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written by Lauren Heaton*

The sound of language has always fascinated Harold Wright. From the honky-tonk twang of his kinfolk down in the Ohio hills, to the staccatoed precision of the Japanese of Mount Fuji, he has made it his life work to build bridges between two seemingly opposite corners of the world.

Wright retired last week from 34 years of teaching Japanese language and culture at Antioch College, but, at 74, he is still in overdrive on his mission to experiment with the music of language.

It was the sounds of his granddaddy strumming the banjo and telling stories on the front porch that first attracted Wright to language, he said. His grandfather, known as the banjo-picking king of Ohio, told hilarious tales in a dialect Wright recognized as curiously different from the English he heard in his Dayton elementary classroom. As an urban Appalachian, Wright straddled the divide between his rural roots and his city upbringing, always listening for the common chords between them.

Poetry, with its musical meter and breakable rules, appealed to Wright, who particularly identified with the Beat writers. When he joined the U.S. Navy and was sent to New Orleans in the late 1940s, the sounds of the Cajun South lured him to the Bohemian French Quarter, where he spent his evenings in the waterfront bars listening to exotic tales of sailors and their journeys to the Orient, he said.

“There, amidst every evil port cities are known for, I would sit around and listen to these old guys tell about their travels to Shanghai, jumping ship and getting tattooed in Hong Kong,” he said. “Then, I knew I wanted to be a world traveler.”

Wright first set foot in Japan in 1952 as a Seabee during the Korean War. Surrounded by the new sounds of a language he couldn't understand, he felt a strange familiarity with the place, he said. Watching men in the shipyards who could join curved wood with straight wood in a way the craftsmen in his family never could, he recalled, he knew that the Japanese had something to teach him.

Karmic events have had a way of guiding Wright's life, he said, and one of the most memorable was the day he met Aunt Suki, the relative of his first wife, Kumiko. Not yet proficient with the Japanese alphabet, Wright went to meet Aunt Suki one night by the light of the full moon. She told him she had been waiting for him for 25 years, and that his path was to build bridges between his country and hers. Aunt Suki showed him photos of people he didn't know and laughed, telling him that someday he would, he recalled. Wright became a scholar of classical Japanese poetry. On a trip to Japan during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, he was commissioned by the government to translate Emperor Meiji's poetry, which would be distributed to all Olympic guests. When he went to collect the manuscripts at the royal shrine, Wright said, he saw a photo he recognized as Emperor Meiji and realized Aunt Suki had indeed been counting on him to facilitate cultural understanding between the U.S. and Japan.

Wright received his second karmic call when he came to Antioch in 1973 to teach Japanese. In the early 1980s, when Antioch refused his request to start an off-campus program in Japan for

lack of funds, he took a leave of absence without pay, organized a group of students to go on co-op teaching English, and they all met in Japan for a semester abroad.

Now Wright is known on the Antioch campus as the founder of the Antioch Education Abroad program to Japan and also the first Antioch faculty member ever to go on co-op.

He introduced the students to Japan, while he worked as a translator. When Wright learned the students were making more money teaching than he was translating, he had the students introduce him to their employer, the Nissan corporation, and he was hired to teach English at a much higher salary, he said.

Wright returned to Japan many times with a Fullbright fellowship, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and other grants to translate poetry, and in 1986 the Shambala Press published his first collection, *Ten Thousand Leaves: Love Poems from the Manyoshu*. Wright had not only a scholar's eye but also a good ear for language, both of which are necessary to maintain the form, rhyme and syllabic count from one language to another, he said.

“I'm very fussy about what makes a good translation,” said Wright, who writes an occasional column in the News that includes a translation of a Japanese poem. “You're dealing with imagery, and you've got to be familiar with the culture to comprehend it and be comfortable in your own language to capture it.”

In addition to publishing eight other volumes of translated poetry, Wright has invented several forms of his own that, he said, represent another bridge between cultures. He combines Shakespeare's sonnet with the Japanese choka love poem to get what he calls the “chonnet,” a 14-line poem with each line alternating between five and seven syllables and ending in a couplet. Always a professor in addition to his other interests, Wright continued to usher students back and forth between Japan and America. On one of his trips abroad, he attended a reading of a Japanese translation of the Beat poets at Kyoto Seiko University and thought the funky, liberal college would be a great match for Antioch. In 1991, he established an exchange program between the two schools that continued until last year.

Since retiring, Wright said, he has fully taken on all of the projects he had set aside in order to teach. Each morning before breakfast, he sits down to write for several hours. He chooses between a collection of his own poetry called *Haiku, Triku, Tanka and More*, a book of translations of his favorite poems called *A Story of Over 1,300 Years of Japanese Poetry*, and a memoir called *Temples and Truck Stops*.

He and his wife, Jonatha, also host a weekly storytelling group at their home in Yellow Springs when they're not traveling in their new RV to various storytelling festivals and fundraisers around the country. Japanese stories as well as Appalachian stories enter into their repertoire as another manifestation of Wright's cross-cultural identity.

After all, it was in Japan, sitting around a camp fire drinking sake and telling nostalgic stories about the good old days, that, Wright said, he was flooded with memories of the good old days on his grandfather's porch. He had traveled overseas only to be called back home to Dayton to

continue building his bridges, he said.

Wright fancies himself a “Jappalachian,” a term coined by a newspaper reporter some years ago. The two worlds couldn’t be more contrary, and yet both have shaped Wright and continue to propel his work.

“Sometimes I have to tell Jonatha to save me from my crazy life,” he said.

“But somehow, the sounds of language, the sounds of Japanese, it all fits together in my head.”