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DEAR MISS FUKUDA

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Miss Naomi Fukuda and I exchanged many letters.

I still remember the late autumn day when I first met Miss Fukuda. I walked up the hill in front of International House in Roppongi, Tokyo, rather anxiously wondering what kind of lady Miss Fukuda would be. I was a senior at Keio University's School of Library and Information Science. The Dean, the late Professor Takahisa Sawamoto, told me to go and meet with her. It was 1971.

Miss Fukuda was waiting for me in the lobby. I was surprised how short she was. I had to bend forward toward her to catch her eye. Immediately, this question came to me "How could such a tiny lady be so successful in America?" In my view, everything about America was big and vast—big houses and cars, endless highways, wide-open spaces, etc. She seemed to be disproportionately small for someone from such a country. After formal greetings she moved her head and surveyed me up and down, from the top of my head to my toes several times. "So, you want to go to America . . . ?" She led me into the cafeteria where we met Mr. Yukio Fujino, the Librarian of I-House at that time. They started talking to each other mostly ignoring me, which gave me ample time to observe Miss Fukuda. Her feet were dangling from the chair under the table without touching the floor. She was swinging them back and forth as she talked. She had very short black hair. Her round eyes were witty and shining. She had unique lips and she stuck out her chin when she talked. Then I noticed how she dressed. Her dress was printed with colorful flowers—a very unusual choice for Japanese ladies of her age in those days, especially among librarians. She wore large earrings and a gaudy necklace around her chest. I felt America. She represented America to me at that very moment.

I passed her audition and started my career as a Japanese librarian at University of Maryland the following spring with her recommendation. Miss Fukuda had been the librarian of its East Asia Collection, but had moved to University of Michigan by the time I arrived. Mr. Jack Siggins, currently the University Librarian of George Washington University, was the head of the East Asia Collection when I arrived, but I still felt Miss Fukuda's presence everywhere in that library.

My responsibilities were cataloging, reference and collection development. University of Maryland had huge cataloging backlogs of Japanese publications originally submitted to SCAP's Civil Censorship Detachment from the years of the Allied Occupations. In fact, many of the materials were still in large wooden boxes and stored in the basement of library. With the Chinese librarian, Mr. K. Y. Fan, I pulled nails from some of those boxes with pliers then cataloged them.

Card catalogs! It was still the age of neatly filed piles of 3 x 5 cards, and the smell of them! Young as I was and being fresh out of library school, I soon thought that I found some cataloging "mistakes" made by my predecessors. I wrote to Miss Fukuda complaining about the number of mistakes I had found. She immediately replied and scolded me "When you think you have found a mistake in a catalog, don't make a big fuss about it. Instead, adjust the mistake quietly and discreetly. Respect your predecessors' works as they did their best at the given time. In fact, they may not even be mistakes, they may merely be different interpretations. Consider a catalog as a living thing. It keeps on evolving and you can contribute to improve it." She added that cataloging indeed is creative work. That idea was very fresh to me.

Those were the days when there was no Internet or inexpensive long distance telephone calls. Receiving letters was the highlight of the day for me. Miss Fukuda frequently sent me letters that delighted me. She always used tasteful envelope and stationary. Her small and tidy handwritten words were with full of warmth and insights: "As a librarian you need to be a well-balanced person. Be careful not to be a monomaniac like some catalogers become. Have open eyes to the world."

Soon, however, I became bored with the monotony of cataloging works and desired to do something more exciting. Miss Fukuda told me: “A beginning librarian should do cataloging work first. You will hold many books in your hands on wide variety of subjects, many of which you would never think about picking up otherwise. You will be forced to turn the pages of those books and read the contents, whether you like it or not, and learn about new things without noticing it while at work. That accumulation of knowledge will become your blood and meat someday.”

When I thought about having the book vendors discount their prices to my library she quickly responded to me. “Do not treat vendors harshly. They need a fair share of profit for them to run their business properly. Librarians, book vendors, publishers, printers, authors—we all depend on and help each other. We are all parts of this book industry circle.” I came to realize the truth of this statement when I later published my first book.

“Never say ‘I am busy’. It means that you are not capable.” I liked the idea and decided not to say that. “If you look busy people may think twice before approaching you to ask questions. As a reference librarian you should always look welcoming and be ready to take their questions. Relax and smile.”

“Try to be in the stacks as much as possible and learn your book collection, especially, reference books.”

“Do not attempt to become a scholar. Librarians and scholars are different. Librarians have a different mission. You are there to assist scholars. The scholar is a specialist, the librarian is a generalist and all rounder. You need to know wider subject fields.”

Every month, or so, a special letter arrived from her in which I found bills totaling \$20.00, or sometimes \$40.00. “Use this money and buy yourself something good to eat. I know you are not eating well.”

When my term at University of Maryland ended I wrote to Miss Fukuda saying, “I am going back to Japan as it seems that there’s no job for me in the U. S.” It was a polite way of telling her that I was quitting being a librarian as, actually, there was a job waiting for me at a major international business firm in Japan.

“Wait a minute. There’s a position open at the University of Chicago. Send an application immediately!” At that moment, I regretted that I wrote her that “no job” excuse. I ended up moving to Chicago anyway. I could not refuse her. However, I was bit disappointed as I had always wanted to be an exciting international businessman. In retrospect, it was a good decision. I love my occupation and I am glad that I listened to her advice and spent my entire career as a librarian, instead of being a businessman and always chasing after monetary profit. It was also Miss Fukuda who was very influential in my next move to Berkeley.

After her retirement from the University of Michigan she moved to Hawaii where her sister lived. She kept on sending me letters and often came to the Mainland and visited me at Berkeley. In the library, she sat on a quiet corner and worked on her next bibliography all day long. Her legs were still swinging from her chair. She always carried a stack of 3 x 5 library cards, on which she hand-copied bibliographic information from books. “When making a bibliography you must actually hold and examine each book you are going to describe. Never quote from other people’s work.”

Hers was the era before computers. In fact, she resented computers rather bitterly. “Nowadays, everybody is ‘computer, computer. . .’ without knowing about books. I cannot trust and respect a librarian who does not read books.”

Miss Fukuda came to my wedding with Mr. Masaei Saito, then Japanese librarian at University of Michigan. I guess she sort of treated me as her son, as she did not have any children. I will never forget the wedding day when both of them showed up in front of me full of smiles.

For over twenty years, Miss Fukuda kept on sending me a cute Japanese calendar booklet as a new year’s gift. Then, one year, it stopped arriving . . . and so did her letters to me.