



Route Finding

I had a guest here for a couple of hours this morning - a young college student who (it seemed) wanted a bit of 'advice' on her decision to pursue a career in the arts. I'm usually open to having such visitors, as it makes a nice break from the work, and it's sometimes quite interesting hearing about their plans and ideas.

Over the years though, my approach to such discussions has changed. 'Once upon a time', whenever I was asked by a younger person to put forward some advice on what direction they should take, my response was always the same: some variation or another on the 'you should follow your dream!' theme. This was probably in part because I honestly felt that this was the 'best' way to approach one's life, but also because it pretty much lined up with the way that I myself have done things. There have been plenty of options available to me along the way, but I have never had any hesitation about 'following my nose' ... If any particular route 'smells' interesting ... I have taken it.

These days though, I am more circumspect in the way that I handle these conversations, for a couple of reasons. First is that as the years have gone by, and I have learned much more about Japanese society, I am far less willing to proffer advice that goes against the general pattern of what is considered 'normal' here. 'Follow your dream' doesn't really have much 'downside' for a youngster in (say) North America. If they achieve something worthwhile, then all is well, but if things don't quite work out, then it is not the end of the world. Society over there offers its members endless 'second chances'. 'If at first you don't succeed, try try again' is not just an empty catchphrase, but an expression of the normal state of affairs.

But here in Japan, even in ultra-modern, very much liberalized Japan, it is not so easy. A student in one of my English classes (back 25 years ago when I was still teaching), had the dream of becoming a rock musician, but his parents were adamantly opposed. With my voice added to his own pleadings though, he managed to convince his father to allow him to follow that path instead of continuing with higher education. We then lost contact, but I heard from him again a few years ago. The music dream hadn't 'quite' panned out, but by then he was too old to go back to school, too old to be hired by any kind of a 'career path' company, and was now stuck in a dead end job.

Now I'm not sorry for how I had encouraged him all those years ago, because the things I had said were honest expressions of my own feelings, but this kind of experience has made me a bit gun shy. I no longer want to be part of actively guiding a young person in one direction or another - simply the stakes are too high.

So what sort of thing did I say to today's young visitor? Just random platitudes?

Not at all; I had plenty to say. But I never used the phrase, "I think you should ..." I listened to her talk about her ideas and plans, and I answered, as best I could, her questions about how I myself have managed to 'make it' as an independent artist/craftsman. And I was brutally honest. As we stood in my workroom looking out over the little stream rippling along under my windows, and she oohed and aaahed about my 'beautiful working environment', I made sure that she take note of the stack of (so far) blank paper on my workbench. "Do you understand? Over the next three weeks - if everything goes *exactly* according to plan - that stack of

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paper will be transformed into the mortgage payment on this workshop that is due at the end of the month. And there is no Plan B."

Thinking about it now, I wonder if perhaps I have swung the pendulum a bit too far in the opposite direction. But which is worse? To actively encourage young people in an endeavour in which they are almost certainly going to fail, or to discourage them from trying?

Well, I don't really know. I will try as best I can to keep these conversations basically neutral, not pushing them in any particular direction. If their own desire (and skills) are strong enough, they may well succeed. I suppose that I provide a kind of living proof that yes, you *can* make a living in the arts like this, but I sure hope they are listening when I tell them that there are a lot more skills required than those that involve putting pigment on paper!

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