

The New York Times

Correspondence/Uncompetitive in Tokyo

Week in Review Desk; Section 4

In Japan, Nice Guys (And Girls) Finish Together

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

1477 words

12 April 1998

The New York Times

Page 7, Column 1

English

(c) 1998 New York Times Company

TOKYO -- MY intention, honest, was not to scar these Japanese kids for life. I just wanted to give them a fun game to play.

It was the fifth birthday party last year for my son Gregory, and he had invited all his Japanese friends over from the Tokyo kindergarten that he attended. My wife and I explained the rules of musical chairs, and we started the music.

It was not so awful for the Japanese boys. They managed to fight for seats, albeit a bit lamely. But the girls were at sea.

The first time I stopped the music, Gregory's 5-year-old girlfriend, Chitose-chan, was next to him, right in front of a chair. But she stood politely and waited for him to be seated first.

So Gregory scrambled into her seat, and Chitose-chan beamed proudly at her own good manners. Then I walked over and told her that she had just lost the game and would have to sit out. She gazed up at me, her luminous eyes full of shocked disbelief, looking like Bambi might after a discussion of venison burgers.

"You mean I lose because I'm polite?" Chitose-chan's eyes asked. "You mean the point of the game is to be rude?"

Well, now that I think of it, I guess that is the point. American kids are taught to be winners, to seize their opportunities and maybe the next kid's as well. Japanese children are taught to be good citizens, to be team players, to obey rules, to be content to be a mosaic tile in some larger design.

One can have an intelligent debate about which approach is better. The Japanese emphasis on consideration and teamwork perhaps explains why Japan has few armed robbers but also so few entrepreneurs. The American emphasis on winning may help explain why the United States consistently racks up Olympic gold medals but also why its hockey players trashed their rooms in Nagano.

The civility that still lingers in Japan is the most charming and delightful aspect of life here today. Taxi drivers wear white gloves, take pride in the cleanliness of their vehicles, and sometimes give a discount if they mistakenly take a long route. When they are sick, Japanese wear surgical face masks so they will not infect others. The Japanese language has almost no curses, and high school baseball teams bow to each other at the beginning of each game.

One can go years here without hearing a voice raised in anger, for when Japanese are furious they sometimes show it by becoming incredibly formal and polite. Compared with New York, it's rather quaint.

The conundrum is that Japan is perhaps too civilized for the 1990's. To revive its economy, mired in a seven-year slump, the country now needs an infusion of economic ruthlessness, a dose of the law of the jungle. Japan desperately needs to restructure itself, which is to say that it needs to create losers -- companies need to lay off excess workers, Mom-and-Pop rice shops need to be replaced by more efficient supermarkets and failing banks need to go bankrupt.

But Japan is deeply uncomfortable with the idea of failures or losers. The social and economic basis of modern Japan is egalitarianism, and that does not leave much room for either winners or losers. In Japan, winning isn't everything, and it isn't the only thing; in elementary schools it isn't even a thing at all.

When Gregory and his brother Geoffrey went to Sports Day at their Japanese kindergarten, everybody told us that this was the big event of the year. So my wife and I went to cheer, but it wasn't really necessary. There were three-legged races and team basketball shoots and all kinds of games, but somehow at the end of the day no one won and no one lost. There were no blue ribbons, no prizes for the fastest runner, no cheers for the best basketball shooter, or anything else; instead, every child got a small prize.

The point of Sports Day was not to divide students by recognizing individual excellence but to unite them by giving them a shared experience. Likewise, schools do not normally break up children into "fast reading classes" and "slow reading classes," because that would stigmatize the slower ones. During recess or phys ed, there is no system of having a few captains take turns picking teams, because the last-picked might be upset; instead kids divide by class or by the Japanese equivalent of alphabetical order. When drama teachers select a play to perform, they choose one in which there is no star, just a lot of equal parts -- which makes for first-rate student harmony and second-rate drama.

Of course, competition is inevitable in any society, and in Japan it is introduced in junior high schools, when children must compete intensely to pass high school and college entrance examinations. But the emphasis remains on "wa," or harmony, on being one with the group.

Ask a traditional Japanese housewife what she wants for her child, and you will sometimes hear an answer like: "I just want my kid to grow up so as not to be a nuisance to other people." Hmmm. Not a dream often heard in America.

Even in business, the obsession with egalitarian wa goes to astonishing lengths. One Tokyo bank executive told me how he envied the Japanese subsidiary of Citibank, which waives certain fees for customers who keep a large minimum balance. That would never be tolerated in a Japanese bank, he said, because it would be regarded as discriminatory against the poor. Likewise, he said, his bank cannot easily close unprofitable branches in remote areas, because then it would be criticized for abandoning the people there.

THE emphasis on wa perhaps arises because 125 million Japanese, almost half of America's population, are squeezed into an area the size of California. How else could they survive but with a passion for protocol and a web of picayune rules dictating consideration for others? If 125 million Americans were jammed into such a small space, we might have torn each other to shreds by now.

Building teamwork in Japan starts from birth. When our third child, Caroline, was born in Tokyo last fall, the hospital explained that the mothers were to nurse their babies all together in the same room at particular meal times. So on her first day of life, Caroline was effectively told to discipline her appetites to adjust to a larger scheme with others.

THIS civility and egalitarianism shape just about every aspect of life. When the Japanese translation of a book that my wife and I wrote was published, we were pleased that the first reviews were positive. But we were frankly surprised when every single Japanese review was positive, and I remarked on that to a Japanese friend. "Oh, that's the only kind of book review there is in Japan," he explained. "There are no bad book reviews. Just nice ones."

And insipid ones, of course. Indeed, Japan itself is so polite as to be a bit bland, rather like "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" on a national scale. And of course Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was never known for its hustle or economic vibrancy.

So now, Japan is trying to become nastier. Workers are being pushed out of their jobs, occasionally even laid off. Employees are no longer being automatically promoted by seniority. Pay differentials are widening. Companies are becoming more concerned with efficiency and share prices, less concerned with employee welfare.

All this will make Japan a more prosperous country, but perhaps a less civil one. The changes certainly rub against the grain here, particularly of older people.

They rub just a bit against my grain, too. I bought a long scroll of calligraphy with the character "wa," in hopes that my kids will learn harmony, instead of clubbing each other over toys. Yet on the other hand I still want them to win -- at musical chairs and everything else.

That is getting tougher, because young Japanese are adapting to greater competition, and they seem to be a bit more aggressive and individualist than their parents. Some young Japanese are even getting pretty good at musical chairs.

And little Chitose-chan, Gregory's girlfriend -- well, she may be polite, but don't underestimate her generation's ability to catch on quickly. Thirty minutes after the game of musical chairs, Chitose-chan and her friend Naoko-chan got into an argument over a party favor. Chitose-chan slugged Naoko-chan in the mouth and grabbed the toy.

Perhaps that's globalization.

Drawing. (Nancy Carpenter)

Document nytf000020010918du4c00jwh

These genuinely nice guys and gals who have trouble attracting a partner should not be ignored. They are real people, they do exist, and they will ask questions even like this (because they really aren't sure whether their propensity for thoughtfulness and kindness is getting in their way). There are disingenuous people pretending to be nice, too, but I think this subject has a lot of nuances to it and isn't quite so straight forward as just being about either entitled people whining or disingenuous nice guys. On finishing last. Given the commonly expressed appeal of the "bad boy" and Donald T

nice guys finish last. The idea that if you are nice to a girl, compliment her, tell her how amazing she is everyday, and really just genuinely show her how incredible she is everyday, that you will never get her to love you. Sadly, this is more than true in most cases. You know when you love this girl, and you're always there for her no matter what, and she always goes for the assholes that cheat on every girl they date and treat them like shit? Yea, that's cause you're the nice guy. However, there is nothing wrong with you at all, and the truth is that it is her loss. Why do nice guys always lose their girlfriends. She must've not known I was there, forgot her conditioner or something and thought she could quickly run back to the bedroom and get it, because she had left her towel in there and was completely nude. Like it's not bad enough that I've got my brother's girlfriend in the buff, it also turns out she has a dick. This was a big (no pun intended) surprise to me. She looks like any other normal girl and, other than what I had just saw, there is nothing masculine about her. She had also never told me or anyone else in my family (as far as I'm aware) and she doesn't share a lot of LGBT related stuff on her Facebook or Instagram. As soon as she saw me she gasped and ran back into the bathroom to get her towel, and then came back out and started apologising to me. Foreigners visiting Japan are not expected to be familiar with Japanese etiquette, but knowing a few basics will go a long way in helping you adapt to local customs and avoid making cultural gaffes. If you're planning a trip to Japan, here are a few cultural faux pas you should be aware of. 1. Don't break the rules of chopstick etiquette in Japan. Rantei at the Kyoto Century Hotel. In Japan, both hands are always used when giving and receiving things, including small objects like business cards. When paying at a shop or cafe, it's common to place the money on the small tray next to the cash register instead of handing it directly to the cashier. 2. Don't serve yourself a drink. Sake Bar Amanogawa at the Keio Plaza Hotel Tokyo. The Nice Guy (or Girl) is nice. If not an All-Loving Hero, he's definitely not unpleasant, obnoxious or an edgy rebel. These characters are friendly. These characters are friendly, psychologically well-balanced, morally good and socially balanced in most cases, and in short, someone anyone would like to be around and have as a friend, which is often what they are to the hero and/or his extended cast. He won't engage in jerk-like behavior, but probably responds in kind to Vitriolic Best Buds.