No Stroll in the Park

By Madison LoFaso
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Japan Center Essay Competition
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As I climb the wide path I feel the small stones beneath my feet, and notice a large boulder to my right. I hear birds. I see a pond in the distance. Okay, so I get it. This is nature. But upon entering the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden, I couldn’t help but think of all the places I’d rather be on a Saturday morning. Why my parents dragged me here I’ll never know. I know better though. Don’t make a big deal out of it, and maybe I’ll get out of here before the day is over. So I suggest we take this path to the right. Looks like a short cut. Before I can take another step, a tall quirky-looking man approaches us and introduces himself as our guide. Really? We need a guide to walk through a park? I am corrected. This is not a park. It’s a Japanese garden, and apparently everything here is placed deliberately to create a “symbolic path to enlightenment.”

We begin our journey by walking through ornate bronze gates. Large Japanese maples dance in the wind. Around them lie small Japanese painted ferns. Everywhere, as if surrounded, I hear the sounds of running water and talkative birds. After the guide explains where these plants are usually found, we continue on to a small footbridge that crosses a narrow stream, fed from a vast pond. The path takes many twists and turns, and around each bend is something new and surprising. This tactic, called hide and reveal, is a common part of Japanese gardens.

From our guide – his name is Marshall – I learn that earliest recorded mention of Japanese gardens was nearly two thousand years ago! Apparently there are many different styles of Japanese gardens, and each serves a unique purpose. Some are designed to promote religious meditation, while others are meant as a simple escape from everyday life. There are Rock Gardens, which as the name implies, are made up entirely of rocks of all sizes. Tea Gardens surround tea houses, with a long relaxing stroll leading to the front door. Pond Gardens invite boaters to tour the garden from its central point in the Pond. Elements like sand and statues are commonly used.
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According to the brochure in my hand, the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden was built in 1960, after Ambassador Humes and his wife returned from Kyoto, Japan. This garden is four acres large and features a small tea house, bamboo groves, a wisteria arbor, a display hut for bonsai and ikebana plants, and a cascading waterfall. I pass a large tree and as the path takes a sharp turn, I suddenly hear music, which pulls my attention from the brochure.

There before me is revealed a magnificent waterfall and lush pond. As I approach the pond I see dozens of colorful koi fish. My attention turns to one that is jet black and darts around the others, stealing their food. I later learn that his nickname is Hoover, like the vacuum cleaner! The air around me is crisp and clean, and the notes of a shakuhachi flute can be heard from the Tea House. As I look to my left, I see our tour guide beginning to meditate. I am truly intrigued and I ask if we can join him. So we sit on the grass and quietly listen to all the sounds around us.

I unexpectedly hear a buzzing sound which pulls me back to reality. It’s my phone. As I dismiss the call, I realize that I have been strolling this garden for over two hours…and I hadn’t checked my phone once! We make our way back to the entrance and Marshall wishes us all a good day. My parents and I quietly make our way back to the car. I think back on the day and I am captivated by the designer’s careful attention to every detail. I am particularly amazed by the bonsai trees, which are miniature versions of large trees found in nature. Such care and love is required to create them.

On the drive home it hits me; a feeling of regret for my behavior toward my parents at the start of the day. What if they relented and let me stay home? I would never have learned that aspects of the Japanese culture could have such an emotional affect on me. I only hope that someday I can travel to Japan and visit some authentic Japanese gardens.
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Bibliography


