

# AN ANGEL IN THE OUTFIELD

by Joseph McSpadden

**T**he word “angel” means messenger. Messages can be received in many ways. The unimportant ones usually arrive by phone, fax or mail. The important ones, those that teach us to make the right choices for our destiny when such decisions are most difficult, we variously call vibes, hunches, insight, intuition or inspiration, or sometimes we call them angels.

In his youth, Shinichi Suzuki was a very fine baseball pitcher. Good pitchers are the core of every baseball team. The goal of every pitcher is to throw a no-hitter. But in baseball, as in life, no-hitters are extremely rare. When an opposing batter gets a hit it is often up to the outfielder to save the play, or even the game. For nearly fifty years Dr. Masaaki Honda has been Suzuki’s chief outfielder.

I’ll not attempt to recount in detail Dr. Honda’s long career as an outfielder and an angel, first because he would



modestly deny all my encomiums, and second because he has told the story far more accurately and eloquently than I ever could in his inspiring book *Suzuki Changed My Life*.\* It is a story of fate, karma, kismet, destiny. The fact is that without Masaaki Honda the rest of the world might never have learned of the miracles Shinichi Suzuki was performing in Japan.

Masaaki Honda was born September 11th, 1914, in Tokyo. At age six he learned for the first time that the parents with whom he had grown up, and whom he loved very much, were not his biological parents, but in fact his aunt and uncle. During World War I, when he was only two years old, his real parents had moved to the United States, but were unable to take Masaaki and his younger brother with them. Both boys were left to be raised by relatives in Japan. One day he was stunned to learn from his first-grade teacher that his “real” mother would arrive the next day to take him with her to America!

So, suddenly six-year-old Masaaki found himself plucked out of the only environment he had ever known and plopped down in the middle of San Francisco. To an American child it might have seemed like a vacation, but to him it was a terrifying experience. He spoke no English, had no friends, and even his parents were strangers to him. But with the resilience of every young child he began to adapt to his new environment.

Masaaki’s first hurdle was to learn this strange foreign language called English. Outside of his family, nearly everyone around him spoke only English, and though he didn’t realize it at the time this worked to his advantage. He had to listen very carefully in order to understand. Meanwhile, in school he was also learning to read English. His favorite books were a series called the “Junior Classics.” So, by diligent listening and reading, Masaaki gradually developed an excellent command of the English language. This knowledge and skill were to become important factors in his future fate.

Six years after Masaaki arrived in America his parents decided to return to Japan, this time taking their children with them. Surprisingly, the six-year hiatus made it difficult for Masaaki to catch up on his Japanese, especially the complicated Kanji, the written characters of the Japanese language. With typical determination, he decided to memorize the entire Kanji dictionary. After all, if he had learned to read English, he could also learn to read Japanese!

The changes in the climate and the environment were hard on his health, however. By the 1920’s tuberculosis had been virtually eradicated in America, and due to the lack of the immunizing effects of exposure, Masaaki’s immune defenses to the disease had been lost. When he returned to Japan the dreaded disease struck him with a vengeance. From sixth grade through his first semester of junior high school most of his school work was completed from his hospital bed. Even while in medical school at Nihon University he was so ill that he mostly studied in bed and only attended classes enough to meet the minimum requirement for graduation.

After four years as a ship’s doctor in the Japanese navy, Masaaki enrolled at the Tokyo University Institute for Infectious Diseases. There he met an old friend from medical school, Takayo Sakurada. Takayo’s younger sister, Junko, played the piano and sang beautifully. Though he could not play himself, Masaaki enjoyed listening to Junko during his frequent visits to the Sakurada’s home. He and Junko also had long conversations. On March 21st, 1944 they married, and on May 1, 1945 their first child, Yuko, was born.



In 1946 Masaaki's tuberculosis recurred, and the severe hemorrhaging was nearly fatal. Junko was told that there was little hope of his recovering. Ironically, it was this life-threatening disease that played a significant role in determining the future course of Honda's long and productive life. He was sent to Sanage, a countryside resort, to recover. While there he listened to the radio to pass the time, and one day heard an interview with a man named Shinichi Suzuki. What Suzuki said struck him like a lightning bolt: "If children are given a good environment at a young age, they all can learn." This was in the midst of Japan's darkest days surrounding the end of World War II. But Honda understood immediately what Suzuki was talking about. He knew that he had not been born with a genius for languages, but because he had been placed in challenging environments as a youngster, he could speak English and Japanese almost equally well. At this moment he made up his mind, "I WILL MEET THIS MAN!"

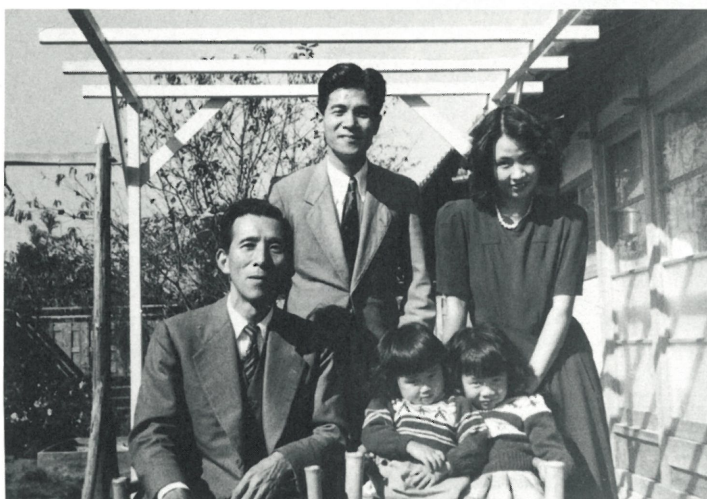
Masaaki's health improved in the clean country air, and in 1947 Junko and Yuko moved to Sanage to be with him. (Their thirteen-hour train ride in a dark box car can now be completed in two hours on the bullet train.) In November of the same year Dr. Honda received a Ph.D. from Tokyo University for his study of influenza.

In September of 1948 Dr. Honda learned that a Mr. Shoichi Yamamura was opening a Suzuki violin studio in a nearby city, and he enrolled Yuko without hesitation. Mayako, their second daughter, who had been born March 27, 1948, was still a little too young for lessons. On April 28, 1950, however, the entire Honda family went to Matsumoto to meet Mr. Suzuki. Now completely convinced of the value and importance of Suzuki's philosophy, and because he could speak English, Honda vowed to help introduce Suzuki's ideas to America. He thus became Suzuki's messenger to the outside world—his angel in the outfield.

It was not an easy task. Less than five years had passed since the end of World War II, and Japan was still very much in confusion. Even Junko, listening to her husband's words of hope, was a little doubtful: "How could such a big dream come true?" Still, Dr. Honda persisted, and began by writing letters all over the world. Two of his addressees were Yehudi Menuhin and President John F. Kennedy.

In 1951 the Honda family moved to Fujisawa, where they still reside, and Dr. Honda joined the Board of Directors of Talent Education Institute. He worked hard to establish the graduation system and the annual National Concert, the first of which was held March, 1954 in Tokyo. The same year, 40-year-old Masaaki decided to take violin lessons. Beginning with *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, he went on to finally play the Vivaldi Concerto in A minor. On October 13, 1955 the Honda family was blessed by the arrival of a third daughter, Asami.

Still, despite his many commitments, Dr. Honda did not forget his mission to bring Suzuki's ideas to America. It was obvious that many people needed to see and hear what was happening in Matsumoto and elsewhere in Japan, and that a film would be the most effective way to do this. The cost of producing one, however, seemed prohibitive. Finally, through constant work and determination a thirty-minute film was



*Above, top: Around 1915, Masaaki with his parents.  
Above: Dr. Suzuki visited the young Honda Family. (Back: Dr. & Mrs. Honda. Front: Dr. Suzuki, Mayako, and Yuko.)  
Below: At the palace on March 25, 1992. From left, Empress Michiko, Emperor Akihito, Mrs. Suzuki, Dr. Suzuki, Mr. Masaru Ibuka (Sony Chairman), and Dr. Honda.*







*Top, right: Dr. Suzuki's 77th birthday party. From left: Dr. Honda, Mr. Ibuka, Prince Tokugawa, Dr. Suzuki.  
Above: In Dublin, Ireland. Left: Dr. Honda & Dr. Doman.  
Right: The Honda family at their 40th wedding anniversary. (From left: Asami, Dr. Honda, Mrs. Honda, Yuko Honda, and Mayako Honda.)  
Below: Dr. Suzuki & Dr. Honda.*



produced. In 1958 Mr. Kenji Mochizuki requested a copy of the film to show at the Ohio String Teachers' Association conference at Oberlin College. Here was an opportunity that could not be missed. The film was sent, and Prof. Clifford Cook made arrangements for it to be shown at the conference.

Several weeks later Dr. Honda received a letter from Prof. John Kendall, who had attended the Oberlin conference, expressing a sincere desire to come to Japan and learn more about Suzuki's ideas and methods. After his visit, Prof. Kendall wrote a glowing report that ended:

"All of us who are interested in the future of string playing will now ask the question: 'Can Mr. Suzuki's methods succeed in America?' It is this writer's opinion that they can succeed.

"The next 50 years will be crucial ones in which the demands on human leadership will be found, and Mr. Suzuki's contention that developing the talents of small children is as important as atomic energy may not be as fantastic as it sounds. Certainly we must begin early to develop to the fullest the human potential for thoughtful, sensitive, capable leadership."

The idea for a group of Japanese Suzuki students to tour the United States began to germinate in the minds of Dr. Honda and Professor Kendall. It would be an enormous undertaking, and at first Dr. Suzuki himself was reticent. At last he was won over and then the tough work began on both sides of the Pacific. Dr. Honda began the tedious task of getting Japanese government approval for the children to be excused from school for a month. Even a single adult who has traveled overseas from any country knows how much paperwork is involved. Taking

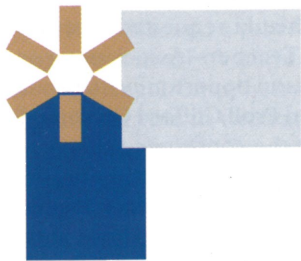
ten tiny tots and their teachers on a tour thousands of miles from home seemed unthinkable. Initially Honda was rebuffed by the bureaucracy from many quarters. In retrospect it is mind-boggling to think how much persistence and resistance to rejection must have gone into this unprecedented project.

The American team consisted of Professors John Kendall, Clifford Cook and Robert Klotman. Their obstacles were a bit different, but no less difficult. Chief among these was skepticism. Who in his right mind would buy a ticket to hear a bunch of Japanese kids play the violin? First of all, they were "just kids." And second, many Americans still considered them "the enemy."

Because the angels persisted, on March 5th, 1964, the first Talent Education Tour—ten Japanese children—played their first concert on American soil in Seattle. These tiny hands reaching across the Pacific were extended in peace, not war. A few days later Prof. Kendall introduced the children to an audience in Philadelphia with the words:

"There are moments in history when a place, a time, a man, and an idea converge to produce results of great significance. . . Such an historical moment occurred when Shinichi Suzuki began his experiments in violin teaching in Japan."





In *Suzuki Changed My Life* Dr. Honda writes of John Kendall: "He had done a wonderful job of spreading the ideals of Talent Education. He acted as

guage, he continued: "So instead of me talking, my wife will sing." Junko was taken completely by surprise, but gave a beautiful rendition of a Japanese song called "Hatsukoi." The message was understood. Everyone liked her singing very much, and many came afterward to thank her, including President

John the Apostle for Talent Education in America and indeed was worthy of his name."

For many Americans whose lives have been profoundly benefited by Dr. Suzuki's teaching, John Kendall and Dr. Honda are very special angels.

Always the innovator, Dr. Honda has many and varied firsts to his credit. The Fujisawa Musicians' Association, which he founded, celebrated its 30th anniversary in 1992. This 90-member group of professional and amateur musicians meets monthly for music and camaraderie. In 1965 Honda helped establish the Rotary Club in Fujisawa, and in 1968, along with Sony president Masaru Ibuka, founded the Early Development Association, which applies the Suzuki philosophy to general education.

In the Fall of 1971 Dr. Honda traveled to Philadelphia to examine first-hand the work of Dr. Glenn Doman at The Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential. Honda had read of Doman's remarkable work with brain-damaged children and found similarities between Doman's findings and those of Suzuki. In 1972, at Dr. Honda's invitation and with the assistance of the ASAP Newspaper and Readers' Digest, Dr. Doman lectured in Tokyo, Osaka and Kobe. His views on the potential of young children received widespread approval. In 1973 Doman invited Dr. and Mrs. Honda to a world conference on human potential in Rio de Janeiro. Dr. Honda spoke about Talent Education and showed tapes of the children's performances. On the last day of the conference there was a black tie ceremony in a beautiful hotel. Dr. Honda wore a tuxedo and Mrs. Honda, her finest kimono. Near the end of the ceremony the lights dimmed, and someone said in a solemn voice:

"This year's highest honor is awarded to..." Spotlights circled right and left.

"Dr. Masaaki Honda!" The spotlight stopped right on him.

At a party following the ceremony many people introduced themselves in their native languages. When Dr. Honda's turn came he said simply, "Even if I talked in English or Japanese, there are some of you who would not understand me." Implying the importance of family and that music is the universal lan-



made artificially or, in a sense, acquired after birth, boosting what the body originally had.

"The function of immunity is wonderful. If this phenomenon could be applied to a child's mentality, it should inhibit evil entering his mind. For instance, if a child is brought up in a good environment and exposed only to good from a tender age, then if evil happens to enter, the senses will work to neutralize or even to counteract this antigen. At least the mind would be so uneasy that it could not tolerate the evil taking root within it.

"The most important role of education is to immunize a child so that he cannot tolerate evil, ugliness, and cruelty."

On September 11, 1994, Dr. Honda turned the ripe young age of 80 years, 08 by Dr. Suzuki's reckoning. He still works every day in his medical clinic in Fujisawa treating brain-damaged children. Every day, that is, that he is not caring for the Talent Education Tour children whom he has escorted all over the world for the last thirty years. May God grant us all more such angels! 🌸

\*Published in 1976 by Summy-Birchard, Inc.

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