

The Room with a Roof

It must have been a storage shed, perhaps a little storefront, or possibly a children's playhouse. The tiny building had been gentrified – outfitted with windows and power – and put up for rent. It was no more than a room with a roof, and it stood on the corner of the lane to the schoolyard and one of the three village streets. The bathroom was even next door, up the open frame staircase over the Burger Factory. This was the little place that was to become my laboratory for the summer.

After several weeks of renovating, I realized that it was becoming a Western version of the Japanese teahouse, a small structure constructed for a specific purpose – to create the conditions conducive to mindful activity and awareness. More than anything else, it was masking the street-level windows with calligraphic abstracts that set the tone. Their parchment-like translucency admitted a diffused light from the outdoors that shifted throughout the day. The one unaltered window not facing the street overlooked a landscaped vista surrounding a striking blue spruce, which echoed the pale frosted green on the walls. The rest was monochromatic, with black furnishings keyed into the charcoal gray of the carpet, offset by a couple of round, red-topped stools. The overall atmosphere was one of luminous calm.

So hand-written invitations went out to potential volunteers who had seemed taken by the idea of exploring this thing that they didn't really understand but that had somehow evoked their intense curiosity. They had to have enough interest to commit to a course of lessons in they knew not what. That attitude was exactly what was needed, as I wasn't quite certain myself what would unfold, although I did suspect that it would be different for each of them. We would explore together, and I would need their feedback to discover which way to go.

Responses started to come in, and they were full of enthusiasm, even including an offer to barter fresh eggs for the free lessons as a gesture of reciprocity. And then came a call from someone I hadn't contacted. A spiritual adept and visual artist, she had been interested in lessons before being sidelined by the discovery of a tumor and impending surgery to remove it. Because of this, I hadn't pursued it further, but then came the message that there had been a change in her medical situation. Her workup had revealed an unanticipated additional abnormal growth. And, she said, now she really wanted to take the lessons. There was a catch in her voice as she said this, and a fearful quality that bespoke the sudden need for connection and human contact.

Clearly, this introduction to teaching was not to be about going by the book. I would be learning to take my cue from the students and finding out how to give them what they needed in the ways they needed to receive it. This wasn't the training course any more – for the next three months, I would be a Free Agent and learning not from my teachers but from my students.