

## ***Writing Towards the Transcendent***

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### ***Synopsis***

In the first part of this paper, I'll discuss a current project of mine, *The Table for Contemplation and Action (A Place to Share Beauty and Fear)* that offers the opportunity for ritual-like writing to an invisible audience. And although it was conceived of as a secular activity in a secular setting, the participant may choose to address their writing towards the transcendent should they desire.

The second part of the paper will highlight the way that three religions: Shintoism, Zen Buddhism, and Judaism, facilitate communication towards the transcendent for their constituents through writing, in places of ritual. Each religion defines the transcendent differently: Shinto, the native religion of Japan, contains many gods and sees sacred power (*kami*) in both animate and inanimate objects; ultimately everything may be seen as sacred. Zen Buddhism is generally described as non-theistic, but praying or writing to the Buddha is common. Judaism is a monotheistic religion. All three religions contain opportunities for personal acts of writing to the transcendent, in sacred places that are open to all.

### ***Expanded Abstract***

*The Table for Contemplation and Action (A Place to Share Beauty and Fear)* is located in the interior public courtyard of Rapson Hall on the University of Minnesota campus, and is in virtually continuous use by students. Rapson Hall is home to Architecture and Landscape Architecture faculty, staff, and students, and has many others coming and going for general classes and events. *The Table for Contemplation and Action* is a six foot square wooden table with a central copper box containing a changing, single, unusual element from the outdoors (to date, pine needles, bark, leaves, moss, and maple seeds). The table also provides students with the opportunity to write about their fear/stress/hopes/wishes and to deposit these writings into the table's blown glass vessel. When the vessel is full, the papers are emptied and burned without reading. Writing is completely voluntary; you learn about this aspect of the table via a small book on the tabletop that also functions as a comment book. Anyone is invited to use the table: for studying, meeting, and eating.

This project has been extremely successful, meaning participants understand, use, and benefit from the table as I had intended. Some of the many positive responses written in the comment book at the table includes: "A wonderful place to sit and study. Sight, texture, smell, lovely. The opportunity to write something down and let it go is very freeing and I am thankful for it." What I didn't expect was that the comment book began to collect some writings referencing Christianity/Jesus, as well as quotes by Camus and Thoreau copied into the comment book. Recently someone was inspired to leave a small vase of flowers at the table. A small book of *Psalms* was also left.

After reading the comment book, seeing the Table "in action", discussing the Table at an open discussion event, and after a trip to Japan, I began to see more direct correlations with ritualized writing within religions: writing done directly by the worshipper to the transcendent, that may or may not have to be officiated. My paper will briefly discuss the methodologies that Shintoism, Zen Buddhism, and Judaism employ to facilitate writing to the transcendent at their sacred settings.

My recent observations and participations in Shinto shrines and Zen Buddhist temples in Japan caused me to see my Table project in a new light. At Shinto shrines in Japan, one can purchase wooden prayer plaques called *ema*, where prayers, wishes, or gratitude can be written by the individual. These plaques are then hung on open racks at the shrine by the worshippers. From the racks, the *kami* (gods) receive them. If your prayer is answered, you can remove your plaque, and/or you can hang a new prayer plaque if desired. A shrine may be known for its focus on facilitating certain types of prayers being answered, such as success at work. This doesn't preclude the worshiper from writing any type of prayer but praying for the type of prayer that the shrine is known for is believed to be a more effective way of having your prayer heard and manifested. Conversely, many shrines have no specific focus for their prayers.

At Zen Buddhist temples in Japan, prayer sticks can be purchased, and any visitor to the temple can write their prayer on the wooden stick. Generally these cost a few hundred yen (a couple dollars). At Sanjusangendo Temple in Kyoto, signs in Japanese and English invite you to write your prayer, leave it on the altar, and further explain that the priests will burn the sticks. The burning releases the prayer to the transcendent. In this tradition, an officiant is needed as an intermediary between the individual and the divine.

Jerusalem's Western Wall is Judaism's most sacred setting, and was another setting I have experienced directly. When it was built some 2000 years ago it was a retaining wall supporting the outer portion of the Temple Mount, upon which stood the Second Temple. The Second Temple was destroyed and the precise location of the temple was lost. Temple Mount was purposely avoided - so that no one would accidentally step on the Holy of Holies - the ancient inner sanctum of the temple barred to all except high priests. Instead, praying took place at an exposed outer wall; according to rabbinical texts, the *shechina* (divine presence) never deserted the wall and for this reason it's regarded as the most holy of all Jewish sites.

The Wall became a place of pilgrimage, and today there is a large plaza in front of the wall that functions as an open-air sanctuary with separate sections for men and women as per Orthodox tradition. The Wall is open to all faiths, 24 hours a day, every day of the year. At the Wall, many write their prayers onto slips of paper and fold it into the crevices between the stones to send their communication to the divine. In recent years, prayers can be sent by fax, email and now Twitter for placement in the Wall. These services do not charge, but rather one is invited to make an online donation. These advances in technology have made it possible for an individual's prayers to be placed in the Wall, while not being physically present, raising interesting questions about the role of the actual sacred setting, and the secular officiating of prayers.

Twice a year, at Passover in the spring and the Jewish New year in the fall, the Wall's workers, under the direction of the rabbi, clear out the accumulated notes. In accordance with Jewish law, they must be buried. Those who are responsible for removing the prayers therefore treat them with great respect: the workers immerse themselves in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) before beginning the holy work of removing the notes. The writings are removed without the use of metal bars or utensils – which stand for warfare and the taking of life - but rather are removed with wooden rods

This research that I have done since returning from Japan influenced the way that thought about and designed the tool to collect the writings from the glass vessel in my Table project, and the burning of these writings. The way *The Table for Contemplation and Action* has been embraced in Rapson Hall raises questions for me about other potential settings for it, the role of public space, who the "participants" are, implications for contemporary design, among others. I look forward to our discussion on these issues.