Minutes of WTB Monthly Meeting

March 13, 2016 at InterFaith Works, 1010 James Street

About 25 women entered a room that had been rearranged to simulate a Japanese tea room. At the front of the room was a screen next to a simple area covered by a tatami mat. Two low panels in natural colors framed a back corner where a kama, pot filled with hot water awaited. A small bowl of moss rested on a low stool in the front corner. We sat in chairs arranged in a semi-circle or on yoga mats on the floor.

President Betty Lamb called the meeting to order at 3:04 PM. Our Mission Statement and Safe Place Declaration were read. Betty then introduced our presenter, Maggie Simpson from Cortland, NY. Maggie formally studied the Urasenke style tea ceremony in California for one year. Over the past ten years she has continued her study and made several trips to Japan to procure implements. She performed the tea ceremony with Tomomi Yoshida, former owner of the Roji Tea Lounge in Syracuse. Drawn by the beautiful simplicity of this ritual and the philosophy behind it, Maggie has shared the Japanese tea ceremony with many interested groups like ours.

Wearing a lovely pink peach kimono, Maggie opened with some remarks about the nature and background of the Japanese tea ceremony. Sen no Rikyu, the first Japanese tea master, created all the movements more that 500 years ago. At that time it was practiced and studied by samurai. Even mortal enemies would have tea together, leaving animosity outside the tea house along with their swords, focusing on the stillness and quietness of a special moment together. At one time only men performed the tea ceremony; now it is mainly performed by women and is considered one of those things a proper Japanese girl should know. The idea surrounding tea is mindfulness, being fully in the moment, appreciating each detail of a unique experience created by the host for his guests. Each tea room has a tokonoma, a place of honor where something very simple and lovely is displayed such as a scroll or a flower. Maggie brought a small, rustic bowl of moss from her garden for the tokonoma. If more than one guest is being served, a designated head guest will do most of the responding to the person serving tea and will sit closest to the tokonoma. Maggie will be making a thin green tea. It is made from powered matcha tea and whipped with a whisk carved from solid bamboo.

In response to questions, Maggie explained that the idea is to leave all your worries outside the tea room. Tea houses are typically in roji gardens; along the path is a stone vessel where guests purify their hands and mouths with water to wash away the outside world before entering. The tea ceremony is a choreographed ritual with over 150 moves that are preformed in a precise manner.

Maggie then performed a tea ceremony for her guest, Joy Pople. A single sweet cake had been placed on a kaishi (small piece of paper) near Joy. Maggie slowly brought things in from behind the screen, then made and served the tea while kneeling on the floor. She used a long tea scoop (chashaku) to remove the tea from a lovely wooden box and used a thin, delicate bamboo ladle to add water from the kama to the tea bowl (chawan); she whipped the tea with a bamboo whisk (chasen) and served it to Joy in a precise manner. After Joy had finished the tea, Maggie rinsed the bowl with water from the kama placing the waste water in a small lidded ceramic container. After clearing the utensils, the host and guest bowed to each other a final time and the ceremony was over.

Maggie again answered questions and responded to comments. The host does not look directly at the guest and never drinks the tea. The quest is handed the bowl with front facing him, but turns the bowl so as not to drink from the front. A sweet is traditionally served to cut the bitterness of the tea. Thin tea is served to each guest in a separate bowl. Other ceremonies use a thick tea and guests drink from the same bowl. There were many questions about the style of Japanese kimono and how the sleeves and obi can be used in the tea ceremony. The stool Maggie used was purchased in Japan and helps to prevent the host’s legs from cramping while kneeling on the tatami mats. The tea ceremony is not religious per se. It requires intense concentration on the part of the host and also requires focus and choreographed responses from the guest. Several women shared experiences of Japanese tea ceremonies they had seen or participated in during travels.

Each of us had a chance to whisk our own matcha tea in a chawan. For those who sat on the yoga mats, Maggie ladled the water from the kama. She later offered the experience at a table using water from a carafe. Meanwhile, women were also sampling refreshments and different types of teas; the room was abuzz with friendly conversation.

About 4:30 Betty called the meeting back to order to thank Maggie for her enlightening and engaging presentation. She also thanked those who had planned, organized, and contributed to the program and refreshments. Betty highlighted upcoming WTB events:

The WTB April meeting will be Sunday, April 17 from 3-5 PM at InterFaith Works. We are excited to have local author Gene Fisch speak about his experiences. Mr. Fisch wrote *All the Love Comes Home*, the first part of a trilogy chronicling and reflecting on his family’s ordeal during to Holocaust in Poland and on the love of higher ideals that sustained them through the worst of times. Since emigrating from Poland, Mr. Fisch has had a wide-ranging and distinguished career spanning athletics, academia, government service, and business. Both men and women are encouraged to attend as it should be a fascinating program for all.

May 15 is our annual Sycamore Hills Garden Tour in Marcellus. Tickets are $10, but only $5 presale. Patti McGuire had tickets available.

On November 6, WTB will hold a 15th Anniversary Celebration at Temple Concord honoring Ruth Colvin and the founding members of WTB; a catered meal is planned and we hope a diverse group of friends will be able to celebrate the first fifteen years of our journey with us.

After the meeting, many hands pitched in to return the conference room to its original configuration and help Maggie pack up her precious things. Many of us conversed and shared impressions until we needed to turn out the lights.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Bova, Sunday Secretary