

April Speaker's Report

Soul of Japan in 10 Words

Sully u3a members welcomed their latest speaker, Kaori Onoda, a freelance Japanese translator and teacher, who distilled modern day Japan into 10 abstract words and their Kanji symbols. Kaori showed how each word explains features of Japanese culture. 'Wa 和', or harmony, underlies that, for good life, collaboration and collective understanding or group interest precede the individuals. This is reflected in Japan's geography: an archipelago, where two thirds are mountains, and the majority of its 123 million inhabitants live on coastal regions. The group endeavour to survive and thrive is embedded in Japan's value system; the public self is bigger than the private self, recognition of independency, and how to 'read' the atmosphere of a human interaction ('ba 場') is crucial for social bonds ('en 縁'). On the concept of 'giri 義理' or duty/obligation, once we understood the Kanji symbol, Kaori taught us to recognise the symbol embedded in other words and phrases. So, we learned about 'parents of duty' (your in-laws), and 'obligation chocolate' when social niceties mean you need to give a present. There were true love, Valentine and friend chocolates too. Other giri duties were seen in regular checks on business clients. The consequences of a 'sakura' (cherry blossom) prediction disaster came in the form of 'haji 恥', or the shame concept, a reaction to other people's criticism. The head of the Japan Meteorological Agency who, predicting badly wrong the emergence of cherry blossom south to north one year, found himself apologising live on TV in front of the whole nation. This showed the concept of we-self, not myself: I'm responsible for how we feel (haji) and therefore the duty (giri) to say so. Our session concluded with the u3a audience on its feet enjoying an impromptu bowing lesson to illustrate the concept of 'uchi to soto 内と外', or the inside and outside presentation of self, and 'ma 間' or learning the time to take a pause to convey feelings. We learned the exact degree of bow needed to give or take a present or introduce oneself. No flapping arms please, keep body straight, bow from the waist, and pause at the right moment and amount of time to indicate the correct degree of respect.

Arigatou sensei Kaori! A great milestone 'setsu 節' for our u3a.

SJW