

“Fresh Eyes” A New Look at the Tokoha Experience

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The motto of Tokoha and the evergreen symbolized wishful thinking to me. The evergreen leaf like me a newcomer suggested promises dangled, inspiring like a wonderful mirage or a rainbow and equally attainable and ripe.

I had worked part time here before and knew what kind of a place Tokoha was when I changed to a full time position I felt like a made man, I was connected joining a family. Like a family there were so many wise persons around and I was happy to benefit from their experience and lack thereof. Before joining the team, many friends and colleagues wished me well and some even asked me, when considering the move, what sort of a wish I had.

After shaking the rijicho's hand I felt the unique sense of brotherhood at Tokoha I knew something was up and that an interesting future lay ahead. In the beginning, learning the school song and bonding with the other new teachers, we were educated about the ways and history of Tokoha. I was curious how it had evolved into the institution as it appears today. I had but to look at the smiling, agreeable faces of the comrades to know.

I was introduced to a rare form of Buddhism for the first time, doing Zazen in the kenshu center where you could get beaten with a bamboo pole three times to inspire you if you so desired or slept. Then clean your plate with green tea and a piece of pickled radish until it was spotless after eating in complete silence. This was particularly difficult when we accompanied the first year students; comprising of 150 giggling girls. Apparently, the Spartan monk lifestyle was a prerequisite, which we discovered in the form of a bonus or lack thereof.

These wonderful experiences, however, did nothing to prepare me for what lay ahead. Tokoha had a high-level English program with motivated and able students it can claim that it employs more foreigners than any other university. It is somewhat interesting that the current program at this university was established in 1984, as advanced technology had been implemented, in a similar fashion to that described in the book bearing that name, to facilitate faculty development. Its greatest feature is that it is a real equal opportunity institution employing a wide variety of teachers with colourful and diverse histories both competent and professionally challenged.

I felt like Tokoha was really doing their part to save the planet when they received the ISO 14001 award and the status of environmentally friendly university; I knew then that the three quarter inch stacks of paper we received every week would not go to waste.

During summer holidays we commented on how the school resembled another kind of institution without the students. Also, how Tokoha poured its resources back into the community and other pockets by cleaning out the neighbourhood and picking up garbage on foundation day. The two-day seminar in the middle of August where we went weeding was exhilarating. We climbed up mount Fuji, one team planting weeds to hold the mountain side together and prevent erosion, the other team pulling out weeds that had taken over the landscape; a rare exercise in futility not entirely uncommon at such events.

I fondly remember the Speech contest, when the organizer Greg O'Dowd a freshman like my self was given the task of running it, following in the footsteps of those knowledgeable colleagues who preceded him. Luckily he was offered encouragement and advice right up until the end by his loyal friend. It was certainly a contest full of surprises and creative evaluation. Also JB who's brief but meaningful stay at Tokoha showed us how the gears meshed, skipped and grinded and helped bring cultures together.

In summary Tokoha is a University where much is left to be desired and even more left up to the imagination. It is a wonderful place to teach but an interesting if not challenging place to work. The students are diligent and motivated, easily achieving the arbitrary goals set for them. Teachers are equally hard working, displaying rare levels of patience and communication skills especially with regards to management, which offers assistants, takes care of things and reigns rewards encouraging, inspiring with handbooks and a moving slogan like "no work no pay" reminiscent of other fence post portents or muses like work will set you free. At this time I can't think of any other institution worthier of praise, comparison, hyperbole or intrigue as those odious phrases described herein. Perhaps a fitting conclusion to this episode would be as follows:

"But I say, not in sleep but in the over-wakefulness of noontide, that the wind speaks not more sweetly to the giant oaks than to the least of all the blades of grass;

And he alone is great who turns the voice of the wind into a song made sweeter by his own loving.

Work is love made visible.

And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.

For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger.

And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes, your grudge distils a poison in the wine.

And if you sing though as angels, and love not the singing, you muffle man's ears to the voices of the day and the voices of the night." *The Prophet Kahlil Gibran*