

A Week without Weekends: *A social activist in Japan*

Monday

It is often said that what most people covet in life are small things: a decent paying job, respect, affection, free time..things which too many of us take for granted. Some want even less...just a visa--a stamp in a passport--and the privilege to live in a foreign country. Today, my energy is focused on helping Emiko, a woman whom I have never met, attain this end. Molested by her father during her teens, she studied English, went to the States and found solace in the psychological therapy unavailable in Japan.

Nearing the end of her stay, she applied for and was refused a visa extension. Her last chance is to apply for political asylum. Usually, this status is reserved for those facing political or ethnic violence in their homelands. Nevertheless, records show that some Japanese have been granted political asylum from the 1970's onward. I spend some hours sitting at the keyboard, describing the sordid state of psychology and counseling in this country. Her chances for success are indeed slim, but it is a card that should be played.

It is startling to wonder how much of someone's life and future happiness could end up in the hands of an indifferent and apathetic immigration clerk. My grandfather took his family to Cuba in the 1930's after being refused visas from the USA and Canada. I sympathize with the plight of these people.

Tuesday

Our university's human rights committee has a meeting with the Buraku Liberation League. Quite similar in purpose to the Anti-defamation League, the league represents--Burakumin-- a minority group within Japanese society. During the middle ages, the Burakumin performed menial tasks which were considered impure according to Confucian



Solomon and Fox

sensibilities: the butchering of animals, the tanning of hides, and the disposal of corpses. Ethnically, they are completely similar to the Japanese majority, but still face intense discrimination in marriage and employment. It is one of the most irrational forms of discrimination anywhere in the world.

Why are we meeting? At a recent university introductory symposium, our dean of Academic Affairs encouraged parents to carefully monitor their children's behavior throughout their university years. "Large corporations often use detective agencies to investigate prospective recruits so personal behavior in an important facet in job searches."

The Buraku Liberation League absolutely despises detective agencies. Such agencies possess and disseminate lists which identify those of buraku heritage, leading to loss of job offers and severance of marriage proposals. Many local government offices display posters shunning the use of detective agencies for these matters. The comment made at the university open house seminar rightly alarmed the Buraku Liberation League. During the two hour meeting, I enjoy watching the barbs being tossed at one our administrators, who even if not discriminatory himself, is certainly representative of the mentality penetrating the college.

Wednesday

I have an appointment with *Japan Times* staff writer Eric Johnston. Eric is researching the case of Matt Lacey, an American who bled to death after being struck on the head with a blunt object in his Fukuoka apartment. The photos and evidence from the scene clearly indicate murder. But dead gaijin (foreigners) do not look good on police reports, draw the attention of embassies and news agencies, and require investigations of non-Japanese--many of whom can only communicate in English--a difficult conundrum.

So, how do you cover up a murder? Easy, fabricate a reason for the cause of death: dehydration. The poor guy could not cope with Japan's hot, humid summer. In a bout of heat exhaustion, he keeled over and hit his head.

Eric and I brainstorm possible avenues for obtaining autopsy evidence and bringing the case into public view. Our efforts later lead to reward: the Fukuoka police department release autopsy records to Charles Lacy, Nagoya based brother of the deceased. Two American pathologists later write opinions confirming that assault and murder were the cause of death, not dehydration.

Thursday

In the morning, I venture off to the foreigner's prison, better known as the West Japan Immigration Control Center. The building, one of clean and refined architectural tastes, serves the illusion that foreigners who overstay their visas are neatly housed and warmly treated.

I have interviews with two inmates: Samuel from Uganda, and Solomon from Ethiopia. After exchanging letters and speaking on the phone, we meet for the first time. Samuel is suing the center for a vicious beating, vengeance in response

to a sexual harassment complaint lodged against a guard. Solomon, an Eritrean, was scheduled to leave for Australia early in the year. Suddenly, a female Japanese acquaintance, in a fit of romantic jealousy, began spreading rumors, and his visa was repealed. Ventilation at the center is unsanitary and Solomon contracted a sinus infection which attacked his auditory canal and resulted in a hearing loss. He is suing for redress, as well as seeking refugee status.

I have 30 minutes with each. They are seated behind a plexi-glass screen and accompanied by a guard who takes notes, and sometimes dozes, as we speak. We discuss strategies for promoting their cases. I promise to come again, especially to Solomon's trial.

Friday

AM Received a report that a long time Afghani resident of Japan with a Ph.D. from a Japanese university, who is now seeking refugee status, has been arrested and is being detained on a larceny charge. I know that the larceny charge is a hoax, the Japanese government has taken a strong interest in attempting to rid the nation of Afghans: 44 were deported last year; none were deported in the previous five years.

According to Dalia Anavian, a Kobe Jewish Community member who translates for Farsi and Kurdish speakers in police and judicial matters, the police ask why the expired passports have not been renewed. The Afghans honestly explain: "Our country has been at war for twenty years. In the present circumstances, they are impossible to obtain." The pleas fall on deaf ears.

PM I glance at the calendar and see it is time to light the Shabbat candles. I sit back with a glass of wine and watch the flames flicker in a dance of celebration—another week has passed. The date on the calendar triggers a memory, and suddenly I am spinning back in time. Today is exactly 25 years to the day that I was deported from India. A young man with a backpack and curiosity about the world, entirely apolitical, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Calcutta was to be the venue of a religious organization



with seditious political ambitions. In order to placate the government in Delhi, police and immigration organs rounded up foreigners en masse for deportation.

Saturday

The morning in our Kobe synagogue is a spiritual treat— a haven from the frenetic insane world. The weekly Torah reading is one of the most animated tales in ancient Hebrew literature. Balaam, a devout servant of the Lord is riding upon a donkey who suddenly stops for no apparent reason in the middle of the road. Balaam berates and beats the donkey. The donkey brays and speaks: "Idiot. Open your eyes, look at the road, do you not see the angel with a sword ready to kill you!" Balaam sees the angel and bows to the ground. The angel states, "If the donkey had not stopped, I would have killed you. (Numbers 22: 28~33)" Due to the donkey's awareness, Balaam survives with his life.

The passage is stunning. I have spent the last 15 years of my life listening to these screaming donkeys. And I wonder, "Why are they talking to me?"

The reading of the Torah is followed by a reading from the Prophets. Today we are reading Micah, root of the English word Michael. The prophet summarizes Jewish belief in ten terse and beautiful words "Do Justice, Love Goodness, and walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)."

I am again profoundly moved. Most of my Jewish education was about do's and don'ts, rules and laws. Beneath the surface, after many years, I perceive a luminous core which is simple and magnificent.

Sunday

After spending many hours in the

synagogue the previous day, I cross galaxies and enter the Tamatsukuri Catholic Church in central Osaka. In the sanctuary is a huge mural with angels clad in traditional kimonos soaring through the air. The church, strongly involved in refugee activities, shelters many Afghans and Iranians. One of the Iranians--Hamid--I know quite well. Sick and tired of waiting for justice in the procrastinating courts, and fed up with bad food and the slow erosion of hope during detention, he went on a hunger strike. After we met on the 36th day of the strike, I gave him up for dead. The next day the government relented, a provisional release was granted, and he abandoned the strike.

Hamid introduces me to other asylum seekers sheltered in the church. The majority are Hazari who are Shi'a and were persecuted under the Taliban. One made his way to Japan, the majority of his \$6000 fee going to a South Korean fisherman who offered secret passage in the cargo bin. Dropped off in the middle of nowhere, he was picked up by immigration police and immediately incarcerated. Expecting to be treated humanely and kindly by sympathetic and technologically advanced Japanese, he was instead prosecuted with the intent of deportation. Returning back to Afghanistan would result in near instantaneous execution.

A couple beers are opened, and we toast in Japanese, the only language we share. 24 hours ago I was sitting in a synagogue with Israelis praying in Hebrew, and now I am in a church speaking in Japanese with Muslims from central Asia. It is amazing how such completely different universes exist so close together.

I get on the train and look at my watch. Sunday night, ten p.m. It has been a long week. Tell me, when does the weekend start? ✧

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