

Language

09-24-2012 by Harry Zirkelbach

No matter the number of schools built, identical curricula, the product varies. There remains this essential in all education, beyond the classroom, we constantly teach ourselves, by conversation, reading, living each day fully. For most of mankind, this has been accomplished by the language of birth. Fortunately for me, most in the Writers Club at Windsor Gardens understand, interpret, and read-between-the-lines the sentences I write.

The Dean of the Engineering College of the University of Detroit, taught one mandatory class to all Seniors. It was on Business Management, misnamed because it was all about English, the communicating of technical engineering topics in a language businessmen and every-man could understand. Without such skill, the greatest invention would not be credited to the originator. Of course Dean was sincere, But he did mention this after three years of technical jargon with English as a second language. He was a captivating teacher; too bad we had few.

Moving ahead two years to 1946, Japan. Another year of education in explosives, and as a Navy diver. In Japan, a Navy Ensign, on one task, the salvage of a sunken munitions Japanese ship in the small western community, Nanao. The Japanese language skill possessed, from in a small phrase book

For this duty I was assigned an interpreter, a native Japanese, then about 50, whose English was understandable, but not extensive. For most purposes this was acceptable. His name was Tommy Yamada and we shared a winter month living, working and eating, on and out of trouble, together.

Tommy had been a tailor. Small businessman. In the 1930s he would buy a ticket on a Japanese passenger ship to any destination, spend the journey hawking tailored clothing to men during the day, sewing suits, shirts, overcoats at night, completing the exchange by the time the ship reached the destined port. And therein he taught himself the tourists' language, one being English.

On a school day when we had no task, Tommy accepted an invitation from the grade school overseer, to have the American explain Democracy to the children, in very simple terms. This was to have a dual purpose, for the children studied English.

We began. I would say a few words, Tommy would explain. About the third sentence, it became clear that Tommy was completely amazed at certain basics of democracy. He began to challenge what I believed were simple facts. Instead of discussing Democracy with the children, I was telling Tommy things he did not know and believe. The children were hearing nothing from Tommy. Not soon enough I changed the topic to living and working in a port city making comparisons between Nanao and American cities. Tommy understood this. The hour ended as it began; I would make a statement, Tommy would interpret, the children would nod in acceptance.

Tommy Yamada and I would never get into complex ideas again, except for the night I had Navy visitors and three of us befuddled our Hotel owners, the geisha girls and Tommy by extolling to virtue of celibacy before marriage.
No converts this night.

Later, when in need of supplies from the Military Government detachment in the Prefectural seat of Kanazawa, my hosts commented on an article in the Nanao newspaper about an American talking publicly to the Japanese. Of course I knew who he was (it turned out so did they). And when I identified myself as that “hero”, they make it clear, I was not to do that again. No one was authorized to represent America in Japan without the written approval of MacArthur.

Well I had, poorly. Thankfully I was not invited again. Resupplied, Tommy and I continued to do our best to represent our nations in word and deed.