The Family
Therapy Networker
March/April 1989

SONG WITHOUT WORDS

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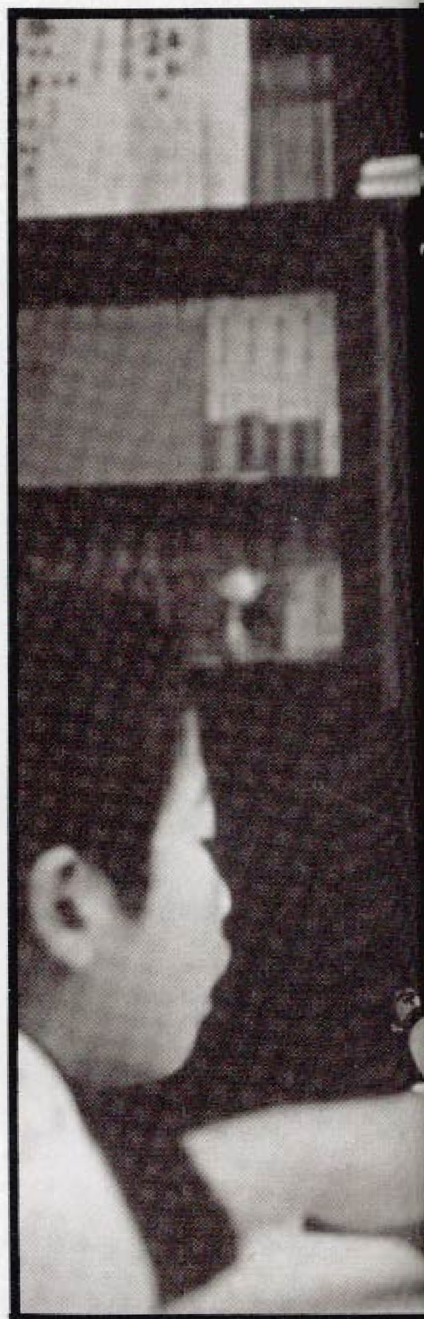
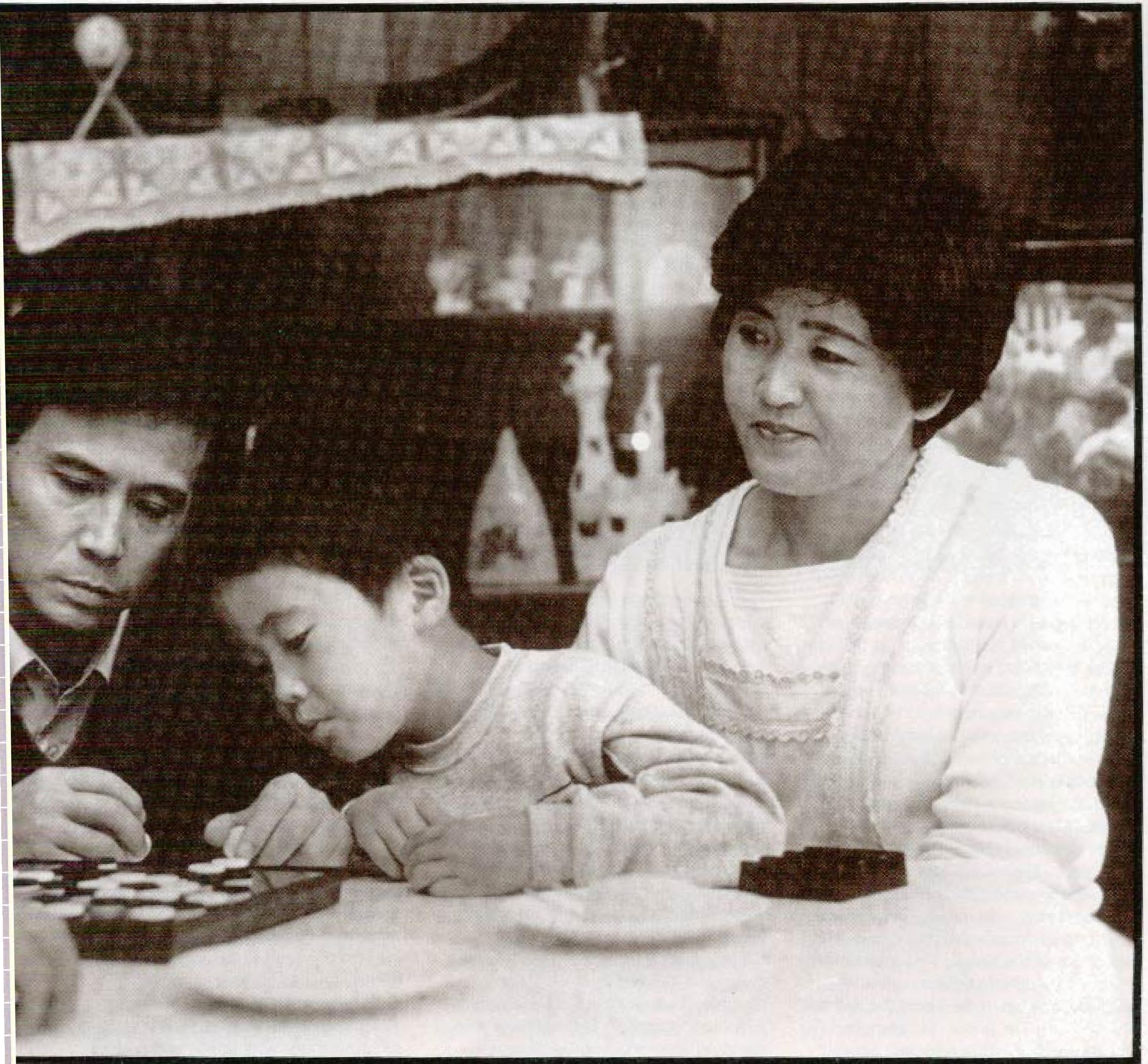


WE AMERICANS KNOW HOW TO TALK; THE JAPANESE, WITH THEIR emphasis on empathy and intuition, know how to listen. To the Japanese, Westerners' talkativeness makes us seem arrogant and hyperactive. They sometimes wonder if we are afraid of silence. In Japan, the most important communication takes place non-verbally. Restrained and disciplined in public, the Japanese nonetheless have rich inner lives, and perhaps more inner emotional freedom than many in our overtly less inhibited society. During a two-year sabbatical in Japan, while my husband and I were visiting researchers at the Japanese National Institute of Mental Health, I too began to wonder about Americans' emphasis on the intellect and verbal skills. Why do we have to talk so much?

Our stay in Japan, as well as contacts with Japanese families here in the States, has given me the opportunity to spend many hours contemplating the differences between Japanese and American cultures. Nowhere are the differences more apparent than in attitudes toward childrearing. When I first saw my own newborn child, I thought about how helpless and dependent he was: I wanted to help him grow strong and self-sufficient. A Japanese mother by contrast wants to strengthen her child's connectedness within a loving family. Mother-child symbiosis lasts



STUART FRANKLIN/MAGNUM

Listening to Japanese families

longer and is valued more highly in Japan than in America. Until a child's sixth birthday, the parents focus almost exclusively on nurturing that child, accomodating themselves to childish whims. Even during the later years of childhood and adolescence, the child/student is the center of the family and almost no sacrifice is considered excessive if it will contribute to his or her educational advancement.

Although the Japanese are trying to integrate modern values of individualism and autonomy with traditional patterns of family and social harmony, their cultural priorities are still the reverse of ours. Americans cherish individual expression; Japanese cherish harmony in the group. Japanese parents put family harmony first when raising children; American parents are more likely to emphasize individual self-actualization. I want my children to be independent, to take a stand against the group and fight for their rights, if necessary. I distrust "groups," which might negatively influence my children's lives or potentially lead them into trouble. In Japan, however, the word for "different" is the same as the word for "wrong." For them, the group is more likely to offer a comfortable, familial experience, in which people feel nurtured and protected.

Whereas Americans "launch" their adult children—send them "out into the world"—Japanese children never "break away." The family maintains a strong sense of connectedness throughout the life cycle. While American mothers threaten to punish their children by making them stay at home, Japanese mothers threaten to punish children by putting them out of the house. My four-year-old learned quickly that ghosts come out after dark in Japan; for safety, he had to come inside the house. In Japan, the mother and baby are one unit. Many American mothers carry babies on their backs in specially designed sling packs, but only in Japan have I seen coats that covered both mother and baby together.

JAPANESE ARE MORE LIKELY THAN Americans to experience themselves as part of a flowing stream, integrated within a larger whole; a sense of oneness and unity between self and others is highly valued. A Japanese colleague working in the United States once told me that Americans give the impression of not wanting to be intruded on by anybody. The result was that she was left feeling somehow isolated when interacting with Americans.

A JAPANESE COLLEAGUE ONCE CRITIQUED MY WORK BY SAYING, "YOU SEEM TO THINK WORDS ARE IMPORTANT." FROM HER PERSPECTIVE, MY OVEREMPHASIS ON WORDS TRANSFORMED THE FAMILY'S COMMUNICATION INTO SOMETHING LESS SUBSTANTIAL, MORE SUPERFICIAL

While harmony is the ideal in Japan, conformity is often the experience. The individual's self-concept is not actively developed in Japan to the extent that it is in the United States. There is no show-and-tell in Japanese schools. Children aren't encouraged to have a personal opinion. One Japanese student listening to American family discussions was amazed that the children speak their feelings and say what they think. A Japanese friend in the United States was perturbed by a questionnaire her third-grade daughter brought home. On it were a lot of incomplete sentences focusing on personal attitudes: "My favorite animal is . . .," "I like my family because . . ." Neither mother nor daughter had ever been asked these particular questions before. What were the right answers? Another Japanese friend told me that it was as an adult, while talking with her English teacher, that she first made the important distinction between "the Japanese answer" and "my own answer." "We are not so conscious of our real desires," says another Japanese living in the U.S., "so conformity is not so difficult."

Just as Americans downplay mutual dependency or avoid closeness for fear of threatening individuality, the Japanese downplay individual differences and resist highlighting individuality for fear of damaging harmony. A writer for the *Japan Times* recently reported that a high percentage of young people said they would be true to their own values, something he thought a very *bad* sign, indicating selfishness and egotism. Traditionally in Japan, self-discipline and self-control are highly valued and highly developed. Self-sacrifice is honored, even to the extent of "killing off" one's own feelings out of respect for others. To the Japanese, a strong person is one who sacrifices self in service to others.

A GROUP OF JAPANESE PEOPLE gathered together are like a clutch of different-colored foam rubber balls, compressed into a small space; the balls can adapt, accommodate their shape in order to make a fit. Americans are more like wooden cubes. To fit the same number of Americans into the same space might require cutting off a few sharp corners or edges—we seem to require more elbow room or we end up poking each other. In a Japanese group, mutual accommodation is the preferred style, on the theory that if each member feels supported, the goals of the group will be more readily achieved. An individual's needs are met because someone else notices and cares, not because of self-promotion. In any case, the true self is felt as a silent, inward awareness, rather than expressed in a demonstration of public self-assertion.

A JAPANESE THERAPIST WORKING with a family is most likely to notice first the difficulty family members have depending upon each other for emotional support and nurturance, their inability to care for and connect with each other. In contrast, an American therapist is more likely to pick up the intrusions by Japanese family members into each other's private space, the lack of individuality and autonomy. In a country settled by immigrants, most American families have ancestors who had to cut ties with family and culture and begin again, alone, in a new environment. A Japanese person's experience of family goes back several generations, perhaps hundreds of years; the ashes of these family members are all entombed together in a family grave.

When I teach, I often ask people to make a symbolic picture of their family. In a kind of picture I saw for the first time in Japan, the colors—each representing a family member—all intermingle, though none lose their individual essence. This view of the Japanese family and relationship carries over into Japanese family therapy. Compared with American therapy, the bond between therapist and patient in

Japan is deeper and more permanent. Empathic communication, expressions of mutual acceptance, and forgiveness of human imperfections, supply the connective tissue between the therapist and family members. Further, the relationship does not end, once therapy is finished, but, like the family itself, goes on forever. The sense of oneness and mutuality between therapist and patient creates an almost mystical sense of connection, a bond made by fate.

ELLIOTT ERWITT/MAGNUM

The Japanese pattern of communication depends primarily on intuition and non-verbal cues. Close family members or friends expect almost telepathic mutual understanding. In Japan, I worked with a group of mental health professionals, mostly women, who had left their families, often including children, behind while they attended six- to 12-month professional development programs in Tokyo. We talked about how often they contacted their families, either by letter or phone call. I discovered, to my initial surprise, that I wrote many more letters home and made more phone calls, than they did. In fact, some of the women told me they almost never wrote or called; doing so would be a sign of something wrong. They felt so deeply connected to their families that they didn't require letters or phone calls. By implication, writing letters or phoning was a sign of being out of (empathic) touch!

AMERICAN CHILDREN LEARN TO express their ideas orally; Japanese children learn to pay attention to the face, to read non-verbal cues, and to listen well. In a healthy American family, family members share their feelings by talking; in a healthy Japanese family, such verbal sharing is not considered necessary or even desirable. For a Japanese man to say he can take his wife for granted is a compliment—she is like the air, and he can count on her.

When having our son tested for a private school in the United States, his Japanese teacher was asked to fill out an American form with a question about whether the child could "control his feelings." On a corresponding Japanese questionnaire, which the teacher showed us, was a question about whether the child "manages to express his feelings." Several times, Japanese colleagues in sharing their feelings with me said, "I can't say that in Japanese," suggesting that the very structure of the language forbade the verbal expression of emotions. The Japanese distrust words and verbal skills: "words are just words." Greater weight is placed on intuition and experience—sensing, touching, doing.

During my first months in Japan, when sitting behind the mirror during therapy sessions, I would often question my Japanese colleagues about the content of the therapy discussion. Sometimes the answer was, "I don't know," and I would wonder how they could listen and not know what people were saying? When I began working in front of the mirror, I was often told, "*That* was very interesting, but we could never do *that*; you could do *that* because you are a foreigner." "That" was my habit of asking for clarification when I did not understand, or pursuing a fuzzy answer to elicit a clearer one. Such behavior was acceptable from foreigners, but a fellow Japanese is expected to know the meaning through empathy. Asking for explicit verbal communication is considered rude and intrusive, and shows that the therapist lacks intuitive understanding.

Western visitors observing Japanese family therapy were sometimes mystified. What were they doing? What was the focus? Often the sessions seemed to us to move slowly, because we Americans did not sense the active, underground

Americans cherish individual expression; the Japanese cherish harmony in the group. In Japan the world for "different" is the same as the word for "wrong."

bonding. Because we could not read the faces and missed the non-verbal communication, we caught perhaps 20 percent of what was happening, and thus often felt at a loss. A Japanese colleague once critiqued my work by saying, "You seem to think words are important." From her perspective, my overemphasis on words transformed the family's communication into something less substantial, more superficial or shallow, than it would have been had I left things less explicit, and depended on my intuition.

In my clinical work, I found most striking the difference between Japanese and American attitudes toward marriage. For me, marriage is the core of the family; being a good parent depends upon a vital, supportive relationship with my husband that meets both our emotional needs. If my relationship with my husband becomes cool, distant, or angry, our children will suffer. If reconciliation is impossible, then it is better for all of us, children included, that we divorce.

Most Japanese would consider the parents immature who separated simply because they no longer cared for each other. Marital difficulties—dissension, isolation, overbearing in-laws, even

endured for the sake of the family's physical abuse—are to be accepted and integrity. Traditionally, the Japanese expect from marriage not personal fulfillment, which they might seek in work, in raising children, in a love affair, but certain standards of behavior and responsibility. They expect to find happiness within themselves.

More jarring to the Western consciousness is the accepted supremacy of the parent-child bond, especially that between mother and children. The traditional bond between a mother and a first son bond is a highly enmeshed relationship that continues throughout the son's adult life. One 35-year-old client, a Japanese businessman living with his own family in Europe, told me he could not read his mother's letters without experiencing such an emotional storm inside that he could think of nothing else for two weeks afterwards.

A typical family therapy case in Japan exhibits a distant marriage, a strong bond between father and paternal grandmother, and another between mother and son. The presenting problem may be a young adolescent's refusal to attend school or, sometimes, the physical abuse of the mother, most often by a son. An adolescent son's violence can cause the mother serious injury, but she generally accepts it, feeling that responding in kind simply fuels the fire. The mother submits, hoping that eventuually her suffering will evoke her child's empathy. The only time a Japanese adult ever became openly angry at me was when I suggested to a badly bruised mother that she should not have allowed her son to beat her. She vehemently insisted that only *because* her son had seen her bruises and suffering, had he stopped the abuse and agreed to return to school.

It often seemed to me that a family's difficulties were exacerbated by their placing an extremely high value on harmony, self-sacrifice, suffering, and empathy. Yet, listening to this mother's protest moved me to reconsider; perhaps her behavior was not "crazy." I thought of Gandhi and of my own Quaker background, and wondered why this way of "accepting the child's anger" was such a difficult concept for me.

Several Japanese colleagues told me that the Oedipal myth was not very useful to them. The child in Japan is never shoved from the nest, and the son never loses the Oedipal struggle—there *is* no struggle; his primacy is accepted from the moment of birth. That this blood bond could ever be secondary to the marital one is almost unimaginable.

A GROUP OF JAPANESE PEOPLE GATHERED TOGETHER ARE LIKE A CLUTCH OF DIFFERENT-COLORED FOAM RUBBER BALLS, COMPRESSED INTO A SMALL SPACE; THE BALLS CAN ADAPT, ACCOMMODATE THEIR SHAPE IN ORDER TO MAKE A FIT. AMERICANS ARE MORE LIKE WOODEN CUBES.

ONE SUMMER, MY FAMILY SPENT SIX weeks at a cabin on a lake. Twice, we invited Japanese friends to visit. We discussed among ourselves where our guests would sleep, then decided to wait until each family arrived to suggest their own arrangements. We did not imagine the result in spite of having read and heard about it often. In both cases, the parents slept in separate beds—each with one or more children! Sleeping with an adult is thought to provide children with a sense of security.

Historically in Japan, a newly married couple moved in with the husband's parents, creating a three-generation household. New wives were basically apprenticed to their mothers-in-law, expected to nurture children, in-laws, and husband, often to the tune of constant criticism. In recent times, the father typically devotes himself to his work and is rarely home. Mother is entirely responsible for managing home and children, controlling the family's finances, overseeing the children's education, and serving and supporting her husband. She is experienced as both self-sacrificing and powerful, the foundation of the home. Once, behind a mirror observing a marital session with a professional couple, both doctors, I heard the husband complain that his wife did not prepare a sack lunch for their late-adolescent son. I suggested to my colleagues that since the father was concerned, he might prepare the lunch himself. Everyone laughed heartily at what they took to be a joke.

Today, most young Japanese want a personally fulfilling marriage, more on the Western model. Many young women are refusing to move in with their mothers-in-law, and unhappy wives are more likely than before to seek divorce, especially after the children are grown. But the conflicts accompanying these transitions can be wrenching. Parents, for example, may ask their independently minded offspring, "But who will take care of the graves?" If no one chooses to live with the parents, to maintain the family house and property, if children all live in other towns, who will care for the parents, the grandparents, and the ancestors? This represents a break with hundreds of years of tradition. To the older generation it seems unfair that they honored, obeyed, and cared for their parents, and now are being deserted by their own children. On the other hand, they also are becoming aware of what they missed. An older Japanese colleague once observed wistfully that he and his wife had never held hands.

JAPANESE CULTURE IS ORGANIZED around principles of wholeness and complementarity, a respect for all elements of being, and a refusal to divide experience into mutually contradictory categories. When we were toilet training our young son, we taught him to pee on a tree in the back yard. Observing this, a Japanese babysitter taught him to first apologize to the tree. She explained that not only did this show respect for the tree, his apology would also inhibit angry spirits.

The awareness of the indivisibility of creation extends to the Japanese acceptance of death as part of the fullness of life. A Japanese painting of a flower bouquet is likely to include all stages of life, from fresh new buds, to wilted and decaying blossoms. The Japanese never see evil in a child; children are gods—or gifts of gods. Basic human nature is thought to be good. They do not share our dualistic tendency to regard human motivation as either good or evil. Japanese are more likely to accept the whole of human nature, defects and graces alike, and thus may have less need for protecting themselves from guilt or for blaming others. In our litigious society, with about 15 times as many lawyers per capita as Japan, we put enormous energy into protecting ourselves from blame, assigning blame to others, going to court to discover who is to blame. In Japan, even the criminal is

partly right, the victim partly wrong. The Japanese are much more likely to accept blame and apologize. Apology, they believe, is the gateway to forgiveness, rehabilitation, and social acceptance.

Americans tend to polarize experience, isolating individual elements of life into good or bad, right or wrong, truth or falsehood. The Japanese, on the other hand, are more likely to see opposites flowing from or even fulfilling each other. In success is the seed of failure, in sadness the germ of future happiness. Matriarchy and patriarchy are Yin and Yang, each intrinsic to an indivisible whole. One extreme flows into the other. Working with Japanese clients, I came to believe that Americans cut off their feelings at the neck, in order to repress what they think is unacceptable in themselves. The Japanese cut off their feelings at the face, displaying only the appropriate demeanor for the occasion and context, but unafraid to experience internal feelings and ideas that Americans would find shameful and repugnant. They seem freer to have a rich inner life, because they do not censor their own emotions, however strictly they control their behavior.

These two principles—wholeness and complementarity—underlie the social relativism for which the Japanese are famous. Americans are uncomfortable with relativism; they prefer seeing themselves and their families as unified, stable, single entities. When asked to make a symbolic picture of their family, Americans will usually make one picture, whereas the Japanese families will make more than one —"this is us when father is home," "this is the family at dinner time," "this shows the family's emotional relations," "this shows the different interests and personalities in the family." A Japanese colleague teased me about my "one true self," because like other Westerners, I believe that if my behavior is inconsistent in different situations I am being somehow false, untrue to myself. If I think one thing and say another, I feel dishonest. The Japanese understand that different roles and contexts allow or even demand different aspects of the self to emerge. External behavior and inner feelings are separate, though co-existing, worlds, and society's requirements do not bind the life of the mind.

What seem like contradictions to us work quite harmoniously in the Japanese temperament. For example, they believe that commitment and effort can achieve anything; they are highly ambitious, and prepared to endure much suffering to achieve their goals. At the same time, they relish the experience of being passively nurtured; the experience of dependency is central to the Japanese personality. Pre-school children are cherished and indulged. By our standards they are given little discipline. But, by the time they are elementary school students, they are far more self-disciplined than their American counterparts. The Japanese believe in accomodation to the group, self-sacrifice on behalf of society and family, apology, and humility as a means to peaceful reconciliation. Yet they also admire the strong, determined individual, the independent spirit of the samurai.

Undoubtedly, there are many ways to understand truth. Westerners seek to understand their world through intellect—logic and reason; Japanese, through intuition. Japanese culture is distrustful of language and reveres the non-verbal. Nevertheless, as a Westerner, I have tried to analyze the essence of the Japanese experience and set it down in the medium of words. I am aware that while I have jotted down some of the notes, the music of Japanese culture will always escape description. ■

MARTINE FRANCK/MAGNUM

In Japanese families mother-child symbiosis lasts longer and is valued more highly than in our culture.

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Note

I would like to thank the many, many individuals and groups who made my work and life in Japan both possible and meaningful. Students, colleagues, friends, and neighbors, all taught me so very much. I am particularly grateful to Koji Suzuki, a pioneer of family therapy in Japan; Dr. Suzuki, who directs family research and training at NIMH, Japan, made it possible for me to come to Japan, and facilitated my entry into Japanese professional life.

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