

## Okagesama by Gregg Krech

If you look around you in your home or office you will probably see walls. Many walls are very smooth and painted. In fact, if your wall is painted, you are really just looking at paint — you can't really see the wall. But what's inside the wall? Have you ever seen or walked through a home that is under construction or being renovated? If you have, you may have seen the inside of a wall before it is closed up and painted.

Important things are inside your walls. First, there are electrical wires. Wherever you see an electrical outlet, it means that there are wires that run all the way to the source of your electricity, like a system of nerves that travel through your body. Because these wires are placed inside the walls you can't see them, but they allow you to plug in a lamp, or a toaster or a television. Also, most walls are built around the structure of wooden studs. These pieces of wood, when nailed together skillfully, make the walls strong which allows them to hold up your house. You can't see the wooden studs — they aren't visible. Finally, you may also have insulation in your walls. This insulation keeps the heat inside your home on a chilly morning or a cold winter night. If you have air conditioning, it also keeps the cool air inside on a hot, summer day.

Your body is a kind of home also. Your skin covers most of your body so we can't actually see what's inside. But what's inside is really extraordinary. You have a heart that never stops beating. You have a brain with 85-90 billion neurons. You have a network of blood vessels that, if laid end to end, would measure about 60,000 miles! You have a nervous system with about 1,300 nerve cells per square inch embedded in your skin. You have over 200 bones. And of course there are many critical organs like your liver and kidney which keep you alive each day. All this, and much more, are inside a body that you think of as "you." All hidden inside the skin.

There's a Japanese word, *okagesama*, which is often used conversationally to express thanks. The root of this word, *kage*, means "shadow." It acknowledges that there are unseen forces in this world which make our life possible. *Okagesama* is grounded in an awareness of what's inside the walls of our home and what's under the skin of our body. Of course, it goes much further than that, because virtually every aspect of life is supported by unseen forces that include objects, energy, people and even money that makes life possible. These are the elements of our life that are in the shadow, so to see them, we have to look very deeply at our life. We have to see with more than just our eyes.

During a *Naikan*, participants have a chance to reflect on a particular skill, like driving, cooking or playing a musical instrument. They are asked to trace that skill and identify all the unseen forces that made that skill possible for them. When we do this, we may find that it is an endless exercise. It is an investigation that can never be completed.

I play the piano, yet I have never been able to fully comprehend what has made it possible for me to play. My mother encouraged me to take lessons and was always singing and playing music herself, which was inspiring. My father paid for my first piano and would drive me to my lessons and wait for me. My teacher, Mrs. Braverman, provided me with instruction and sheet music. She was able to teach me because she had a teacher when she was younger. The piano itself is an amazing instrument and the process of building a piano is complex and precise. It involves wood, which came from living trees that had to be cut and milled. It has more than 225 strings, which are made from high carbon steel. Each of those strings has to be tuned, regularly, to maintain the piano's lovely sound. The keys themselves are made from wood and plastic. There are people who transported the pianos on which I practiced. There was gas and oil required for my father's car to drive me to lessons. My father received money, from his job at a bakery, in order to pay for my lessons. My hearing allowed me to listen to music so I could learn to play. It goes on and on. Endlessly.

Okagesama is the recognition of these forces that are hidden in the shadow of our lives. Self-reflection allows us to see inside the walls and under the skin of our day-to-day existence. We become aware of how we are supported, cared for, and loved even as we send an email, drink a cup of coffee, or take a shower.

Because something is in a shadow, it does not mean it doesn't exist.

A shadow does not negate the existence of what is hidden. It simply means we can't see it because there is an absence of light. And when we bring the light of awareness to that shadow, what do we find? We often find love. Quiet, inconspicuous, unassuming love. And that love brings a smile to our heart.

Okagesama.