

A Farewell to Prof. Masako Notoji

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1993, and I'm sitting in the middle of a row in the middle of a room somewhere in the middle of Ritsumeikan University, a little overawed, a little stunned even, attending the Japanese Association for American Studies annual meeting for the first time. The English-language workshop session is drawing to a close and it's time for questions and comments. The moderator responds to a hand raised in the back row and I hear the self-introduction "Masako Notoji, University of Tokyo." An intimidatingly articulate and confident question follows, neatly developing the theme of the session: I swivel round in my chair, drawn to this voice and engaged by the question. Aha, I think, waking up.

2013, and I'm sitting at my desk, writing this farewell, wondering how these twenty years have passed so quickly. I'm thinking back over times shared at Komaba, at America Gakkai sessions, at editorial board meetings, dinners, parties, on drives, in gardens, and up mountains, reflecting on my great good fortune not only to have known Professor Notoji, not only to have had opportunities to work with her, but to have shared so many good times with her — along with quite a few not-so-good times that would have been a lot worse without her.

For two decades, the essence of Notoji sensei for me has been that she reliably, inevitably has always known, and has always shown me, *how to do it*, whatever the "it" of the moment happens to be. She knows how to deal gracefully with any situation, no matter how alarming or how absurd. She knows — for example — how to ask the perfect question in a seminar: the one which will make the speaker feel good and at the same time get the discussion going. She knows how to make the perfect speech, the perfect kanpai — appropriate, amusing, engaging, not too long, not too short. She knows how to engage an audience. She knows how to do meetings: when to intervene, when to bide her time, when to tolerate digression, when to get things back on track. She knows how to work all night and survive the next day with 20-minute naps between classes and meetings and more meetings. She knows how to choose her battles and deploy her talents. She knows how to wrangle paperwork and bureaucracy and how to negotiate and when to give up and when to persist. She knows how to host a party, get visitors relaxed, really do and really *be* international.

And she knows how to edit. Whatever I know of the sensitive art of working on other people's academic English, I learned it from Professor Notoji. In the years when I was lucky

enough to work with her on the editorial board of the *Japanese Journal of American Studies*, she would cheerfully spend hours sitting with me, co-editing papers, negotiating every point, defending the author from my over-energetic desire to improve, improve, improve, fix, improve. I would be champing to change something; she would ask “is it absolutely necessary?” and I would usually have to admit that, well, no, it wasn’t. It wasn’t a matter of preventing a disaster; it was just a case of buffing things up a bit. “Then let’s leave it as it is,” she’d say. And in that way, sentence by sentence, she would save the original voice of the author from the trappings of my over-enthusiastic red pen. Twenty some years later, I still go through the same routine, now with her voice in my head and these days not with a red pen but with the “comment and highlight changes” function on Word. I still go through a document asking myself, line by line, “is this change really necessary?”

What to say, in conclusion? First, that I hope and pray that this is a conclusion only to an essay, nothing more. And second . . . well, that after more than twenty years of collegiality and friendship (and explanations and help and encouragement and cups of tea), what it comes down to is just this: for twenty years since that day at Ritsumeikan, “it’s been a pleasure and a privilege.”

This is a revised version of an essay originally written for the America-ka alumni bulletin, *Uzushio*.