The Way of Kanji

Breaking the code: Our essayist finds serenity on the most unlikely path.

S hopping for a gift on Fourth Street in Berkeley, I dip into stores feeling happy enough. But as I survey shelf after shelf of obsessively arranged, shrink-wrapped merchandise that I’ll never need, will never buy and don’t even necessarily understand, I am suddenly overwhelmed by a material culture that spits out things that don’t appeal to me in the least. (Tell me I’m not the only one astounded by the fact that lime green is popular again.) My breathing becomes shallow and quick, and my head feels far too light for the amount of gravity at hand. A panicked energy sours my stomach as I sense how far out of step I am with consumerist energies and forces. And yet, I came for a gift, and I’m determined to leave with one. I spot Miki’s Paper across the street, and I know I’ll feel better inside that store, surrounding myself with hand-made Japanese items, each one a little work of art. Unfortunately, other people have crowded into the tiny shop, so I gravitate toward the sole empty space, looking for something, anything, to soothe me. If I can’t find a calming object here, I won’t be able to find it anywhere on Fourth Street—and what will I do then? That’s when I spot the kanji. It’s just a small display. Well, not a display at all, as the kanji’s not the point. Incense is the point. But in neat kanji (one of three scripts in Japanese writing), someone has thoughtfully supplied the Japanese word for each type of incense. I’ve never seen these words before:

白檀 sandalwood

石榴 pomegranate

水仙 narcissus

What joy—I’ve found some kanji! I’ve come home!

In every case, I recognize the initial character (白 is “white,” 石 is “stone,” and 水 is “water”), but I’m unfamiliar with their partners. I lean in and study the characters more, trying to tease them apart for bits of meaning. For instance, the second half of “pomegranate” is 石, which contains “tree” (木) and “to detain” (留). But what could these two parts mean when combined as 柿? Although I’m not getting very far, this puzzle feels like just what I needed. I’m somewhat stumped, but I also have a toehold, so I’m perfectly engaged. The hubbub of shoppers falls away, and I feel alone in the most comforting way, focusing on the written characters as if they’re my lifeline to sanity. In a kanji-induced trance such as this, I become rather like my dog whenever she stares down a squirrel. Her eyes fixate on one point, her lips part, her

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12
her heart seems to beat through her chest, and she cools her energy as if she’s about to shoot out like an arrow in pursuit of prey. When I zero in on kanji, my breathing slows to a nor-
mal pace, then slows further to a deep, steady tempo that I can never quite achieve in yoga. If someone called to me in the street, I’d probably be out of luck. For some reason, kanji allows me to forget the world. And what a relief to focus on something other than myself.

Standing in Miks, I turn my attention to the last word, 水 (mizu-). If it’s “wa-
ter,” what could it be? The left side of 水 means “person” (人), and the right side says “mountain” (山). But what does it mean when they’re stuffed together in one char-
acter?

My path to a deep, quiet, interior place happens to involve the strokes and dots of symbols from a foreign land. I could never have anticipated, even five years after, that these delicate lines would play any meaningful part in my life.

I grapple with the problem all the way back to my car and my house: a small dictionary, where I find that 水 means “hermit.” Ah, ah hermit is a person living alone in the mountains. And when you join “water” with “hermit,” you get “narcissus,” perhaps a solitary flower in ponds and small social flowers congregate. The world seems like a lovelier place when you consider this. What a thrill to crack the hard shells of characters and to find a pond inside.

For four years kanji has been around me. By any measure I’m far from fluent in Japanese. I don’t even make a set of video games, so I rarely profit in a practical way from kanji knowledge (though it helps me determine how long to boil soba noodies). But I’ve been attracted to that culture for years. As a result I might see 詩 at age 13 with my family sit a spark, and then a college course on Japanese literature reignited that fire. Frequent contact to the Asian aesthetic in the Bay Area has probably done the most to foster this interest. I spend staggering chunks of time studying kanji. When I’m feeling low, kanji is my anti-
depressant. It’s hard to know why this antidote works so
effectively, but I think it gives my overactive mind something to chew on so it won’t devour itself. Kanji presents a compelling challenge: I need to figure out what a character means and why. Because kanji requires me to consider every dot, it quiet the mind, bringing on a focused, accepting state in which I’m ut-
terly content to be doing what I’m doing.

I should note that kanji can also be used to convey the state of the spirit. After studying kanji for four hours one afternoon, I told my husband, “I feel like I’ve been in some other world.” “Japan?” he said.

“No,” I replied, “It was more like that wintry room in A Beautiful Mind where numbers fly by Russell Crowe’s head while he tries to find patterns.”

My yoga teacher reminds us that water eventually carves a rock, drop by drop, and that with consistent practice, our bodies will also change, slowly but surely.

Day after day, the rock looks the same: solid and unyielding. And then—a small change. Maybe a big one. The brain is capable of progress.

Occasionally by the time I in-
slip into a bath after a day of hunching at my computer to write architecture, I’m so worn out that I absorb little from nothing to a page of Japa-
nese. I can’t tell 泉 from 水 (truly) or 失 from 矢矢 (sarcatic laughter and “arrowhead”). No matter. In that depleted state, I’m content to admire the shapes of characters. The other day I spotted にんじん (carrot) written verti-
cally, as is typical in Japanese books:

My yoga teacher reminds us that water eventually carves a rock, drop by drop, and that with consistent practice, our bodies will also change, slowly but surely.

Day after day, the rock looks the same: solid and unyielding. And then—a small change. Maybe a big one. The brain is capable of progress.

Occasionally by the time I

in-slip into a bath after a day of hunching at my computer to write architecture, I’m so
drowned out that I absorb little from nothing to a page of Japa-
nese. I can’t tell 泉 from 水 (truly) or 失 from 矢矢 (sarcatic laughter and “arrowhead”). No matter. In that depleted state, I’m content to admire the shapes of characters. The other day I spotted にんじん (carrot) written verti-
cally, as is typical in Japanese books:

My yoga teacher reminds us that water eventually carves a rock, drop by drop, and that with consistent practice, our bodies will also change, slowly but surely.

Day after day, the rock looks the same: solid and unyielding. And then—a small change. Maybe a big one. The brain is capable of progress.

Occasionally by the time I

in-slip into a bath after a day of hunching at my computer to write architecture, I’m so
drowned out that I absorb little from nothing to a page of Japa-
nese. I can’t tell 泉 from 水 (truly) or 失 from 矢矢 (sarcatic laughter and “arrowhead”). No matter. In that depleted state, I’m content to admire the shapes of characters. The other day I spotted にんじん (carrot) written verti-
cally, as is typical in Japanese books:

My yoga teacher reminds us that water eventually carves a rock, drop by drop, and that with consistent practice, our bodies will also change, slowly but surely.

Day after day, the rock looks the same: solid and unyielding. And then—a small change. Maybe a big one. The brain is capable of progress.

Occasionally by the time I

in-slip into a bath after a day of hunching at my computer to write architecture, I’m so
drowned out that I absorb little from nothing to a page of Japa-
nese. I can’t tell 泉 from 水 (truly) or 失 from 矢矢 (sarcatic laughter and “arrowhead”). No matter. In that depleted state, I’m content to admire the shapes of characters. The other day I spotted にんじん (carrot) written verti-
cally, as is typical in Japanese books:

My yoga teacher reminds us that water eventually carves a rock, drop by drop, and that with consistent practice, our bodies will also change, slowly but surely.

Day after day, the rock looks the same: solid and unyielding. And then—a small change. Maybe a big one. The brain is capable of progress.

Occasionally by the time I

in-slip into a bath after a day of hunching at my computer to write architecture, I’m so
drowned out that I absorb little from nothing to a page of Japa-
nese. I can’t tell 泉 from 水 (truly) or 失 from 矢矢 (sarcatic laughter and “arrowhead”). No matter. In that depleted state, I’m content to admire the shapes of characters. The other day I spotted にんじん (carrot) written verti-
cally, as is typical in Japanese books:

My yoga teacher reminds us that water eventually carves a rock, drop by drop, and that with consistent practice, our bodies will also change, slowly but surely.

Day after day, the rock looks the same: solid and unyielding. And then—a small change. Maybe a big one. The brain is capable of progress.

Occasionally by the time I

in-slip into a bath after a day of hunching at my computer to write architecture, I’m so
drowned out that I absorb little from nothing to a page of Japa-
nese. I can’t tell 泉 from 水 (truly) or 失 from 矢矢 (sarcatic laughter and “arrowhead”). No matter. In that depleted state, I’m content to admire the shapes of characters. The other day I spotted にんじん (carrot) written verti-
c}. 12 A P R I L 2 0 0 7