

Kayoko Wakita:

Well, I was named Kayoko Wakita. I asked my father as I was growing older what my name meant and he said, "It's a person that's very philosophical."

I was born December 19, 1928 in Los Angeles, as a matter of fact on Sunset Boulevard. Well, I take that back, I take that back. My parents had gone to Japan, well, to visit, but also they stayed and did a lot of advanced work musically. My father was telling me that she was pregnant with me and they thought, "Well, we'll be home in time." But they stayed longer than they thought and they said they barely got off the boat and they had to go to the hospital.

I have to say I had the most terrific parents and I feel very fortunate for that. They were very different. Well, they weren't actually immigrants, maybe that made a difference. Also, the fact that usually the ones that were immigrants were second born, because the first born usually inherits, and is responsible for family, therefore they don't immigrate. But the second one, you better go and make money is usually the case. In my mother's case, she came to visit my aunt, her aunt rather, my great aunt, and that's how they met. But my father came actually to get his father, the mayor of the little chalet. My father's name was Giichi, which is hard to pronounce, G-I-I-C-H-I Wakita. His father's was Nodzo.

Many of his friends, and particularly he had a relative in Osaka who was actually a marvelous artist. He had gone to New York to not only study, but to advance his work. When he returned, he told them all about the United States and he built his home that was a Western style and told all kinds of stories to my father, who was at the time studying swordsmanship. I'll often stay there, because he was in the national finals. He was telling us, he says, "I learned a lot about it and I got really curious." Of course, when my father didn't come home as early as we thought he would, they said, "You better go get him." So I thought I'd better do that and I went.

It would be about 1922 or so in Seattle. Then eventually went down to Los Angeles. But generally their friends were located in Seattle and they had a little Tokyo town. My grandfather obviously was having a good time, therefore he wasn't coming home yet and he was making extra money to spend being a lumberjack. Well, when my father showed up, my father said, "You have to get back." And he said, "Well, I think it wouldn't hurt you to work either." But he started to work with his dad lumberjacking. Then said, "Well, I guess you better get home," and eventually got him on the boat. Grandfather thinking we were going home together, but my father took off and stayed. He was planning, well, he was not planning. He had his mind made up. My father was so well read and I think this had a lot to do with his staying. He wanted to explore and learn more and he liked the freedom he found.

First born, you're given a lot of responsibility. I remember a story he told me and he was maybe just about five or six. He said, "I used to hang out with Grandpa," would be my great-grandfather. He would walk his holdings and there were lots of bamboo forests and they'd be climbing the mountain. But Great-Grandfather always tapped, walking and tapping. What he was doing was searching for a perfect bamboo so that the man that bought the bamboos would take them on a raft down the stream. But it was the rapids, so he had to have a good bamboo, else it would break. So as he's going, he said, "Just by listening he could tell if it was eaten by insects or there are insects inside. He was that keen."

My father said quite often he would tag along and he said he had a little stick, so he... One day Grandfather grabbed him by his... and said, "Don't ever do that again. You are taking someone's life into your hands. If that one you selected is amongst my group and it breaks, the man may drown or he may be injured." He said, "That was my big lesson as a youngster." I never forgot that. You go around tapping things and you don't think anything of it, but a life of a person depended on that.

He started to learn as a teenager, he started to learn the shakuhachi while he was going to high school. Then throughout college he was continuing.

My mother, she came from a place called [foreign language 00:06:19], which was a larger city. I was there when I was in Japan the last time. It's famous because the beach has white sand. Her family owned most of that property, the whole area. She married my grandfather. In Japan, they have arrangements and usually it's the wealth of the family and what kind of lineage you have. Obviously, it was a pretty good lineage. I can trace ours to the 10th century. There was a Lordship whose name was Tada. I tried to figure it out, I thought maybe we got Wakita out of that somehow, because in the old days they would say you're part of the left Tada, or right Tada, or the front Tada, and waki is side. We think maybe we are the Wakitadas and eventually shorten to Wakita. That's what I'm thinking.

My father, I said, "What am I going to be?" He said, "You have the best of both worlds and be grateful for that." That's where I stand.

Yeah. I don't know whether they owned the hotel or not, but it was one of the rooms there. A midwife. In those days the Japanese obviously had midwives to take care of things.

I was too small, but my sister was already going to school. But I do remember they had a Chinese restaurant, I think it was Chinese. They went to school to study Chinese food, because they said if we start a restaurant we better know about it, so they became very familiar. They were always studying. When I would straighten things up, there were tons of cookbooks and tons of how to raise children books.

No, I have a younger brother. He writes books. But he taught architecture for, yeah, 43 years at the college.

My father said, "If you learn something you must share it," so that's how we grew up. If you learn something, share it. That's how it was. We never thought about being teachers so much. In fact, when my parents came out of camp, of course they taught before the war too, and sometimes some people were able to afford it and if they couldn't, that was okay. That's my parents' attitude. They felt you shouldn't be making money out of something you enjoy.

Evidently there was a larger Japanese community and they were building this little town. While they were there they were living... No, they had a home. They were renting a home on 8th Street, I believe. But the restaurant was also on 8th Street, because my sister was born.

Well, my sister's gone now, but she was, we felt of the three, my father always felt she was the brightest. Her name was Miyoko and it was written beautiful child. Miyo, the character Miyo is beautiful. She was so smart, but she was always ill for something. She was frail, I shouldn't say ill, but frail. She was a beautiful child so everybody paid attention to her. By the time I came, "This is a healthy kid, don't worry about her, we have to take care of Miyoko." She has hard time with her teeth and she's always frail, so everybody doted on her. That was fine. I thought, oh goodie, they're paying attention to my sister. I'd be outside sitting on the cars and playing with the boys next door. We'd be playing cowboys and Indians and I'm running around and my sister's being gentle and dramatic.

Well, she was 72, and I'm so sorry, she had a very serious case of arthritis, to the point where her hands were getting to be gnarled, as were her feet. But that wouldn't have happened... I have rheumatoid arthritis, but as you can see I'm quite healthy. In her case, it was that time if you got that special blood in your system, you got very ill, it was a flu. But they said if you catch it, they said it might get into your blood system and if that happens you're going to come down with really serious arthritis.

Well, it was Christmas Eve, my sister had been working and she came home and knew that the boys wanted certain toys, and she said, "I've just got to get this so they can open it in the morning," and she left and it was nighttime. I'm thinking Janette shouldn't be out at night, she shouldn't be out at night. Then the following week she had to go to the doctor.

I think she was pretty tough that she married the man she loved. Everybody's trying to arrange. Oh gosh, the Wakita, and we have to get someone special and all of that. These people were coming over with their representatives. We were in Boyle Heights at the time. I was in Fullerton with my parents and she wanted to go to school in this area, so she went to stay with my aunt and uncle in Boyle Heights. Then that's when the Miyazaki clan who lived catty-corner, and the good looking boys. There were nine kids and there were five guys.

I went to go in the summertime and during the summer I'm going, "Wow, Jan! There are five kids out there, five guys and they're all good looking too." I said, "There's a young one that's just right for me," I would say. We used to kid about it. So whenever we had to go shopping, we won't take the car, we'll walk in front of the house. I felt like I was the go between and I'd say, "Hi," on my sister's behalf and my sister would say, "Don't be so forward," and she'd grab me. They said, "Oh, it's okay. Hi, girls." Then they'd be out there showing their muscles. She'd married one of them.

Okay, his name is Osamu. Just one character, and it means peace. My father thought maybe he might grow up to be a peacemaker.

I don't know, something about it, because he, which was not popular, but he said, "We shouldn't go to war. Japan shouldn't go to war." In fact, before we went to camp, he brought the kids together and he said, "Now, America will not give us citizenship so we remain aliens and our country has to be Japan because we don't have any other country. But you folks were born here, therefore your loyalty runs and belongs to the United States." He told us that and he said, "Don't forget that," and I've never forgotten that.

Well, he became a teacher. He was teaching Dorsey High, but he studied architecture. That was his interest. So he majored in that and he said, "Gosh, kids ought to learn more stuff and I should make it easier for them because they always have to do all these sketches and stuff." So he started to the aids for the kids and they became handouts for him. But then someone said, "You should write it so that the kids could learn faster." So he started to write. He wrote and wrote and wrote. He was still finishing when he got married. He was asked to publish his book. He was at Dorsey High, they hired him there and he was teaching, and he was also the advisor for the senior group that prints the paper and things like...

He's very popular. He was good looking and girls just loved him. He was a wonderful dancer. He loved magic, so he was always doing magic. He says, "Okay, we're going to start class. Now what do you think this is?" And he'd do things like that, get attention, and pretty soon, "Now, we're going to study." And they studied. He was a great teacher.

I think it grew on us. We watched our parents teach and for them it was a matter of sharing and that's how we felt too.

I only spoke Japanese because it was J Town, everyone spoke Japanese. I don't know whether there was a concern there on my father's part, but to go and be immersed where there's no Japanese, it'd make you a better speaker for sure.

I think it's Majan. It was 517 South [inaudible 00:17:26]. No, 517 North [inaudible 00:17:30]. Then, my father even hired a Chinese artist and had four huge paintings done to put on the walls of China. What was curious for me, as a little kid, you're always curious, you look, and one had camels. Then another one had horses with merchants on their travels to the Silk Road. I think they were all Silk Road and then scenery.

One day you're looking at these things and you're saying, "How come the camel's walking like that, and the horse is running like that?" And my father said, "The camel goes two at a time, two feet, two feet, two feet, two feet. And the horse goes one, two, three, four." I said, "I didn't know that." Do you know,

my father was, he knew so many things just right off the top of his head. And it was very curious. I always asked him questions and he always had the answers. But then I realized he was so well read.

But when it came to cooking, I always asked my mother. Oh, she was a tremendous cook.

I have to tell you, it's chow mein and it's Chinese. But she could cook spaghetti that was terrific. And then before we could finish our dinner, she'd already had a little loaf of cake baked. She'd think about it and then she doesn't measure, just gets the flour out and this out. Puts it... and by end of dinner we'd had a cake.

Very. In fact, I've been criticized for that. People have said, "No wonder you're not married. Oh my gosh!" I was almost on a couple or three occasions. Yeah, the last one, after I met his relatives, okay, that cured me. I said, "I'd prefer these, my own, to being around these people." So at that moment I felt very badly for the young man because he was really a nice guy. I liked him too. But I thought, no, I can't deal with your people.

Let's see. Oh my gosh. I was crazy about... Don't put his name in. He was the handsomest kid in Fullerton. He came to visit somebody and he happened to go by our backyard. I said, "Hi, James. [inaudible 00:20:33]." And he came over to talk to me and I was just... I could hardly wait to go to school and say, "Guess who I saw yesterday afternoon."

Well, yeah. Except for the family. I used to type his papers for him because he was going to USC and he became very successful in business. One of the things I liked about him, he was very kind. But not only that, while he was in the service in Japan, he was studying-

Speaker 2:

Someone else.

Kayoko Wakita:

... shakuhachi with my father. Yeah. So it was very nice, my parents liked that too. They got along with him great. And he was interested in Japanese music. Also, I had met him in camp because I was learning to write Japanese characters in camp. And he was my teacher because he studied in Japan. When he was drafted, he ended up being an interpreter and doing some good things for the benefit of our service event.

As a result, since my father's teacher in Japan, the founder of the school that he belonged to, had two kids and the mother and they were all barely eating. And because of that, both children were ill malnutrition. One got so seriously sick, it affected his growth. The mother wrote my father about this and she said, "We're having such difficult, is there anything you can do?" They couldn't buy medicine. So my father asked my boyfriend at the time, he said, "George, do you think..." And he was up in rank by that time too so he had his jeep, and he said, "I'll get some medication and I'll go over there." And he took some food as well and saved the family. So we were very grateful for that.

They all called him Bud. Bob Litterman. His sister and I were friends, they were a very nice family. The moment the war broke out, he lied about his age, signed up the Navy and soon as he was on that boat and on the Pacific, it was sunk. I was heartbroken. He used to escort his sister and me to the movies. He was such a gentleman, such a kind and caring person. But he had such a conviction about he had to do something because we're at war, he had to go.

So we were living actually in the business building, which I don't think at the time was illegal. We managed to do that. My father fixed it up so we had a large closet and bedroom and living room.

Yeah, I was 13 and I remember I had such mixed feelings walking to school because I realized Dad said his country of birth is at war. And I looked just like him and I thought, it's going to happen to my brother too, he's going to the other school. I had very mixed feelings. One of the strangest experience I had was when one of the girls, we were all talking about the war and I felt terrible. It's like they look like you kind of thing, you feel terrible. And then they're talking about, "My dad's volunteering as soon as he takes care of his office and stuff."

Then there's another one saying, "My brother's talking about it too, but he's too young." And, "What are we going to do?" All this conversation is going on and you're feeling really tight around your chest because these are your friends, they're going to be going out to war in a lot of fear.

A girl I didn't know well at all came up to me and she said, "Let me look at your hand." And I said, "Sure." Oh no, she looked at it, took me, I put my hand out like this. Then she turned it over. She said, "I just wanted to see if you were the same color." And I thought, what a strange thing that was. She wanted to verify within herself that I was a different color, but it was the weirdest-

Speaker 2:

Degrading.

Kayoko Wakita:

... strangest feeling. I thought, what am I going to do?

No, not Ford, [inaudible 00:26:11] Junior. That's all they were talking about in class. You're thinking, they all look like me and they're talking about the enemy. I didn't really know what to do. Here I am with kids that we'd go out for a hamburger once or twice a week to the local...

Speaker 2:

Friends.

Kayoko Wakita:

Yeah. We played at the park and we'd roll down the hill and I was going to be a Girl Scout. I was in that process. It was heart wrenching. Finally when you come to your senses and things are... and then the news breaks that we have to go to camp and I have to tell them I have to leave school. The question was, "Why?" We have to go through this, and I have to tell them, "Because I look like..." They couldn't understand why I had to go away. "You're one of us. You're an American. Why do you have to go to camp?" This was over and over and over again. "Do you have to go? Why can't you stay? You have to finish school. You're going to be in the eighth grade."

It was the most insecure time of my life, but I just hated to leave my friends. Then I said, "Gosh, can somebody take care of our..." My father had a beautiful goldfish pond that he designed with a waterfall. We said, "We can't let them die because no one will care for them." So I asked my friends, I said, "Do any of you have a goldfish in your house?" And Anita Simon, who is a wealthy family, she said, "Oh, we've got a large pond. We can take care of them. Sure we can. Kay will take care of them. So tell me when we can come and pick it up and I'll have my mom drive up with the big jar and we'll take them. But why do you have to go?" We'd go through this business. While I was at camp, they sent me a set of clothes, my circle of friends. I just cried and cried. I still do.

But I had a family friend who was very good at making things and he was always gathering people's discarded toothbrush. It was plastic on the end, or whatever, the cellophane or whatever material they had. He would melt it and blend it and then he would make beautiful pins, lapel pins. He could do this.

So he said, "If you have any of these and your friends are tired with their brush, collect them for me." So he had a whole bunch of them. I said, "How much would you charge me if I ordered a bunch?" And he said, "Oh, Kay." I said, "You have to give me a price." And he said, "Gee, I have to... It's a lot of work." I said, "I know, so you better tell me." He said, "75 cents." So I said, "Yeah, can you make eight of them?" So I sent them to eight of my friends.

My father insisted, he said, "Enjoy the scenery. Look at that. That beautiful mountain. Look at that." Every morning we went out, my dad would say, "There's a little snow up there. In wintertime, we'll have more, but isn't that a gorgeous sight?" And then we turn the other way, and we had heard that the Indian reservation is nearby and that the Indian used to pray up there and that it is a burial site as well. So I also gave a little prayer.

My parents, we didn't go to church. Well, they were Buddhists. My father is zen. But he became a zen person after. He knew the Bible inside out, much more than I could ever... But he said when he was learning English, he didn't have anything to read so that's what he read. So he knew the Bible well and would tell me, because I was doing a study between Shakespeare and the great playwright of Japan because they were so similar. One was writing for a puppet theater, which was adopted into the kabuki eventually. And then here was Shakespeare. I was doing a comparison study when I was going to SC. I was talking about, "Gosh, this one story that Shakespeare has might fit as a comparison for this." My father pops up and says, "Well, part of it might fit, but a lot of it won't." Then he would cite what parts might. And I'm going, "Yeah." I feel very fortunate I had such unique parents.

Never. They never did. They said, "You choose whoever you want."

Well, with this one I had to get an okay because I was in high school yet and it was for the junior prom. I used to see him in my class and we used to talk to each other. I won't tell you his name because I think he's in J Town somewhere. Anyway, he used to work at the mess hall and we'd talk to each other and, "Hi, how are you? You going to the movies that's going to be outdoors? You want to go to the movies?" And I said, "Well, yeah, but I don't know, I have to ask my parents." He said, "Well, I'll come stop by your way."

He came and he brought me two cubes, two blocks of butter. He said, "I got them because I worked hard today and some of us were even given some extra stuff today." So he brought them over and wanted me to give them to my parents so they would okay the fact that he was going to be escorting me to... it was just to an outside bench. I said, "Everybody's out there already," like telling my folks. "Are you going to..."

"No. It's too hot, we'll stay in the house." So I said, "Well, this is so and so," and I introduced him, "How do you do? How do you do?" And I said, "He's going, so I'm going to go too because my friends are already out there." So we sat together.

Not really. No, they're not impressed because they said, "This isn't fair to the neighbors." But when you think about it, you had nothing in camp. The only time you ate was when the bell, the garbage bang, a top was hit by two rock or something and they called you to come and you get in line. Then, they had the heaviest, you think this is fairly heavy, it was maybe just a little heavier than that. You carry that and if you're small, like my mother was, it's hard. And they go boomp, boomp. Everything on one plate. Everything that ran went on one plate. So you go there and just sit there and it's all runny.

It used to bother my father. My father said, "Don't use that jam." And I said, "why?" And he said, "Because see that lady that's going around wiping the table? She wiped the jam lid with that." But I think the thing he did, he was strict, my father was very strict, but he said, "For every meal the family eats together, no matter what. I don't care where you are, we will wait for you. So you come and we sit together." I think that was the best thing, because we notice a lot of kids, because they have friends,



they start being buddies and let's all the buddies eat together, and they're losing contact with their parents. If they didn't then speak much Japanese to begin with, they spoke less. We always spoke Japanese at the table with my parents.

It turned out that up in administration when our food supply was delivered, some of them got a hold of it and was selling it to black market. So we didn't get our full ration. Since we found out about it, the mayor of our [inaudible 00:36:07] community went to protest and so did a number of other people behind him. But he was the leader, so he went. They arrested him and put him in the rig, so to speak, which was never used ever. But they had one. So he was in there. Okay, we thought that was unfair. All we wanted to do was ask why this was happening and to ask him to fix it. But no, he got arrested. So then he's in this bungalow and the people start to gather and start shouting about it. The next thing we know he's pulled out of there and taken to bishop and put in jail there for a couple of days.

Then the crowd got larger and they were starting to approach administration saying, "You bring him back. He has committed no crime and this is what happened." So they brought him back, put him in the [inaudible 00:37:13]. They put guards around it and the people by this time were pretty hot under the collar and particularly the young people. They notified all the blocks. I remember, we'd gone to bed, it was 9:00, but I was listening to the radio and I was in bed. My father was reading the paper and he was already reading in bed and we started to hear the mess hall bells, one, two, and then pretty soon all of them were. That was a signal that everyone is going to go and talk to administrators en masse. My father said, "Well, there are enough there. I'm not going to go. Yeah, I'm already in bed."

"Mr. Wakita, you better go. If you don't show up, you might have a problem. So you better get dressed." So then my father got dressed and I got dressed. We all got dressed and it was not too long after we heard this roar, a terrible scream and roar of people running and screaming and roaring. We heard the machine gun and people got shot from the back. The reason I can tell you all this is because a family friend was a nurse. She was one of the top nurses. She was a surgical nurse as a matter of fact. They didn't want her to go, but she had to because she was Japanese. But anyway, they called her first and said, "We want you to set up the hospital." All by herself. She ordered all the instruments, all the equipment. But she was this brilliant nurse and she did all that and she said, "I didn't even have a bed when I was doing this. We didn't have cots yet. I slept on the wooden floor with space in between while they were doing this."

But she basically built the hospital. Then, we had no doctors, so the intern guys that were just learning to be doctors or were going to be doctors almost were assigned to us. They had never done operations or anything. So she was it. She was the one that had to guide them on how to do it, what tools to use and all this.

Some of them got shot and they were... The couple, we knew one couple that were right across from us, he was shot in the leg, from the back of course. We were so worried because they just had a baby and we were just doting on this cute baby. He was in the hospital of course, and we heard all the sounds of the ambulance coming down the hill. Then pretty soon they'd close up, another one down, going up. There were a number of them.

Yeah, you might. But my father always told us, "Things will happen, but it's the word gaman. We have to grin and bear it. So learn to grin and bear it. It'll make you stronger. But if we don't, we won't survive." And that's what you do.