poorly fitted windows, and torn

paper shoji screens that pass for closet doors. There are no appliances, no furnishings, and the whole place smells of mold and rancid oil. I inhale sharply and turn to Sharon. "Can you excuse me please? I need to be alone." The door clangs shut behind her and I collapse onto my overstuffed suitcase. "Whatever possessed you to take this job?" I ask myself.

My tired brain flips through scenes from the past eight months - graduating in December, cover letters and resumes in January, a string of interviews with disinterested editors in spring, and the call from a friend of a friend in July. Would I be interested in teaching English in Japan for a year? It seemed like the perfect solution.

The next several days were filled with an ongoing series of culture shocks. From my new employer, Mr. Shimizu, I discovered that I was already \$5,000 in debt. The school had paid the deposit on my apartment (six months in advance), purchased a phone number (\$750), and new bedding (\$400). Household expenses, along with rent, utility bills, and taxes would be deducted from my monthly paycheck. I could expect to receive less than half my base salary, which as Sharon put it bluntly, "should cover the cost of food."

I started my teaching job, but at the end of each bewildering, shell-shocked day all I could think as I retreated to my spartan apartment was, "I want to go home."

Then, three months into my 12-month stay, I got a call from the wife of one of my students. Her name was Akemi, and she wanted me to come to her home for tea. Other teachers had warned that these invitations were a total waste of time, so I hesitated to accept.

"Can I check my schedule and call you back?" I asked.

"Of course," said Akemi. "I will wait for your message."

I replaced the receiver and sat back to think. Since arriving in Japan I had spent virtually all my time with the other teachers, a ragtag bunch of characters whose idea of a good time was having drinks at the local karaoke bars. One night of fending off unwanted advances of Japanese businessmen at one of these noisy, smoked-filled clubs was enough for me. I'd been spending my evenings at home reading and going for long walks. Not only was I lonely, but I had learned virtually nothing about the Japanese people or culture. I picked up the phone, called Akemi back, and got directions to her house.

Akemi and her home were revelations. Set back from the street behind a gray stone wall, the house was approached via irregularly shaped gray-slate stones set in freshly raked white sand. The front yard was dotted with artfully pruned fir trees supported by bamboo frames. The house itself was a boxy single-story affair with white walls, wooden trim, and a blue tile roof.

Based on her husky voice and formal speech on the phone, I expected Akemi to be a stocky older woman. Instead, the door was opened by a diminutive woman in her late thirties with the

sharp-boned, willowy figure of a teenager, glossy black hair falling to her shoulders, and the engaging, toothy smile of a born extrovert.

“Jena-san?” she asked, offering her hand.

“Yes, and you must be Akemi,” I replied.

“Surprised?” she asked, motioning me into the genkan, or entryway.

“I thought you would be wider,” I said, fumbling for an explanation as I removed my shoes.

“I am also surprised,” Akemi replied with a mischievous grin. “I imagine big yellow hair,” she said, holding her hands out around her head, “and California suntan.” Clearly my braided brown hair and pale skin did not fit the bill. We broke into simultaneous laughter and the ice was broken. “Welcome to my home,” she said and ushered me into a tatami mat room just off the main hallway where a low wooden table was set for tea. “You must tell me everything about America.”

For the next three hours over green tea and tiny cakes stuffed with sweet bean paste, Akemi and I traded stories. Unlike my students, who seemed compelled to ask my age, place of birth, and marital status, Akemi was not particularly interested in personal facts. Instead she asked about the women she had seen in American films (are all American women sexually uninhibited?), what it is like to drive across states like Kansas and Wyoming, and why are so many Americans overweight?

I asked about the Japanese obsession with all things kawaii (cute), the reluctance of my students to express their opinions, and the rumors I’d heard about arranged marriage. It wasn’t long before I discovered that Akemi’s marriage was arranged. A gifted violinist with a concert career, she had stopped performing at the age of 24 when her parents insisted that she get married and start a family. Her failure to produce children (she was now 36) was an ongoing source of concern, as was her growing unhappiness with the role of housewife. “But why did you let your parents bully you like that?” I asked indignantly. “You can still play the violin. Don’t let them stop you.”

For the first time Akemi’s perky smile faded and she looked away. Clearly I’d overstepped the bounds of our new relationship. “In Japan, we are taught to obey our parents,” she said gently. “Besides, my husband is not a bad man.”

“I’m sorry, Akemi,” I apologized, wanting to kick myself. “I have no business giving you advice.”

“Daijobu, Jena-san,” she replied as she refilled my cup with tea. “I know life is different in America.”

Later, when some of the tension had eased between us, I told her how much I envied her ability to play the violin. "I'd love to hear you play someday."

There was a long pause. I wondered if I had offended her again, but then she nodded. "I will play for you, Jena-san."

"Hontoni arigato, Akemi-san." "Thank you very much, Akemi," I replied in Japanese, using the honorific to let her know how much I appreciated the gift of both her music and friendship.

"Doitashimashite," she replied with a shy smile. "You're welcome." Her cheeks were flushed and her gaze firmly fixed on the task of making a fresh pot of tea. A comfortable silence fell between us, and as I watched the precise, measured movements of her fine-boned hands - hands capable of coaxing concertos from violin strings - I felt the tension of the past few months easing from my solar plexus. I took a deep breath and marveled at how a single friend can make an entire country feel like home.

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