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In Japan, Nice Guys (And Girls) Finish Together

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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)

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