

◇特集Ⅱ. キャンパスの若者たち

LIGHTING A FIRE ?

起 爆 剤 ?

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“Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.” (William Butler Yeats)

Let me begin with a short speech that I recently gave to the new students during their Orientation Week in April:

Once again -- this time in English! -- welcome to Bunkyo University and congratulations on passing the entrance exam. This year, so many students wanted to enter universities that the competition was especially difficult. I think that now you must feel very happy to be in university -- and I think that you are also probably tired. Maybe even exhausted! You studied hard for many years, memorizing many facts to prepare for the exams; most of you went to *juku* and some of you were *ronin*. Now you need to recover. You want to rest, to enjoy yourself by making friends and joining sports clubs and other circles, and maybe you want a part-time job to have some spare cash. I don't want to get in your way, but I do urge you to reflect on your priorities. Sports circles and a part-time job may be good and important -- but they should not be the most important thing. If you make them the most important thing while you are here, you will waste the best years of your life -- maybe the most important years of your life.

Why are your four years at Bunkyo so important? Before now, when you were in middle school and high school, you had to do what you were told. After university, you are likely to get a job with a company and will need to work very hard; a bit later, you will probably have a spouse and then children. All this means many responsibilities will be on your shoulders, which will leave little time for other things. So perhaps the greatest freedom you will ever have is while you are here with us at Bunkyo University. However, freedom is like my hand: it has two sides. Freedom is a great opportunity, yet also a great danger if you don't use it wisely. If you waste and abuse that freedom, it is unfortunate, not only for you but for your family and those around you.

Why is this freedom so important? *Only now can you appreciate what real education is.* Until now, you went to school mainly to memorize information, but that is not the most important kind of education. The famous physicist Albert Einstein said: “Education is what is left when you have forgotten everything you learned.” What is left when you forget all the facts

you've memorized? Now is your chance to think for yourself -- that is, to learn how to think, and to ask yourself what you really want to do with your life. What is the best way to live? What is important in life? Is it enough to become a salaryman, to have a wife or husband, and children? Is it enough just to do what everyone else does, without thinking about it? You must decide for yourself, yet we teachers here at Bunkyo can help you learn how to think, and we can teach you about the things that we all need to think about. So, please use us well! Take advantage of what we can offer you.

There is another point that needs to be emphasized. In Japan recently, many people have been talking about "internationalization." So Bunkyo has a new *kokusaigakubu*, and many other universities have new *kokusaigakubu* as well. But what does internationalization really mean? Everyone has his or her own idea; maybe no one really knows, so let me give you my opinion. Internationalization is so important now because today none of us can afford to be nationalists. Now more than ever, nationalism is dangerous, because it means fierce competition between countries, culturally as well as economically and militarily. However, the most dangerous problems in the world today are international, global, and we will never be able to solve them as long as we are preoccupied with competing against each other in order to protect our own corner of the world. The biggest problem for all of us today is environmental: the world's ecology -- its "biosphere" -- is in great danger. If Japanese import companies cut down all the trees in southeast Asia, the people in southeast Asia will suffer -- but so will people in Japan, because there will be less oxygen and more pollution for everybody all over the world. Environmental problems have a way of ignoring national boundaries. When China burns coal, Japan gets acid rain.

The United Nations has said that we have no more than a ten-year "window of opportunity" before the degradation of the earth's environment may become irreversible. This means that the most important international issues today are not economic but ecological: whether we humans will destroy the earth, which is the mother as well as the home of us all. And for that reason what you will do in the future will be very important. Despite some recent economic problems, small Japan continues to be one of the most wealthy and influential countries in the world. Whatever Japan decides to do will have a big effect on the rest of the world. If Japanese and American and European corporations are interested only in profit and their own market-share, the environmental situation will get worse. This must change, and the ones who must help to change it are you. So a great responsibility is on your shoulders. If you are interested only in making money and having a good time, you will not be able to fulfill that responsibility. To meet it, you must be intelligent and well-educated. You must learn about what is really happening in the world, and you must learn how to think. So please use your time here well. Remember that we teachers are here to help you. But we can help you only if you want to learn.

These simple words summarize many of my feelings about Japanese students. The fact that

I present them in English, which means that some of the students do not understand what I say, touches on some of the other feelings I have about teaching in a Japanese university.

To be quite frank, my response to Bunkyo students is a contradictory, ever-changing mixture of love and occasional dissatisfaction, admiration and sympathy, hope and discouragement, enthusiasm and frustration -- and guilt, for the way that my poor Japanese (which I cannot blame on anyone else!) constantly limits my ability to communicate with them -- not only to teach them but (even more important) to motivate them.

The Japanese educational system is widely admired in many parts of the world for its success in teaching literacy and mathematics skills, and for the way it socializes children into Japanese society. Since I deal with the products of that system every day, however, I do not share much of that enthusiasm. And over the course of several years it has become obvious to me that many of my colleagues have much the same opinion, whether or not they are inclined to admit it publicly: in important ways the educational system is failing because it is not meeting the students' needs. Since we professors are among the significant agents of that system, let me personalize that last statement: we professors are failing the students, a fact I must remember whenever I find myself in the situation of needing to give a student a failing mark. Let me emphasize that I'm not referring specifically to Bunkyo University or to the Faculty of International Studies, for I suspect we do a better job than most universities. But, if there is a difference, it's relative: we don't do enough, and perhaps we can't do enough, because the odds are against us by the time we meet the incoming freshmen.

If I were the absolute ruler of a country who wanted an educational system that would ensure students would not criticize the present social structure, because they would be preoccupied with their own competition against each other; which, instead of teaching them about what is really happening, would stuff them full of largely irrelevant information; and which would teach them to hate studying -- if I wanted to accomplish all the above, I would devise something similar to the present entrance-exam-oriented system, which our students must endure before they make it into university. What is surprising to me, then, is not that so many of them arrive sullen, exhausted, and hating to study (because they have little awareness of how exciting true education can be). What surprises me, rather, is how much some (not all!) of the students are able to recover from their force-fed, military-like regimen. The image that comes to mind is the green shoots which manage to find a crack in the pavement and spring up into sunlight even in the midst of 'concrete jungles'. The innate desire to live and learn is not easily destroyed, and I rejoice when it happens: when students begin to open their eyes and think for themselves, and ask questions about what they have been taking for granted. Then there is an excitement in their eyes that is infectious and that reminds me why being a professor is the greatest job in the world. (But it is noticeable that this happens more often with women students, which suggests that in contemporary Japanese society there is not only a generation gap but also a worrisome gender gap.)

And then they graduate, going out into society to begin their own lives. Many of our students sooner or later become nostalgic for their college days. What they do not often realize, however, is that we professors also become nostalgic for them. Having invested so much of our time and effort -- of ourselves -- into their education, we miss them too and wonder how they are faring, whether they are finding interesting, challenging work that actually helps people, in a competitive economic climate which does not always value such things.

But that worry begins long before graduation, in the job-hunting that preoccupies and distracts students during much of their last year, and increasingly in their third year as well. After relaxing and enjoying themselves for the first year or two -- a necessary recuperation for many -- some students finally wake up in their third year, eager to learn and grow. Then, however, it is almost too late, for the pressures of job hunting soon appear.

I am sorry if this seems to present an overly grim state of affairs. Perhaps I am too pessimistic -- an occupational hazard for philosophers? -- but today especially it is important to be completely honest. The bursting of the economic bubble and the slow "recovery" since then has merely tightened the tension within universities as well as in companies, as students wonder about what the future holds for them. These pressures suggest that the entire educational system as constructed after the Pacific War needs drastic reforms. The place to start, I suggest, is by changing the university entrance exams, for they are the focal point of the whole system. If they change significantly, so will everything else as well. But that is the topic for another essay.

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