



Going Out: A Japanese Tea Ceremony

by Casey Gramaglia

For Montessori elementary and adolescent students, the opportunity for learning outside the classroom is an important part of the curriculum. Students may plan a “going out” for a small group of students related to a project, such as going to the grocery store for ingredients for a cooking project. Or a larger trip for the whole group may be planned, usually related to work going on in the classroom.

These opportunities to learn outside the classroom allow students to have hands-on opportunities with the world and their community. In the first plane of development (ages 0-6), we try to bring the world to the classroom, but in the second plane of development, we want to bring the student to the world. Although we cannot take the students around the world, we can take advantage of local opportunities that introduce students to places and activities from around the world.

The tea ceremony and tea appreciation are part of our curriculum at NewGate School. Students are given the opportunity to partake in tea ceremonies at school, and students were able to go to The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art to experience an afternoon of a traditional Japanese tea ceremony, hosted by Dr. Rebecca Corbett, author of *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo & Meiji Japan*.

The Japanese tea ceremony (Sado) is rooted in a tradition of mindfulness, naturalist intrigue, and political stability; all of which served to unify, strengthen, and pacify an ancient culture. Tea brokered the deal. Tea welcomed the guest. Tea served as a reminder to pause and appreciate the ephemeral nature of impermanence in an increasingly complex and turbulent world. When we arrived, our host explained how the natural surroundings play an important role in setting the mood; the sounds of the wind blowing through the bamboo grove and cedar branches, the bird song, all contributed to the experience of calm and tranquility presented during the ceremony. As the audience sat with straight spines,

attentive to the moment of peace, receptive to the myriad gifts of nature, we were quickly interrupted by the sounds of gasoline-powered golf carts, transporting people to and fro, and prop planes flying above the Gulf of Mexico. Our host joked and suggested that, today, we would have to replace the more traditional sounds of nature with those of mechanized equipment and vehicles, to which the crowd laughed and relaxed further into their seats awaiting the ancient spectacle to unfold.

The designated guest was invited to partake, the sweet was offered, and the tea was prepared. Each gesture of the tea master was carried out with profound precision, meaning, and purpose. As this quiet dance unfolded, the noise of human interference quickly dissipated into an inner abyss of luminous silence that was noticeably felt by all; the experience became palpable. For this brief moment, that felt like an eternity, we were all interconnected: students, teachers, guests, masters, all one. Before we knew it, the ceremony had come to a close, and our host opened up the floor for questions. NewGate students quickly raised their hands in unison! Though I am biased, naturally in a way a teacher would be toward their students, their questions were thoughtful, mature, and insightful. The audience was captivated by the interaction between young people and our host. The students asked questions such as, “What was the food item presented at the beginning of the ritual? What is the significance of the design on the belt (obi) of your kimono?” Our host was visibly pleased with the genuine sincerity and enthusiasm of our students. Eventually, their questions had to be capped off as another group prepared to receive the presentation; otherwise, their dialogue could have continued indefinitely.

This kind of interaction, unexpected by many adults, is typical of students who are expanding their knowledge and building on what they have already experienced. The opportunity to interact with specialists, whether a traditional host for a tea ceremony, or the stocker at the local grocery store, provides a

living, hands-on opportunity to ask questions and fulfill curiosity.

The Ringling Museum (Sarasota, FL) also provided a tour of the traditional, yet modern, Japanese Tea House that was recently constructed on the grounds. The tea house is regularly available to view from the outside; there are large glass windows showing the craftsmanship of the interior and the equipment inside. However, today was different. We could actually walk inside, feel the tatami mats below our feet and smell the scent of grass, cedar, and pine. The students delighted in asking more questions and exploring the tea house. We learned that the tea house was designed by a student from the Ringling College of Art + Design. The design combines elements of a traditional tea house, fused with classical, modern Sarasota architecture.

Being able to go out and explore, whether exploring nature, the visual arts, or experiences such as a tea ceremony or live theater, provides a deeper understanding of lessons learned in the classroom. By becoming a part of the larger community, with family, a small group, the whole class, or even the whole school, bonds are strengthened, lessons are learned, and new interests are kindled. Taking the time to let students help plan and attend opportunities, especially those that are out of their regular experiences, both with school and with the family, is time well spent. Those memories of experiences will remain with them and be building blocks for continued learning. ■



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