



Influence

I had a bit of a break in my routine one day this past week. I was treated to a very nice luncheon (an interesting word that I certainly don't get a chance to use much!) at a very upscale hotel downtown. When I say that the meal was 'very nice' though, I am taking a bit of a liberty with the truth, because to be honest with you, I wasn't actually able to sit peacefully and eat it all. I did enjoy my appetizer and the soup, but no sooner had the entrée been placed in front of me than it was time to push my chair back from the table and make my way to the podium.

Yes, this lunch 'treat' came at a price. I was the guest speaker at a lunch meeting of one of the major businessmen's service clubs. The invitation had come about a half-year ago, and as back then I was OK for time, but definitely not OK for money, I accepted, as the fee being offered was more than enough to make it worthwhile.

Six months later, my time/finances situation is completely the reverse, but I of course honoured my commitment, and prepared a talk for them. I have done talks to this sort of group any number of times before, but never to a group of businessmen of this 'level'. These men were all company presidents, and all from fairly substantial companies. There were about 60 of them in the room, and you can bet that while we ate lunch, there were 60 matching sleek limousines with 60 perfectly attired drivers waiting in the parking area below.

In the train on the way to the lunch, I had made a number of notes about a possible talk, and had basically decided on what approach to take. The overall theme was a no-brainer - my print-making business has been totally re-vitalized over the past half-year, so this made an easy theme on which to hang the thread of the presentation.

I began with a quick outline of my work over the previous 25 years or so: how I had initially become interested in Japanese printmaking while living overseas, and had quit my job and brought my family to this country, where I tried to learn all I could about it. The subsequent years had been quite a roller coaster ride, but I had managed to bring up my family, make a living at the craft, and eventually become a major figure in the field.

But it was when I began to talk about last year's transformation of my activities that I ran into trouble, as it were. I explained how my business had been declining in recent years, and that the process of re-vitalizing it had involved a few important things: I had hired a number of new assistants - all women - and I had begun collaboration with other people far younger than myself, who brought interesting new ideas to blend with my own knowledge of the old traditional ways.

And as I talked about these things, I looked out over my audience. Every one of them male. Every one of them at least my own age, and most older.

They sat totally stony-faced, many with arms crossed, and none of them showing any response. Now that's not specifically a bad sign when giving a speech in Japan; total passivity is the standard (and of course polite) behaviour when listening to a presentation. You are never going to get 'Hear hear!' or shouts of 'Right on!'.

So I pressed on, made my points, and brought the thing to a comfortable conclusion, at which time they responded with the standard polite applause. A couple of short minutes later, the room was empty, as they all headed back to their cars, and their businesses. And of course now I wonder - did anything I say make even the slightest impression on these 'leaders of Japan'?

I'll never know!

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