

Shodo Canada Awards Ceremony Speech November 8th, 2020

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I am happy to see that so many people are attending this event. The last couple of months have been tough on everyone and unfortunately, we have not been able to meet in person for a long time. However, it was amazing that many of us were still able to continue our calligraphy lessons with Maeda-sensei throughout the shutdown in spring and even this summer. It was definitely one of the things that provided some needed structure during these weeks and worked surprisingly well. Actually, we had quite a bit of fun and improvement in our skills. I think I can speak for all students who attended these lessons and thank both our sensei as well as the behind the scenes Waterloo and New York tech teams to make this possible. Thank you very much. Thank you also for organizing this ceremony.

This year brought a lot of surprises to all of us, most of them not so good. But for me there was a big positive surprise. So far, my biggest accomplishment in Shodo had been an almost award award at our holiday gathering a number of years ago. So I was more than surprised and humbled to receive an award this year. Initially when I saw the email notification, I thought there must have been a mistake, but since I am talking here right now it must have been correct. I just want to mention here that this year I had been using a brush that had been previously used by my 89-year-old mother in law in Japan. So maybe some of her talent was transferred to me this year.

When I was asked to give a speech here at this ceremony I started to think about the content and was about to prepare a lecture on the biology, chemistry and neuroscience of calligraphy, but luckily for you I was told that my speech should only be 5 minutes or less.

So, I just want to briefly talk about some of the positive effects that calligraphy has for me. Many days of class start for me, with the lazy thought whether I should skip this week; I often feel tired and not very enthusiastic on Saturday mornings, so I wonder whether I should take it easy and just get another cup of coffee and stay home. Fortunately, most of the time my German sense of duty makes me finally go anyway. And that is a good choice; it is a good feeling to come to class and see my fellow students and usually our sensei is already very enthusiastic about what we will do today. I enjoy the slow preparation of the ink before we start and that already gets me in a meditative mode. Then the actual writing requires full attention. Gradually you have to get into a state of flow, where you only – or at least mostly, because there is a lot of nice conversation going on as well – concentrate on the brush and the paper and try to write the kanji or phrase you want to do on that day. Usually my first attempt or a number of attempts look pretty awful. You try again and again and slowly, very slowly, it starts to somewhat resemble the beautiful sample we have received. Like many people, I often wonder whether the orange ink is somehow better than the black one I have...

After class I feel good, my Saturday morning depression has gone, as well as any trace of headache that I might have had. As a matter of fact, the meditative or Flow state of mind, where you completely concentrate on one thing and stop all the background chatter in your brain, has been shown to improve health and memory and overall well-being.

Because we have to submit a masterpiece by the end of February, we have to concentrate and work on our character or phrase over a period of several weeks. This process where you gradually get better at your theme, often interspersed with setbacks – like after several weeks you realize that you did not even have the stroke order right – culminates often in the last week – at least for me -where you have to accomplish 2 things 1) get your masterpiece out and then when you get the approval by sensei you have to stamp your seal on the piece without ruining it in the last moment. When all of this is accomplished, then you leave the class with a feeling of pride and bliss and high motivation to practice more often for the next year.

All of this is just a way to thank our sensei for pushing us to participate in the competition and do our very best to create all the wonderful pieces that we can see today in this exhibition. With that, I want to congratulate and thank all participants for their dedication and effort to create the diverse entries that make this Canadian Calligraphy competition so wonderful every year.