

REFLECTIONS ON JAPAN

Learning at lunch



After stacking the dishes, students hang their utensils by a hole in the handle on to the tray which is designed to hold plates, as well as the dishes.

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OUR VISIT to the Mashiki Chuo Elementary School was well anticipated. Representing, as it did, a break from the rigorous demands of the 2019 Japan Journalism Fellowship organised by the Association for Promotion of International Cooperation in collaboration with the Foreign Press Center Japan, and which this year is centred on the environment and disaster preparedness.

After participating in discussions and presentations about earthquakes, typhoons and flooding with state officials and administrators, I was really looking forward to this less focused and much more stress-free interaction.

The spontaneous welcome we received was heart-warming as the children shouted “hello, hello”, waving enthusiastically and reacting to our responses with squeals of laughter. We were caught off guard by this rich outpouring of childhood joyfulness.

Each fellow was placed at a cluster of desks with five students, and I was fortunate to be seated directly in front of an engaging 12-year-old by the name of Koki. I enquired whether anyone spoke English and was greeted with a raft of smiles and shakes of the head. Then Koki, with prompting from another desk, enquired if I knew Harry Potter, to which I laughed and replied in the negative.

I then tried to tell them I was from Jamaica and mentioned the country’s sprint legend Usain Bolt, at which point Koki asked, “Bolto”?

Before I had finished nodding in the affirmative, he assumed Bolt’s trademark ‘To the World’ pose and, as my face registered shock and confirmation, his face lit up. Now we were really talking.

FOLDING MILK BOXES

As I struggled to unwrap the plastic straw to drink my milk, Koki laughed at my awkwardness and gladly took it, being very careful to not let his hand touch it directly.

Koki finished his meal ahead of the rest and then did something which puzzled me. He took his milk box



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER SERJU

This student, who was the smallest and likely youngest person around the lunch table, struggled to fit his box in. No one offered to help and, eventually, a triumphant smile as he succeeds.



As lunch ended, the students placed the upturned chairs atop the tables and pushed them to the corner of the room.

and proceeded to open it in a way which led me to think he was being mischievous. I watched in surprise when another student proceeded to fold his empty box and put it inside Koki’s box. I struggled to make sense of this innocent gesture and then watched in amazement as each student in turn went about crushing their empty box and fitting it inside. When they were finished it amounted to just one box and I watched in amazement as this was repeated across the room.

Our ‘conversion’ continued, and again, I was in for a bit of intrigue

when at the end of lunch the children, with military precision, took their trays and went to a table where they stacked the dishes and proceeded to hang the utensils by a hole in the handle I had not noticed before.

They then placed the chairs atop the tables, pushing them to the corner of the room, which was cleared in minutes. I was stunned by the orderly manner in which this was accomplished, having come for lunch but being schooled in just a smidgen of the Japanese learning process.

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Japan’s evolving DIET

ANY CONVERSATION at home about the National Diet is likely to trigger an argument about the appropriateness of pairing imported cod from Newfoundland, Canada, with the ackee fruit reportedly imported to the Caribbean from Ghana before 1725. That ackee pays everlasting tribute to Captain William Bligh, by way of its scientific name *Blighiaspida*, and, combined with the Canadian cod, results in ackee and salt fish, Jamaica’s national dish.

But recently, in Tokyo, Japan, during a presentation by Dr Eiichi Miyashiro, a senior reporter with the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper and a distinguished member of the Foreign Press Center Japan, the National Diet turned out to require a different discussion.

Things were proceeding smoothly, as well they might given the circumstances, with Dr Miyashiro bringing the 2019 cohort of the Association for Promoting International Cooperation Japan Journalism Fellowship up to speed on the Imperial Family, Imperial Palace and Ceremonial Settings, ahead of the recent ascension ceremony/parade by the new emperor.

The first time Dr Miyashiro spoke about “convocation of the diet”, I let it slide. It was his mention of “proclamation of the general election of members of the diet” which led to my enquiry through an interpreter whether or not something had been lost in the translation.

VOTING SYSTEM

Not at all, the esteemed scholar assured me, going on to explain that the National Diet is in fact Japan’s bicameral legislature, consisting of a lower house, which is the House of Representatives and an Upper House. Both houses of the Diet are directly related under parallel voting systems. In addition to passing laws, the diet is formally responsible for selection of the prime minister and was first convened as the Imperial Diet in 1889.

Since then, it has undergone significant changes but, still for all, the much-needed civics lessons notwithstanding, courtesy of Dr Miyashiro, a scholar and gentleman who served up so much food for thought, every time I heard about the National Diet while in Japan, I couldn’t stop thinking sushi, fried rice, noodles, fish and soup.

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Madoka Kusano points to some of the supplies in the locker.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SERJU

Japan relief aid 101 explained

WE ALL listened attentively as details of how the relief agenda unfolds in response to a disaster or other emergency affecting residents in the town of Mashiki and pressed her with questions about areas of particular interest. One issue that caught our attention was the explanation that, following one disaster, baby formula was provided but, when it arrived, emergency response realised that there were no bottles in which to serve it.

We found it ironic that such a seemingly glaring omission could have occurred but Madoka Kusano, of the town’s Disaster Management Division, assured it was unlikely to recur as steps had been taken since to ensure that a comprehensive checklist of items was

updated on a regular basis.

She gave us a walk-through of the three lockers stocked with relief supplies located on the premises of Mashiki Chuo Elementary School, which serves as an evacuation in the event of a disaster.

SYSTEM OF TRUST

By the time she had opened the lockers to show us the different range of items stored, including farming implements; baby formula, of course; emergency stoves; tarpaulin and more, we were more than impressed but a little puzzled. The seeming paucity of relief supplies, given the amount of space available, suggested they were in need of more support.

Not so, according to the municipality

employee. Supplies were meant for emergency relief for an initial period of up to three days, after which more aid would be provided as needs dictated, hence there was no need for overstocking. That made sense, and with all our questions answered and the session winding down, Madoka casually mentioned that replicas of the key she had used to open all three lockers were also in the hands of all emergency response team members – police, fire department, and the Japan Self Defense Forces, as well as other state officials.

How could that make sense, and didn’t the issue of accountability come into play, we wondered?

On the contrary, she explained, it made more sense to do it this way, since in the

event that, at the time of a disaster, the person(s) responsible for disseminating relief or aid was sick or on leave, there was no risk of the process being held up, or relief delayed.

As one of four of participants in the Japan Journalism Fellowship, which is sponsored by the Association for the Promotion of International Cooperation in collaboration with the Tokyo-based Foreign Press Center Japan, it took me quite some time to digest this crazy notion that public cooperation could be predicated along these lines. Could it work like this in Jamaica? I wondered. Maybe, just maybe.

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