

Lessons From Abroad

BarterNews: How did working in Ireland and Japan shape your thinking?

Billingsley: In Ireland I saw a country with 3.5 million people, that years ago had 10 million.

Seeing such a nation where there were still signs of two-thirds of the homesteads going vacant, people speaking quietly, or in Gaelic, being fiercely Catholic, and struggling to bring in industry, makes one realize that nations differ – and how strong and really fortunate we are in the United States.

An even bigger lesson was gleaned when I was working with the Japanese. My experiences there were very valuable and enlightening, because I had to learn to interact with an entirely different culture to be effective.

One of the most important things I did, to understand their ethical and interpersonal dealings, was visit a Buddhist temple and study their religious underpinnings.

In the U.S. we're all basically Judeo-Christian descendants and generally believe "thou shalt not lie, cheat or steal...and no sexual hanky-panky."

And our whole contract-law and legal system – the fact that we sign contracts – all stems from that ten commandments relationship, an interesting set of rules that works well to make our society work.

If I were to distill the general Buddhist world and tenets in the same fashion, it would be the seven precepts of Buddha, i.e. you should have right thoughts, right actions, and right deeds...and you should be diligent like Buddha.

We say you should be "honest", and they say "you should do what's right."

Now, our failing is that we look at situations and rationalize our actions by thinking, "I'm a man of my word, but caveat emptor (buyer beware)."

And few people here really feel there's anything wrong with that Western way of thinking, although in reality the increasing mingling of the two great religious and ethical systems creates frequent dichotomies.

In other words, if there are two intelligent people at an arm's length negotiation and one guy gets the better of the other, that's all fair – even if it's grossly unfair.

Suppose he paid \$8,000 for a \$3,000 car because he lets pride get in his way, and/or the other fellow was a much better salesman. Here, as long as everything is represented as it should be with no lying in the process, and legal documents are signed – we still believe "buyer beware."

The Japanese, on the other hand, wouldn't allow this to happen. It would be a "sinful" thing, as far as they were concerned. In their world if it was worth \$3,000 and should sell for \$5,000 that would be all right. But if sold for \$8,000 then it's not right.

If you do too many things that just aren't right, you get reincarnated as a crow and must learn those lessons again. And we think that's the most ridiculous thing we've ever heard.

Neither system is particularly better or worse than the other. It's just a different set of rules, like comparing checkers to chess.

But then, all of us sort of believe, in our childhood center, that there are guys down in a fiery place with pitchforks and horns who are going to stick us in the hind-end if we don't tell the truth! And the Japanese think that's the most ridiculous thing they've ever heard.

And in a balanced way, each is right and each is wrong. Neither system is particularly better or worse than the other. It's just a different set of rules, like comparing checkers to chess.

When you bring those two groups together you have the same 12"x12" rectangular board filled with squares. But one group is playing checkers and the other is playing chess. One jumps the other's pieces while the other moves randomly around the board... and each thinks his opponent is cheating.

BarterNews: So when you were working in Japan with General Electric was this type of thinking typical of your peers?

Billingsley: I think it is typical of all folks in any culture, although I never really checked it out.

For myself, I've always tried to solve the puzzle and to understand things that are different. Since I've been a "big picture" fellow, from early on in life, I've been trying to put together pieces of life's puzzle.

Until one gets enough pieces that can slip together and form a solid whole, one really doesn't quite understand how the world works.

But then at some point, for me it was about age 32, several things slid together. And I thought then that I understood what was now going on here.

As I put together my map, trying to understand different peoples, different cultures, different organizations, and different systems I find that it's easier and easier for me to interact in different situations, whatever they might be.

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