
Profound Transformations at Sea

An Interview with John and Jan Belleme

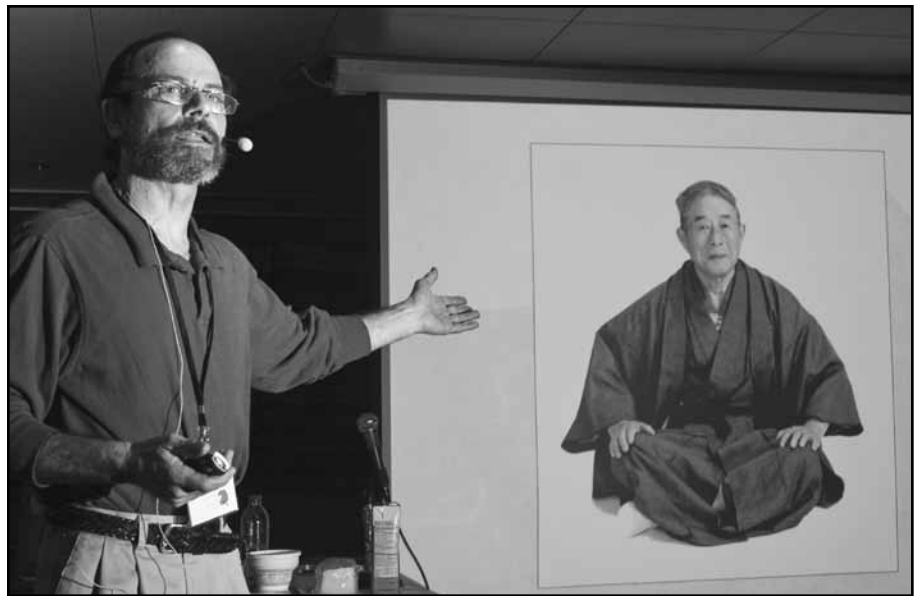
Julia Ferré

Photos by Taylor Johnson

John Belleme and Sandy Pukel host The Holistic Holiday at Sea cruise, having partnered together on various businesses for many years. Adding to the team, Jan Belleme works with John and Sandy tirelessly behind the scenes. John and Jan have contributed much to the macrobiotic movement. They established the American Miso Company and have written a number of books, including Japanese Foods that Heal. Julia had a chance to speak with both John and Jan in March, 2013.

I am so pleased to meet both of you! I would like to talk with you about the history of the cruise. This year (2013) is the 10th anniversary. How did you get started with all this?

John: Sandy and I have been doing businesses for years. We did a miso factory, a seitan factory, and a Japanese macrobiotic foods import company. In the 1980s and 1990s Sandy held many macrobiotic conferences on the coast of Florida at the Eden Roc Hotel and other resorts. In the late 1990s, at the last minute, a hotel cancelled the event because they were redoing the kitchen and it wasn't ready. The cancellation was a big disappointment, and Sandy



JOHN BELLEME SPEAKS ABOUT HIS MISO TEACHER, TAKAMICHI ONOZAKI

stopped holding conferences. Around 2002, he became interested in holding a macrobiotic conference on a ship, and he contacted me to help set it up.

On the first cruise, we had 400 people. 95% of the participants and teachers were macrobiotic. It was a smashing success, even though we had a disaster on that cruise. When we got out to sea, we learned that several of our macrobiotic staples were left behind in Ft. Lauderdale. Our head

chef, Mark Hanna, had to redo the menu at sea. There were no umeboshi plums or some other basic stuff, so we borrowed some whole foods from the ship, and luckily Mark had brought 15 pounds of miso in his backpack. People loved the food, and we knew it was a success because no one knew anything was wrong.

How did the cruise evolve from a macrobiotic conference to become



Keynote Lecture Room on Board

more of a vegan program?

John: The macrobiotic part has grown slowly while the vegan part has grown rapidly. For the second cruise, we formed a partnership with Vegetarian Times and from then on we included more and more well-known plant-based diet lecturers, researchers, and cooking teachers. Christina Pirello and Jessica Porter stayed on as the macrobiotic cooking teachers, and we brought on a third cooking teacher each year, such as Ann Gentry, Isa Moskowitz, Bryant Terry, and Colleen Patrick-Goudreau, all of whom are well-known in the vegan circles.

Were Christina and Jessica on the first cruise?

Jan: Jessica wasn't, but Christina was. Christina has been on all 10 cruises. Her engaging and informative classes are popular with both macrobiotic and vegan guests. Jessica became the MC early on, introducing all the presenters. Her hilarious presenter introductions have become one of the highlights of the cruise.

John: Our goal is to accommodate the rapidly growing worldwide interest in a whole-foods plant-based diet while maintaining macrobiotic standards and educational opportunities.

Last year was my first year and there were four menus. How has that changed?

John: In 2012, we had the main macrobiotic vegan menu, a gluten-free menu, an oil-free menu, and a macrobiotic healing menu. It was borderline ridiculous with all the seating arrangements. The main menu was almost completely gluten-free anyway, so in 2013, the gluten-free was incorporated into the main menu. We still offer the oil-free menu, but don't publicize the healing macrobiotic menu.

Jan: There are always a few individuals who request a macrobiotic healing menu. In 2012 we published that option, but it was confusing because some people asked for that option not realizing that our main menu is macrobiotic anyway, and the healing diet is a restricted menu. So now, we ask that anyone who wants a macrobiotic healing menu to contact us ahead of time and we'll set it up.

How many people have requested the different menu options?

Jan: The oil-free is about 25%. About 73% choose the main vegan macrobiotic menu, and about 1% want the ship's regular menu. There are about six people who asked for

the macrobiotic healing menu; they all have special health needs or are under the care of a counselor.

How do the macrobiotic and vegan parts of the conference combine?

John: At the beginning of the cruise many of the vegans have never heard of macrobiotics. But then they begin going to the macrobiotic classes and start asking questions, "What is the difference between a macrobiotic diet and a vegan diet?" Many vegan diets have no structure. People eat organic and plenty of vegetables, but often they don't pay attention to grains or medicinal foods. As the week goes on, they learn how to modify their eating with more principled structure. Some buy macrobiotic books or become semi-macrobiotic when they leave the ship. This cruise is a real intensive, and it changes some people's attitudes about food.

Jan: Not only the vegan people, some of the macrobiotic people are influenced to go totally vegan.

What are some of the logistics of holding the cruise?

John: Some things are a nightmare! Here is an example. Including all the room samples, bookstore items and the food, we have about 70 vendors from around the US and Japan that ship their products here. We store everything in three warehouses and consolidate the goods at the last minute into one warehouse that will actually bring everything onto the ship. These are public warehouses; our people don't check things in. All we know is that a shipment came in, tempeh for instance. We also don't always know when something is shorted.

A week before the cruise, all the food gets put onto the ship. Mark and the cooking staff get onboard and take inventory at sea. The ship goes in and out every Saturday. When it comes in the Saturday before, we load it up and deliver our chefs and they get everything organized, they put the millet

here and the rice there. They have a list of what they are supposed to have. Then Sandy and I get phone calls by satellite from the ship with what is actually there. Sandy and I have 3 or 4 days to buy what is missing. For the next cruise we have radically changed this process to make it more simple and efficient.

Do you do the scheduling and the program booklet?

John: Jan does most of that. There are 35 teachers and 120 classes and it all has to be scheduled. On top of that, there has to be people to introduce the presenters. We have to strategize the most important speakers into the right

“This cruise is a real intensive, and it changes some people’s attitudes about food.”

rooms too. It is like a Hollywood production.

Jan: The program booklet is very important because it has the information about everything! Now we carry them on with us but one year we had a near disaster. They were sent to the warehouse to go on the ship the week before, but when the crew was doing inventory, they couldn’t find them.

John: The warehouse people said they definitely put them on the ship, but the ship people said they were definitely not on the ship.

Jan: We were getting ready to reprint the whole thing, and just as we were at the deadline of making the call to reprint the entire 1700 run, they found the booklets onboard.

What other mishaps have you experienced?

John: When things get lost it is frustrating. On the fourth cruise, we left the Ft. Lauderdale dock without most of our produce—no kale, Bok Choy, dandelion greens, for instance. Luckily, the first stop was the next morning in Key West, so we had them rush our produce order to Key West. Then, when we got there, there was a dock strike and the longshoremen would not help us load a truckload of greens onto the ship. We had to walk it on, case by case.

Here are some numbers you might find interesting: 2000 pounds of onions, 1800 pounds of carrots, 150 pounds of sea salt, 300 pounds of miso, 65 gallons of maple syrup, 45 gallons of rice syrup, cases and cases of organic bagels, 200 pounds of vegan cream cheese. We have 4 tractor trailers full of food, including the produce.

I can’t even imagine how much space that takes and how to balance the inventory. Speaking of balance, Sandy told me that teachers approach you and ask to come on to teach. How do you manage that?

John: Each year, about 100 people ask to come and teach. People want to be here because they think they will get to stand up in front of 1000 people. What actually happens is that only the big names can draw that number of people. We put them in the theater and the rest of the teachers are in the smaller rooms.

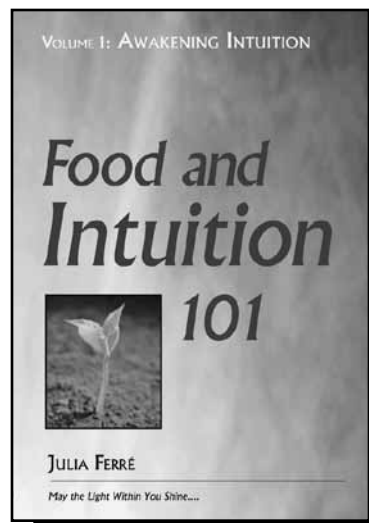
We have to balance the classes. There are 1400 people who have to get seated, and so we have to put a really well-known person in the theater every time. If we don’t, then people fill up the other two rooms. Those two rooms together can hold 500 people. If everyone went to a class, then 900 people would have to be in the theater.

Do certain teachers have their own crowd? Like Yogi Desai?

John: He is a good example. He has a little entourage.

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Meditation during the Morning Yoga Class

Jan: Dr. Esselstyn does too. Dr. Campbell, Dr. Esselstyn, Dr. Barnard, and Michio Kushi this year, are kind of like our rock stars! They are the people that bring a lot of people here. When people book, we ask if there was a particular presenter who influenced their decision to come. Those names are always the top ones.

How about some of the other big names...Dr. McDougall, Dean Ornish, Deepak Chopra?

Jan: We have invited Dr. McDougall twice, but he is too busy. He has his own program, a retreat in Costa Rica as well as an ongoing program in California.

John: We asked Dean Ornish, but he (or maybe it was his wife) doesn't sail. The other complication is that we want people who are vegan, and Dean Ornish likes to recommend fish oil. As for Deepak Chopra, I don't think he is a good mix with this demographic.

Is that because he does more spiritual stuff?

Jan: Not really, we have spiritual stuff.

John: Yes, but not as the main event. Chopra would have to be the

main event and we couldn't just put him in a little room. I'm not sure it would be the right mix either because he is an Ayurvedic physician and sometimes recommends meat or dairy for certain conditions.

Have you had activists on the cruise?

Jan: One year there were maybe 4 or 5 ethical vegans who confronted some other people about what they were eating. Generally, it seems that many people first become vegan because they care about animals, and over time, learn about health and the concept of plant-based whole foods. There is a progression, and now I think there are many more health-orientated vegans. We were sitting with some young vegans at lunch and I asked if that were the case, and she said that most of her friends were vegan for health reasons and ecological reasons. She had started as an ethical vegan, but now is more aware of how to eat a healthy vegan diet rather than just eat vegan junk food.

What is the most influential thing that made the cruise happen?

John: My philosophy is that the universe presented an opportunity. It's not that Sandy or I had the idea

and planned it all. We didn't know that people wanted to have such a conference on a ship, but apparently there was a need for it. The miso factory was the same—there was a need for it.

You started small, and it fulfills a need, and it grows.

John: The universe builds it organically. What happened was that Sandy and I said we were going to do a macrobiotic cruise. However, it didn't have the potential to grow large by staying only within the macrobiotic circles. What made it grow was the connection with *Vegetarian Times*. For the second cruise, we partnered with them; we put their name on the ads, "Holistic Holiday at Sea with *Vegetarian Times*," and they gave us ads in their magazine and promotion on their website. There were so many new people who learned about the cruise that way. Then, we learned that there are thousands of people who want to go on a cruise ship but can't eat the food, and they began signing up.

How has the cruise influenced people?

John: We have seen profound transformations, including reversal of chronic disease and serious cancer. Betty Hoehn is one example. She always is on the recovery panel.

Jan: Betty wanted to come on the cruise one year but was too sick to attend. On the following year she was even more sick. The first time she had been diagnosed with Chronic Lymphatic Leukemia, and the second time she had Lymphoma on top of it. She was told she had a limited time to live.

John: She happened to pick up a magazine that we advertised in only once. It was a regional magazine, not a national magazine, and she happened to be in the right place to pick it up.

Jan: The cruise was in March and she called me afterwards in May and said that the lymphoma and leu-

kemia were gone. She had become strictly macrobiotic on board, had a consultation, and did some cooking classes. Within a few months, her numbers, cell count, etc, had radically reduced. A few months later, her enlarged spleen had shrunk back to normal size. She first came in 2007 or 2008 and has been coming every year since. She looks great.

John: Her husband joined her and started eating the same way, and his blood pressure came down, blood sugar came down, PSA down. This is a common situation. A vegan woman brings her meat-eating husband for companionship. He doesn't really

"We have seen profound transformations, including reversal of chronic disease and serious cancer."

want to go and even asks for a reduction in fees because he doesn't plan on attending anything or eating the food. I tell them to see what happens when you get on board, you might go to a few classes and eat some of the food. Many times by the time they leave the ship, they both are vegan, he loses weight and feels better.

Jan: One year a couple came with their daughter who was macrobiotic. They had no interest in anything that we offered and wanted a complete discount because they were not going to eat any of the food or attend any of the classes. Back then, we did give a discount; but they taught us. At the end of the cruise, we got an email from her that said, "This was so wonderful, it changed my life. I didn't eat anything except your food. I went to all the classes. I got a consultation,

and on and on." They ended up paying afterwards for the whole thing, but that was the best example of how being on the cruise with other people and experiencing the food and the program is so influential.

It is a total immersion. I love being in the dining room with the whole group. If I came with my family I would sit with just them, but here I get to choose from hundreds of people to sit with.

John: We purposely do open seating. Some ships make you sit at the same table. We have socials too and make a real effort to make it feel like a community.

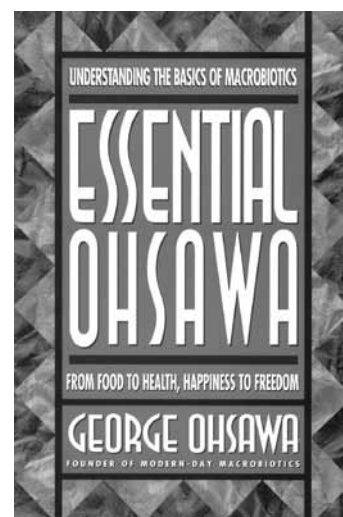
The community feeling is so supportive. How have other people made connections?

Jan: We have had some weddings because of the cruise! Janet Vitt was actually married on the ship during the second cruise, and another family, the Karpels from Los Angeles, came with their three daughters; two of them met their fiancés on board. We also have a match-a-roommate program for anyone who wants to come on the cruise by themselves. We give them a choice among several people—they may want a person from their part of the country or someone their own age—and put them in touch with each other.

John: This has created some great friendships. My older sister, an intensive-care nurse, came on the second cruise, and we roomed her with a woman physician. This was 8 years ago, and they still talk. My younger sister came on the ship too. She was a beautician and had her own beauty parlor with 12 employees. Her specialty was hair color, and she came on the cruise to learn about food but ended up learning about the toxicity of cosmetics. Dr. Sherry Rogers was on that cruise, and she did a power point presentation where there was a slide of a cosmetologist who had a blue tongue! After my sister saw that,

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Coming into Port

she sold her business and changed her life entirely.

Is it possible that the cruise can get bigger? Perhaps take over a whole ship?

John: It will be bigger next year. We are limited to half a ship for logistical reasons in the dining room. There are two seatings for dinner: an early seating at 6, and a later seating at 8. The two dining rooms can seat 1400 people. There were 100 people who couldn't come this year because we were sold out, that is, we couldn't add any more to the two dining rooms.

In 2014, we are going to be on a ship where half the ship is 1750. In order to charter the whole ship, we would have to have at least 2000 people. If we only had 1800 it wouldn't be enough to pay all the expenses. So it is a financial logistic. We figure if we had 1400 this year, maybe we can go to 1700 next year. After that? Who knows?

How does working on the cruise fit with your personal mission, if you would call it that? You went to Japan, studied making miso, have written a number of books, established the American miso company. Here

you are educating and bringing awareness to more people, you have contributed so much, and influenced so many. Have you wanted to develop this, or it is just an opportunity?

John: It is character changing and transformative for sure. I am basically a quiet person and not that social. I come on the cruise with 1400 people for dinner, yet at home rarely invite 2 people for dinner!

Jan: Maybe it is due partly to putting out all the time on the phone, e-mails, etc, and thus we need private time.

John: Yet, when someone comes and wants to learn, there is a need to supply information. It's not like I have information that I want to find people to give it to, it is rather that people want information. This cruise is an opportunity for people to be educated because they want to be educated. Not because I want to educate them, but because they want to be educated. They don't come on the cruise to see me, or Sandy, or anything like that.

Jan: It does mesh with our goals. This is definitely aligned with what we want to do to help more people. There is a CME program that brings more doctors on board. Doctors listen to other doctors talk about their re-

search, and then maybe that information influences their practice and how they treat their patients. It is very rewarding to see all these steps and see all this growth.

John: There have been miracles too. I'll give an example. When Dr. Campbell told us about Dr. Esselstyn, we invited Esselstyn to come. Shortly afterwards, President Clinton goes vegan and mentions his name. Then Esselstyn goes on CNN and becomes even more popular, and the movie, *Forks Over Knives* came out. When we invited him, we really didn't know him. Then he becomes popular and attracts 350 people to our cruise. Who would have guessed?

Jan: The opportunity has been created for us.

It is great to be a part of it. Thank you.

John and Jan Belleme are leading authorities on the healing powers of traditional Japanese foods. In 1979, after living and studying in Japan for about a year where the Bellemes learned the craft of miso making first-hand, they co-founded the American Miso Company, one of the world's largest producers of traditional miso. Since the 1980s the Bellemes have researched and written, and in many cases illustrated, over 130 published articles on the subject of Japanese foods, including five books: Cooking with Japanese Foods; Culinary Treasures of Japan; Clearspring – The Real Taste of Japan; The Miso Book, and Japanese Foods That Heal. John and Jan travel throughout the eastern United States giving lectures about authentic Japanese foods. Every winter, with partner Sandy Pukel, they organize a week-long health cruise that features prominent experts in macrobiotic cooking, healthy living, holistic medicine, yoga, meditation, shiatsu, Pilates, and natural beauty aids. They live in Saluda, North Carolina..