The Japanese term “mono no aware” represents the essence of a cultural aesthetic sensibility prevalent in Japan, which can be loosely translated as “finding the beauty in the sadness at the transience of all beautiful things.” In most cultures, there is a consciousness among the “elders” of the necessity of preserving what is culturally significant and meaningful, and therefore a dedication to transmitting cultural heritage to the next generation.

When we presented on the theme of “Generations: the Transience and Permanence of What is Transmitted, Shared, and Remembered,” we did not read a paper. Rather, we entered into a discussion arising from our creative work, the resonance of depth psychology understanding shared by a grandmother and grandson—a 71-year-old psychoanalyst who is a writer and a 21-year-old college senior who is majoring in psychology and who is also a writer.

The genesis of our panel presentation was a conversation between the two of us, and the spirit of that conversation carried over into the presentation. We were talking about the theme of the conference, transience and permanence, and what we thought had been transmitted to us through the generations. Joseph found himself reminiscing about how his taste and interest in music was formed. In a music appreciation class in college, the instructor asked the students to write a short essay about their favorite music, the quality that music possessed, and how their taste was formed. Joseph wrote that he liked lyrical music.

Merle has a deep abiding love for the music of the British Isles, and for Irish music in particular, and listens most Saturdays to traditional Irish music on WFUV, the Fordham University radio station, from 8:00 am to 1:00 pm. She also has a large collection of Irish music CDs. Joseph described listening to that radio station in his grandmother’s house most Saturdays, enthralled by the lyricism of the music. He met his sweetheart, Grace, when they both were in high school. Grace is a singer/songwriter, with a range of styles
that can be funky, soulful, blues-y – and very lyrical. Joseph recognizes that something he was fascinated by when very young continues to fascinate him, and is part of the initial fascination he had with Grace – a fascination that has matured into a deep and meaningful love between the two of them.

Something else arose, that linked Irish music with Joseph and Merle’s love of writing. Joseph had written a short story, “Charlie Boy,” and gave it to Merle and her husband Les, Joseph’s grandfather, to read. Les also is a writer. “Charlie Boy” is a first person narrative, from the perspective of a man in his early 60’s, terminally ill and finally reconciling himself to his brother Charlie’s decision to join the army, a decision made years ago, when Charlie was in his late teens. The story addresses serious themes, like the culture of war in a family with a military history, the function of memory, and forgiveness.

Merle was enthralled by the story, and stunned by the ability of a 21-year-old young man to enter so deeply into the experience, feelings, thoughts, and worldview of a man in his 60’s. It seemed simply uncanny, as if he were channeling someone whose story needed to be told. Because Merle was impressed with the power of the story, she asked Joseph to choose a passage to read at the presentation, and, indeed, he did so. Merle, and audience members, had the experience of hearing a terminally ill man in his 60’s tell his story, in his powerful words, channeled through a vital 21-year-old man.

Joseph pointed out that the title of the story is taken from a song, “Charlie Boy,” by The Lumineers, a song in which someone begs Charlie Boy not to go to war, and that the song itself has a quality similar to the Irish music that Merle loves. The Lumineers are an American folk-rock band, and, of course, a lot of American folk music has Irish roots.

Then Merle told Joseph that Merle’s mother Sima Lee, Joseph’s great-grandmother, a Polish Jew born outside Warsaw, and who immigrated to New York City in 1920, after World War I, when she was 10 years old, was enthralled by Irish culture. She listened to classical music and American folk music, loved traditional Irish music, and was enthusiastic about Irish writers, particularly Sean O’Casey. In 1952, when Merle was 10 years old, the same age her mother had been when her mother arrived in New York City, her mother told her that Merle could paint murals on her bedroom walls if she
wished. Merle indeed wished. And so she painted a scene of what she imagined Ireland looked like, green grassy hills, and an Irish girl dancing a jig. Merle heard the music in her mind when she looked at her mural.

Something has been transmitted to both of us from the generations past, and continues to be transmitted. The psychoanalyst-grandmother’s mother was the daughter of a woman who published essays in the Yiddish press in pre-World War I Poland. Her father, who was working class, had a high school diploma, and was self-educated and highly cultured, had a great desire to be a writer, wrote poetry, began a novel, and loved literature, and recited Shakespeare’s sonnets at the drop of a hat. Joseph’s grandmother’s daughter Rebecca, who is the grandson’s mother, earned an MSW, worked in a victim’s services agency in a big city, and has written novels, short stories, film scripts, and a musical. Merle’s son Dominic, who is Rebecca’s brother and Joseph’s uncle, has written and acted in a one-man play produced in Tribeca. Both grandmother and grandson write fiction with an emphasis on the inner life of the characters.

What has been transmitted through the generations, and how? DNA? Chromosomes? Of course there may be a biological factor involved. Family culture? Definitely. Both grew up in households where books were family treasures, and literature, as well as all the other arts, were considered essential to a meaningful life.

In transmission of cultural heritage, there is a sense of the transience of all beautiful things. The people themselves, who hold cultural values, are mortal, and, therefore, transient. They know, whether consciously or unconsciously, that they have been given a gift, and that they hold the hopes of the generation that has passed. They too hope to see something of what they value, and, indeed, who they are, transmitted to the next generation.

In the dialogue between grandmother and grandson, they explored the themes in their own fiction, themes that address transience and permanence. When they decided to do a joint presentation, Joseph and Merle discovered that they each had written a short story, each story very different from the other. Joseph’s story had a college student as a main character, and largely took place in the woods. Merle’s story had a suburban housewife and mother, circa 1970’s, as a main character, and largely took place in a
house in the suburbs. And yet, both stories had a startling common element – both stories were about the main character discovering a portal into another, sacred world.

Joseph and Merle also discussed their own “need” to write, to preserve something that might otherwise be “transient”, their own ways of looking at the world, their ways of resonating with and entering into the experience of others, their sense that what they have to say, and the way they say it, is important. Writing fiction can be understood as a way of giving a sense of permanence to the transient.

Merle became very aware that her sense of her family’s values and traditions were very important to her. Merle’s background is Jewish – her mother was a Polish Jew and her father was born in New York City of recently arrived Jewish immigrants from Byelrus, now Belarus. Beyond ethnicity, she values what had been her parents’ liberal/progressive outlook, and their philosophy. Her father had described himself as a pantheist, essentially in the tradition of Baruch Spinoza, that the material world was imbued with the divine. Both parents valued culture, and education for its own sake. Although neither had gone to college, and Merle’s mother had only three years of formal education, they both were self-educated, well-read, and highly cultured.

Joseph is a cultured, well-educated young man. He embodies the values that Merle’s parents possessed.

Joseph, and for that matter, all of Merle’s grandchildren, comes from a mixed ethnic identity background. Joseph, his brother Anthony, and his sister Leah, have a Jewish, Italian, and Sicilian ethnic heritage. Their cousins Hailey and Kane have a Jewish, Italian, and Irish ethnic heritage. Their cousin Nicky has a Jewish, Italian, Irish, and Puerto Rican ethnic heritage. Merle found herself wondering, how much of their Jewish heritage is important to them. What are they aware of in terms of their Jewish background?

Yet Merle determined that what truly mattered was the depth of their souls, the way they relate to others, and the values that they hold.
As a child, Merle was greatly influenced by reading Yiddish writers, translated into English. She read “Bontche the Silent”, ("Bontche Shweig") by I.L. Perelman. She read “Tales of the Old Country” by Sholem Aleichem. She learned Yiddish folk songs and lullabies.

The “old country” traditions, the language, the music, the literature, may not be as resonant to the younger generations, to Merle’s children and grandchildren. That is the transient.

The deeper values, the talents, the ways of relating, are ever-present, in new forms. That is the permanent.

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