



## Better Half!

In what is a first for this 'A Story A Week' series, I'm going to make a short disclosure before we start: some names and other identifying features of certain individuals have been changed - in order to protect the incompetent!

Ever since I became familiar with the general tenor of the Japanese education system - with its emphasis on examinations as the 'gateway' to a system of ranked institutions - I have been pretty much against it. I think I have had this opinion mostly because of the clear knowledge of how I would have fared had I been part of such a system myself. Which is to say I would have failed dismally. I never studied with any enthusiasm, I was frequently lax in doing homework, and I generally rejected any attempt to push me to 'work to your full potential', etc. etc. I would have been a dropout.

Now actually, I was a dropout anyway, never making it through the first year of university, but at least I lived in a society that gave such people second chances (or more), so I ended up doing pretty well after I got some experience at life. But I had an experience this week that brought with it the thought that perhaps after all, the 'exam hell' system is not such a bad fit for Japanese society, and does produce practical results for the country.

I had email communication, and subsequent telephone contact, with a couple of young Japanese students who (for a purpose not relevant to our story) wished to come and visit my workshop. I acquiesced, and we set up a date and time. A few minutes before the scheduled time arrived, I received a phone call; the two boys were lost, and were calling for directions.

This in itself is not so unusual, as anybody who had searched for addresses in a Japanese city can testify. But what happened next was a bit out of the ordinary. In trying to determine just where they were, I asked them to describe nearby buildings, and they said they were in front of what looked like a daycare center. There are a couple of these not too far from my home, so I asked them what it was called. This was followed by a slight pause, some discussion between the two of them, and they then replied that they weren't able to read the sign, but that they recognized one of the characters in the name - the one for 'tree' (not exactly the most complex character in the language, for sure).

Now this was enough information for me to figure out which building they were in front of, and I told them to wait there while I came over to meet them. After I approached them, and we made our greetings, I casually asked "Don't you have any kind of phone or device that might have a map?" One of them proudly pulled out his phone, "Yes; I have an iPhone!" It turned out though, that he didn't understand how to use it for getting directions ...

In any case, to make a long story short, the subsequent interview was a total disaster. These guys not only couldn't find their way around town, but they couldn't easily explain their requirements, they had no sensible plan for the project for which they required my cooperation, and the entire episode was a total waste of everybody's time.

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After they left, I and one of the current printer trainees - a very competent young *girl* - talked about the episode. She had asked one of them which school they were from, and she now said to me, "Well, that's about what you would expect then, from that place ..."

The point being this - that the examination system for university entrance does indeed act as an efficient filter of 'competence' (I hesitate to stretch the point to include 'intelligence'). Kids who can actually get things done end up at schools in the upper ranks, and when they graduate are scooped up by major companies, who don't care a whit what they learned at school. The companies know all they need to know by just looking at the name on the graduation certificate. The examination system 'works' very well indeed, from the point of view of corporate Japan.

For me - in my new function as an employer - I now get the picture; if I want competent young men, I need to look for ones from schools in an upper ranking. The bad news for me of course, is that those boys soon get cherry picked by the Toyotas and Sonys of the country. None of them would be interested in what I have to offer.

But I have a secret weapon! One that corporate Japan is still almost completely ignoring, no matter what rank of school is involved. A good half of the population of this country is being ignored by the 'cherry pickers'. I'm learning my lesson about just where the competence resides in this country, and I don't think I'll be interviewing any more ... boys.

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