

HEADING FOR TOKYO

ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE ROAD

BY RICHARD OSTERGAARD

My expectations of myself as a missionary were shattered in a matter of minutes.

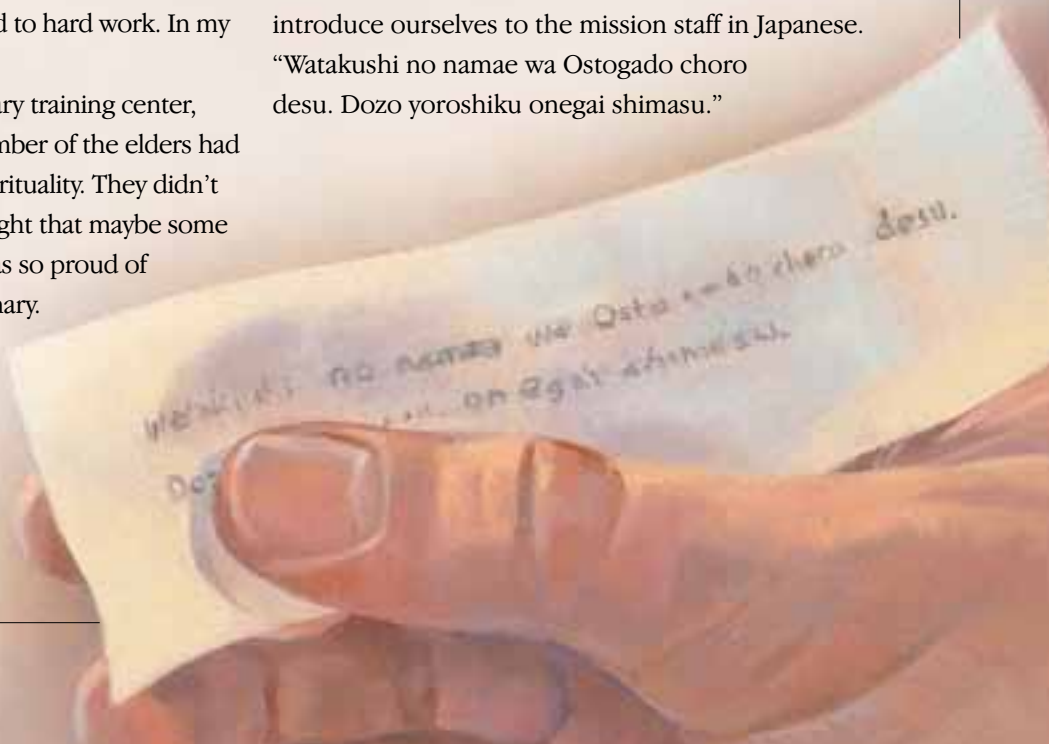
As I was preparing for a mission, I was confident that I was highly qualified. I was two years older than the rest of the elders and had been active in collegiate sports. Raised in a rural area, I was used to hard work. In my mind, I was a real “macho man.”

Time passed quickly at the missionary training center, but at times I felt slightly uneasy. A number of the elders had quiet self-confidence, maturity, and spirituality. They didn’t engage in idle talk or horseplay. I thought that maybe some of the attributes and qualifications I was so proud of might not serve a purpose as a missionary.

We arrived in Japan in overcast weather. In the main concourse we met President and Sister Komatsu. Outside, we climbed into two automobiles and headed toward Tokyo—driving on what seemed to me the wrong side of the road.

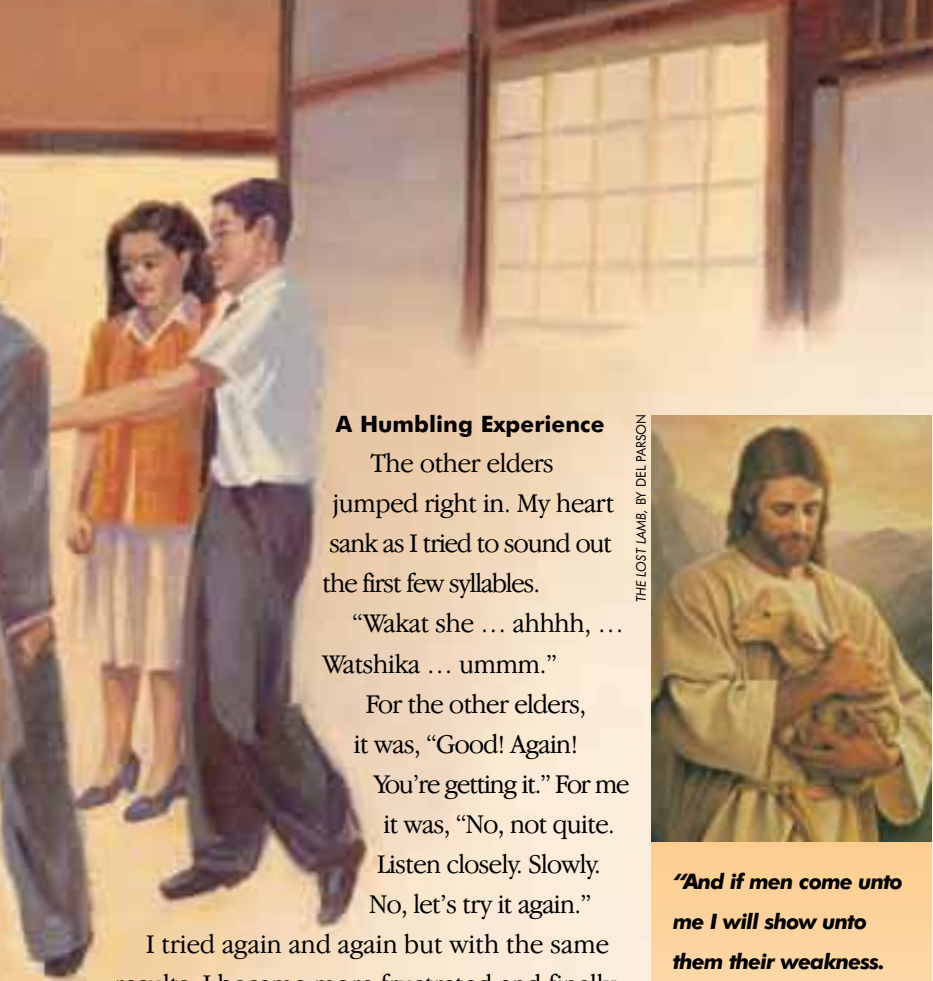
It felt strange and in some ways became a metaphor for the next two years.

Immediately, Sister Komatsu turned around and gave each of us a strip of paper with a short typed message. She said that it was a “self-introduction” in Japanese, and she wanted us to memorize the sentences so we could introduce ourselves to the mission staff in Japanese. “Watakushi no namae wa Ostogado choro desu. Dozo yoroshiku onegai shimasu.”





Wa sakushi no yume ni wa
Dozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu
Otagaki shiro 1884



A Humbling Experience

The other elders jumped right in. My heart sank as I tried to sound out the first few syllables.

“Wakat she ... ahhhh, ...
Watshika ... ummm.”

For the other elders, it was, “Good! Again! You’re getting it.” For me it was, “No, not quite. Listen closely. Slowly. No, let’s try it again.”

I tried again and again but with the same results. I became more frustrated and finally wadded up the slip of paper and put it into my pocket. Where was the macho man of but an hour before?

We were shown our sleeping quarters at the mission home and told to return in a few minutes to introduce ourselves to the Komatsu family and mission staff. This wasn’t a fair game. I tried to justify my feelings, thinking, “Let any one of these missionaries walk on a football field in a face-off—there would be no contest. Could any of them handle months of hard labor, working 12-hour days on a jackhammer, shoveling trenches, or throwing bales of hay?”

This seemed to be a new game where they had the skills that I lacked. I had wrongly assumed that physical stature and life experience would be all I needed.

We went downstairs to introduce ourselves. By the time I reached President and Sister Komatsu, I had bumbled every attempt and tears were welling in my eyes. I was unable to repeat the two simple sentences, even using the wadded up slip of paper. It was the most humbling experience of my life.

THE LOST LAMB, BY DEL PARSON



“And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.”

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Insistent on Success

This was the beginning of a long and challenging experience, but I had a testimony of the gospel and knew I could never quit trying. My progress was slow, and I seemed to be hindering my companions, which only amplified my mental anguish.

I came to understand many gospel principles through this trial; humility was chief among them. I had to be teachable and willing to seek the Lord’s help. I needed to learn how to pray, concentrate, study, apply self-discipline, and love the Japanese people and the missionaries with whom I served.

I came to understand the power of the scriptures. Through them, I realized that my challenges were nothing compared to those of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who, in peril for his life at Liberty Jail, was told by the Lord that “all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7).

Two other scriptures helped me understand why I needed to be changed and start anew. Doctrine and Covenants 12:8 reads: “No one can assist in this work except he shall be humble and full of love.” Ether 12:27 teaches: “And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weak-

ness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.”

While I never became completely fluent in Japanese, I was able to teach the gospel in my own simple way, and we were blessed to see a number of conversions. The Lord is always there if we seek Him through service, prayer, and faith—even when we feel like we’re heading to Tokyo, or anywhere, on the wrong side of the road. ■