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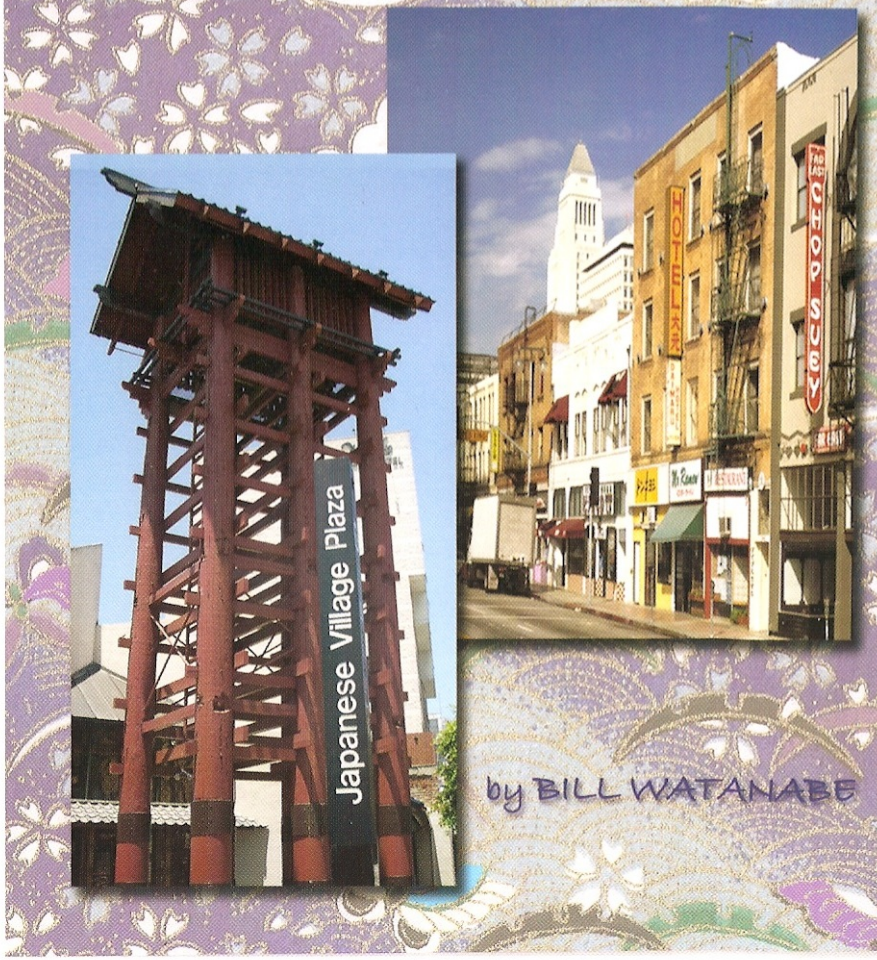
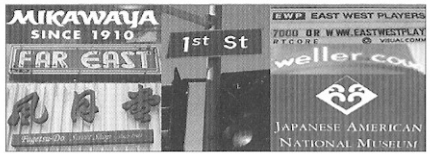
MIRACLES IN LITTLE TOKYO

Seeking the Prosperity of the City



by BILL WATANABE

INTRODUCTION:
BEFORE THE MIRACLES



Before World War II, Little Tokyo in Los Angeles was a bustling place. Japanese Americans lived in the area south to 10th Street, east to Boyle Heights, north to Chinatown, and west to Figueroa Street. As many as 20,000 people supported the many shops, churches, businesses, and cultural events that gave life to the community. But the war came, and those in this thriving ethnic community were wrongfully removed by the U.S. government; they were placed in internment camps simply because of their race.

When they returned after the war, Little Tokyo became home only to the elderly and to the poor because most young families chose to live in the suburbs. Their desire was to pursue the American dream: a house with a yard, nice schools, and a new car. Many businesses never returned. Only a handful came back to reclaim and try to rebuild their once busy and thriving community.

By 1960, Little Tokyo was becoming rundown and was struggling to survive. Many buildings were old and no longer structurally sound. Officials in City Hall were talking about expanding further east into Little Tokyo to build more offices for their growing staff. Parts of Little Tokyo had already been demolished and built over. This included the new police headquarters, which, in the mid-1950s, took over an entire block near the center of the old Little Tokyo. So, the Reverend Howard Toriumi of Union Church pulled together a committee of business and community people to plan for the preservation of Little Tokyo and to get the city's help in restoring the old buildings.

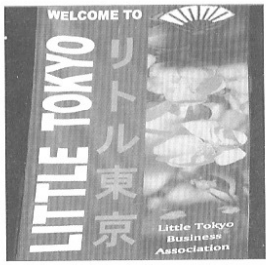
In 1970, after years of committee effort, the City declared Little Tokyo a "community redevelopment project area" and soon Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) funds were available for new civic development projects. Union Church was one of the first to benefit as it relocated to a new building. Other projects were soon in the works: the building of senior citizens' housing, a new modern first-class hotel, a major office building, and new structures for small businesses.

But modern, new buildings meant higher costs and rents. It meant the small "mom and pop" stores that had been the mainstays of Little Tokyo businesses would have a difficult time surviving. It meant the loss of the old, historic Little Tokyo that had been home and social center for the Japanese American community for many decades. With these changes, many community activists came into conflict with the seeming "business first" attitudes of the City and the CRA, which often appeared insensitive to the needs of the poor and the disenfranchised who had long called Little Tokyo their home.

In spite of efforts to modernize and preserve Little Tokyo, less and less, Japanese Americans were coming to Little Tokyo for their business, commercial or social needs. Instead, more and more, they were going to places like Gardena, West Los Angeles or Monterey Park. Japanese restaurants were opening up all across the city, and many Little Tokyo Japanese restaurants and businesses were moving out to better locales with cheaper rents, newer buildings, less crime, and closer to where people were living.

In the late 70s, the problem of homelessness brought beggars and panhandlers to Little Tokyo. Their requests for food or money made it undesirable for people to shop there. In an almost imperceptible way, the crowds in Little Tokyo began to get thinner, and times got harder for businesses.

It was around this time that I came to work in Little Tokyo . . .



GIVING GOD CREDIT

For over thirty years I have had the tremendous privilege of working in the Little Tokyo community. I have kept at it all these years because of the guidance and inspiration I have received from the God of the Bible, a God of love who deeply cares for Japanese Americans, Asian Americans and all people.

As I have come to understand how God cares about the communities and the social contexts in which we live, I have been motivated to care about and serve the community in which God has placed me. Some of that understanding has come from Jeremiah 29:5, 7, two Bible verses in which God encourages God's people—the people of Israel who were living as exiles in Babylon—to make a positive difference in their temporary new home:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce . . . Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.[1]

Like these exiled people, I live in a city in which God has placed me temporarily—for the short time I'm on this earth. And like them, I have also been asked by God to seek the prosperity of the city God cares deeply about—the "city" of Little Tokyo.

1 Jeremiah 29:5,7 (NIV)

I have seen God actively at work, orchestrating circumstances and events to create services and provide resources to improve the quality of life for the people and community of Little Tokyo. As the Executive Director of the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), I have witnessed firsthand God's amazing, if not miraculous, work through LTSC. I feel it is time to give credit where credit is due and let others know what I've known since I was called to be a social worker at LTSC. What follows is my attempt to document what God has done for me and Little Tokyo.

FOLLOWING THE SIGNS

EVERY NOW AND THEN during my over fifty years as a Christian, I have had experiences in my life that I would call "providential." These providential interventions have sustained and directed me in my life's work. One was an intervention in which I had a sign, and another, a vision from God.

In the late 1960s, I was working as a mechanical engineer, but I knew I was in the wrong profession. I also knew I ended up in the wrong profession because when I was younger and at the point of deciding about college and career, I tried to decide what my life's work was supposed to be without any help from God. I simply "went with the flow" and drifted into engineering because everyone told me it was a good and promising career. I don't recall anyone asking me if I was following God's will. Perhaps someone did, and I simply didn't listen. I know at church we talked about how to discern God's will for our lives, but somehow, it didn't sink in. When I should have been asking God for direction for my life, I simply didn't look and listen to God, and that was a mistake.

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To rectify that mistake, I made a firm decision in the spring of 1968 to wait on God to show me a clear and unmistakable sign for the direction my life was to take. Eighteen months of waiting passed after making that decision, and nothing had happened. However, during that period, I talked with a number of friends who had gone into social work, and I found myself interested in the field. I decided to take an exploratory evening class in social work at Cal State University, Northridge.

The sign from God I had been waiting for finally came one evening in 1969 at Cal State, Northridge. I can remember going to register at the campus. The catalogue I reviewed listed a night class entitled "Social Change," and the class description sounded very interesting and dynamic. I prayed to God that the class would be open. But to my dismay, when I arrived at the classroom, it was overflowing with students; I couldn't even enter the room but had to stand outside the doorway along with about a half-dozen other students. I could hear the professor, who seemed like he would be a really good and eloquent teacher, state that he would give priority to students who needed the class for their major or to graduate, or who had some other priority need. That clearly left me out. But I was disappointed only for about five minutes because my faith was leading me to believe that since I did not get into that class, God must have another class in mind for me.

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The only other night class being offered in social work was entitled "Social Legislation." This class seemed very dull and boring, not nearly as attractive as the Social Change class. But I felt full of faith that perhaps I should enroll in this class. And so, I did. The class was taught by a black professor, and there were about ten of us in the classroom. I believe he lectured on the beginnings of social security or some such subject. It was, in fact, somewhat boring. But what happened after the lecture was where the miracle began.

After that first lecture, I was walking to the parking lot and it just so happened that the professor from my class was also walking in the same direction. He did not know me at all. So, he struck up a conversation, asking me why I was taking the class. I mentioned to him that I was an engineer but was thinking of making a career change and considering social work. He stopped dead in his tracks, turned to me and said, "You know, you should apply to the UCLA School of Social Welfare because they are looking for minority students like you." And, after a pause, he said, "You know, I happen to be on the review panel and I would like to

help you get in." With these words, time seemed to freeze for a moment. This was it! This was the clear and unmistakable sign from God for which I was waiting. I was a little stunned and yet confident that this was the handiwork of God in my life. I think I semi-floated to my car as I pondered what I had just heard.

I immediately applied to UCLA. I didn't bother to apply anywhere else because I KNEW what God's will was. God opened the door and I was admitted. Even though my grade point average was under 3.0 (a "B" average), and I never took the Graduate Record Exam, which is required for most graduate programs, I was admitted anyway! I think that qualifies as a miracle any way you cut it.

But, I was not admitted right away. Actually, I received a rejection letter from UCLA in June of 1970. Oddly enough, because of the sign I experienced, I was not disappointed at all, but rather just a little confused about what God was going to do. I was still full of faith that God would follow through on the sign I was given.

Later that month, I went to the Mt. Hermon Christian Camp in the Santa Cruz mountains of Northern California. While there, I told a Christian friend about the sign and the rejection letter. He counseled me that perhaps God was simply testing and strengthening my faith, and I felt comfortable with that.

About two weeks after receiving the rejection letter, and about one week after returning from Mt. Hermon, I received another letter from UCLA. This time it informed me that I had been accepted after all! And then came my "vision" experience. I can still vividly remember standing in the kitchen, holding the letter in my hand, and after reading

it, looking up toward the ceiling, and all of a sudden, seeing a picture come into view in my mind's eye. I could see a long road, leading away from me far into the distance. The road was perfectly straight, and there was extreme brightness and light all around. I felt that God was saying to me, "This is the path I have chosen for you. Follow it, and it will be straight and true and bright." This was my vision. And, it laid the direction for my life's work in social work. God led me to a specific college class, to a specific professor, to UCLA and to social work. I was convinced that God was going to bless me if I followed God's will in this new direction that was given me.

FINDING WORK IN LITTLE TOKYO

After finishing my Masters in Social Work from UCLA in 1972, I became involved for the next five years with an Asian American Christian commune called Agape Fellowship (which is another story by itself). In 1977, I wound up taking a job in Little Tokyo, working as a Project Coordinator for the Japanese Community Pioneer Center. At that time, the Pioneer Center, a program for the elderly, was the largest social service agency in the Japanese American community.

About ten years earlier, I had spent a year studying Japanese at Waseda University in Tokyo (from 1967 to 1968). Now I had a social work degree in community organizing. So, it seemed to me that God had put me in the right place where I could use both my Japanese education and my social work education. While I felt very fortunate to be working at the Pioneer Center, my position was funded through a federal work-training program, and I could not stay in the position for more than two years. I needed to find another position by January of 1980, or I would be jobless.

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Around the spring of 1979, a number of community groups in Little Tokyo began to meet to talk about the future prospect of moving into the yet-to-be-built Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC). I attended these meetings as a representative of the Pioneer Center; the Pioneer Center was slated to be one of the future tenants of the JACCC, which was scheduled for completion in March of 1980.

I thought of this new JACCC building often, because every day I would walk from my parking lot, up San Pedro Street, and pass by the construction site of the JACCC on my way to the Pioneer Center offices, which were in the old and rundown former Union Church building.