

“My Return to the Konko Faith”  
By Eri Yasuhara  
Tenchi Kane No Kami Grand Ceremony Sermon  
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おめでとうございます！ Congratulations to the Chicago Church on your Tenchi Kane No Kami Grand Ceremony!

When Takeuchi Sensei asked me to give the sermon on this auspicious occasion, I was of course honored but also surprised and taken aback. After all, I am not a minister, nor am I used to giving sermons—though my family would probably say I like to lecture! But Sensei suggested that I share some of my personal experiences in the Konko Faith, especially how I came to be a Konko believer. And I thought, well, that I can do! And as I pondered what I might talk about, I decided I also wanted to tie my story to one of my favorite teachings, which is:

「疑いを放れて広き真の大道を開き見よ。わが身は神徳の中に生かされてあり。」  
(理解 III 神訓 1-2)

In English, this would be something like: **“Banish doubt, open your eyes, and behold the vast, great way of truth and sincerity. You are living in the midst of Divine Virtue”** (Gorikai III, Shinkun 1-2; not an official translation). This is a teaching that has helped me more than once through life. What it said to me was, “Stop worrying! You’re making so many requests, asking for help with this and that, but stop and look around you. You are ALREADY receiving so many divine blessings!” And the reason this teaching spoke to me, is that I am a worrier. I tend to worry about everything, so the phrases “Banish doubt” and especially “You are ALREADY living in the midst of Divine Virtue,” meaning “you are already receiving many, many blessings,” really helped me to stop fretting about things and trust Kami-sama more.

And what are some of these blessings that we are already living in the midst of? Here are just a few examples.

- Every day, without fail, whether we ask for it or not, the sun rises, and a new day begins.
- As the earth rotates around the sun, we get seasons—different kinds of seasons, depending on where in the world we live, but seasons that give us renewal of life.
- What about our bodies? Each has trillions of cells that are doing one specific thing that keeps us alive. If even one cell stops doing its job, the consequences can be catastrophic.
- Take digestion: If you think about it, it's nothing short of a miracle that our bodies can take in food, turn it into fuel and nutrients that we need, and then get rid of the waste material that the body does not need. Do we ever thank Kami-sama for allowing us to have bowel movements, for example?

These are just some of the many, many blessings that surround us and allow us to live, every minute of every day. They are blessings that we usually don't even think about and so, unfortunately, it doesn't occur to us to thank Kami-sama for them.

But I also thought about this teaching in a slightly different way; that is, in the sense of being surrounded by blessings that we might not have recognized as blessings at the time, but when we look back, we see that Kami-sama was actually taking very good care of us and giving us incredible blessings after all. Such realizations happen especially when we get to a certain age and start to look back on our lives—like yours truly!

So let me tell you how I came to be a Konko believer and how Kami-sama was showering me with divine blessings all throughout my life, even though I didn't realize it.

My faith has come to me through my mother and her mother (my grandmother), who is originally from Wakayama Prefecture. That's where she

and my mother first became Konko believers. So in that sense, I'm a third-generation believer who "grew up in the Faith." But in another sense, I feel like I'm actually fairly new to Konkokyo, because I took a very, very long detour before "coming back" to this Faith.

My family immigrated from Japan in the early 1950s—mother, father, grandmother, my younger sister, and me. We came here in order to be united with my grandfather, my mother's father, who was a fairly typical Issei, and who had been forcibly removed from the West Coast and imprisoned in government "internment camps" along with 120,000 other Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II. He was imprisoned in Arkansas, then Tule Lake and Manzanar.

After moving around a bit, we settled in San Gabriel, which is a suburb about 10 miles east of Los Angeles' Little Tokyo. There were a few other Japanese American families in the area, but not that many. One of them was the Takeda family—my sister and I grew up with the "Takeda girls," who were the grandchildren of Goto Sensei.

Like most of the other Japanese Americans in the area, I was enrolled for first grade in the local public school. Something happened during that first year, and my parents pulled me out of that school. I have no memory of why this happened, and don't know to this day if there was some sort of "racial" incident, or perhaps my parents just didn't like the school, or what. But the upshot was that, starting in the second grade, I was sent to a Catholic school that was very close to our house, and my sister also followed me there when she was old enough to start school. One thing my parents said later, was that so-called "mission schools," that is, Catholic and Christian schools in general, had very good reputations in Japan for academic rigor and discipline. That may or may not have had something to do with the move.

In any case, I found myself the lone non-Catholic child in a Catholic parochial school being taught by nuns. And when you're that age, seven or eight, the most important thing in life is to be accepted by your peers, which means

being just like everyone else and not “different.” It was bad enough that I was the only ethnic Asian in a school with only Caucasian and Hispanic students. I was also the only non-Catholic—I wasn’t even Christian! So, naturally, I told my parents that I wanted to be baptized a Catholic.

You can imagine how this shocked my mother and grandmother. I doubt my father was that upset, though he had also become a member of the Konkō Church of Hollywood when we settled in Southern California. While he was living in Japan, I imagine that he had the usual Japanese tolerance for and non-committal attitude toward religion, participating in both Buddhist rites and Shinto ceremonies, especially festivals. My grandfather was a member of the Salvation Army but had changed to Konkōkyo because he felt strongly that “it was not good to have two different religions in the same household,” and he knew how strong my grandmother’s faith in Konkōkyo was.

My mother immediately consulted their minister, who was Goto Sensei, about my request. Understandably, he discouraged it. But I guess I kept asking and insisting, because next, my mother consulted Fukuda Sensei of the San Francisco Church. At the time he was called “Bishop Fukuda” but today would be called Chief Administrative Minister, or CAM. He was also one of the most respected Konkō ministers in North America. And the answer he gave, relayed to me much later by my mother, has always stayed with me. To paraphrase, he said that “this is a Christian country. I think it will be much easier for your daughter to make her way in this society if she became a Christian. So I think it’s fine for her to be baptized a Catholic.”

No matter how many times I recall this story, I am astonished by it. Can you imagine a high-ranking minister of any religion saying it’s OK to switch to another faith? But such was, and is, the tolerance and respect for other Faiths that is a hallmark of Konkōkyo.

So, I became a Catholic. And I spent something like 12 years as a Catholic, a really strict, dyed-in-the-wool, uncompromising Catholic. One of the nuns

who taught us once said that I was trying to be more Catholic than the Pope!  
And she was right.

Eventually, in my first or second year of college, I grew very disillusioned by the Catholic Church, and I left. Just to clarify, it wasn't the Catholic vision of God that disappointed me, but the institution of the Church. And for the next twenty years or so, I considered myself to have “no religion” at all—an attitude that upset my mother very much, unfortunately.

Still, I sort of “kept in touch” with Konkokyo. When I was still a child, I went where my parents wanted me to go, which included monthly services at the Konko Church of Hollywood, then Gardena. I must admit, though, that when I was deep in the throes of Catholicism, I resented having to go to Konko services and unfortunately exhibited that resentment in my attitude; it's something I deeply regret today. By the time I was in college, I think—at least I hope! —I had developed a more respectful attitude toward the Konko Faith, even when I considered myself to have no religion at all; this was partly because of my grandmother and mother. I also willingly participated in various special services and knew that whenever there was to be some significant event in my life, such as a trip, my mother made an *otodoke* (mediation request) to church, and an *orei mairi* (visit of thanks) afterwards. When my father couldn't or wouldn't drive to Gardena, I drove my mother and grandmother, whenever I could.

So, my “return” to the Konko Faith was gradual—no sudden moment of inspiration, no lightning bolt from the sky, not even an “aha moment.” I think it was just an accumulation of the influence of my mother and grandmother (even after her death in 1985), both of whom had a very, very strong faith and who were not afraid to talk about it—though they did so very diplomatically. And they told stories of faith practices that had resulted in great blessings, as well as examples of irreverences that had unfortunate results.

As I grew older, I also developed a sort of “intellectual” or almost “scholarly” interest in this Faith, given what, to me, were some very interesting teachings

in comparison to what I knew about Western Christianity. As someone who had a professional interest in Japanese language, literature, and culture, I was also interested in what felt to me were some very “Japanese” features of Konkokyo.

It’s hard to say when and how, exactly, I “came back” to the Konko Faith, but I did. One “milestone moment” in my own mind was the KCNA conference of 2000, the joint conference with KMH that was held in Hilo, Hawaii, when the fifth Konko-sama came. I had taken a new, higher position at a different university that was to start in the Fall, and I determined that the best way to start it would be to attend the conference which was being held several weeks before that. One of the most moving moments of my life was attending the Opening Service with Konko-sama leading all the prayers in his excellent English. I had been responsible for translating some of the prayers that he was leading.

Many, many years later, my mother said something that surprised me and at the same time made me incredibly grateful for Kami-sama’s great blessings that had guided my life. She said she was glad that I had become a Catholic! I was shocked, of course. After all the heartache I had caused her, after all those years I had rejected her beliefs and willfully spent outside the circle of her faith, this was the last thing I thought I’d ever hear from her lips. Naturally, I asked her why, and she said, “Because you learned how to pray.” I had to admit that that was true. Whether in church or at home, at formal services or in informal “conversations with God,” my life as a devout Catholic convert was filled with prayer. I suppose I should not have been surprised that she had noticed; after all, she was my mother.

There were other ways in which my years as a Catholic “prepared me,” in a manner of speaking, for my life as a Konko believer. As mentioned earlier, I at first developed an intellectual curiosity about Konkokyo, given what I had learned about Catholic theology. I found it quite illuminating to compare some of the differences between the two Faiths and their approaches to such questions as the nature of the Divine, the relationship between God and

humans, etc. Usually, I found the Konko teachings on such matters more attractive than the Christian approach.

Some of you know that I have been privileged to work on translating some of the documents and prayers of the Konko Faith into English. In this work, I have found my understanding and knowledge of Western religious culture and language—one product of those years as a Catholic—to be helpful. I am careful to avoid language that is too redolent of Western Christianity, but at the same time, I find my familiarity with that language and culture useful.

So, at this stage of my life, as I look back on the paths that have brought me to this point, it is so clear to me that Kami-sama has been showering me with blessings every step of the way. I just didn't realize it and so didn't express the gratitude I should have.

**“Banish doubt, open your eyes, and behold the vast, great way of truth and sincerity. You are living in the midst of Divine Virtue.”**

I hope we can all take this teaching to heart, so that we can rid ourselves of doubt and uncertainty and realize that we are already living amidst the countless divine blessings of Kami.

Thank you for your attention!

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