



Any Volunteers ... Please?

Nearly all of the mothers in my immediate neighbourhood go out to part time jobs every morning after the rest of their family has left the house, so there are very few people around here during the day, just the retirees, and the few - like me - whose employment doesn't fit standard patterns. So when I bumped into one of the local housewives today in mid-morning, I guess my face must have showed my slight puzzlement, because she felt it necessary to 'explain' her presence by saying, "I'm on the way to a Home & School meeting ..."

Ah yes, the 'hogoshakai' ... Now that my two daughters are long ago grown up and gone, I no longer have to think about such things, but during the years that the three of us lived together here, I of course made frequent visits to their elementary school for such meetings, which were a wonderful way for me to observe some of the inner workings of Japanese society. The very first one I attended was a good example. For these meetings, the kids are given the time off, and the parents go to the classroom and sit in their own child's desk. I noticed that no sooner did each mother arrive and find the proper place to sit, than she did exactly the same thing as all the others - open the desk drawer and begin rummaging around inside. They cleaned up this and that, taking some papers aside for disposal, and leafed through the notebooks and anything else they found there. I myself touched nothing, and when one of the other mothers prompted me to use this opportunity to do some 'cleaning up', I replied that there was no way I was going to interfere with my daughter's privacy. This desk was her personal space, and I would no more look inside it than I would look inside a personal diary.

As for 'cleaning up' the desk, I didn't feel that this was a parent's job. How on earth would a child ever learn to keep things clean if the parent was always hovering around, doing it for them! So I just sat with my arms crossed, waiting for the meeting to begin. It's funny though, that when I told the girls later about this episode, they both had the same reaction, "Dad, it's OK to look in the desk. There's nothing private in there!" But all during those years, I never did; it just felt wrong.

As you might expect, I was usually the only male at the hogoshakai meetings, and as I was of course the only foreigner, this left me in a sort of 'part of the group, but not really part of the group' kind of situation. I was expected to always attend, and to participate in all the activities, but I wasn't expected to shoulder all of the same responsibilities as the other parents - becoming class representative, or chairing one of another of the various organizing committees for school events.

Whenever it became necessary for the group to appoint such representatives, the situation became quite tense; mothers who had previous experience of such things (perhaps with older children in the school) felt that they had 'done their part', so were unwilling to volunteer, while new mothers, who could well imagine how time-consuming such jobs could be, were desperate to avoid it for as long as possible, although they knew that somewhere along the line they would no longer be able to escape being called on.

I felt 'safe' from all this, and usually just looked around the room normally, not hesitating to look directly at the teacher or other group leaders, but nearly everybody else always avoided eye contact as much as possible, in the hope that this would leave them 'invisible'. On one occasion I remember well, the teacher was so frustrated by the inability of the group to make the necessary appointments, she got up and walked out, tell-

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

ing us to please come and fetch her from the teachers' room when everything had been arranged. Such a horrible silence then fell over the room!

Was I wrong not to have volunteered? But truly, I would have been much more of a liability than an asset, without having any of the background knowledge (not to mention language ability) necessary for the work.

So this morning, I certainly gave a broad and encouraging smile to the neighbour who was on her way to one of these meetings!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>