

Just the Right Way

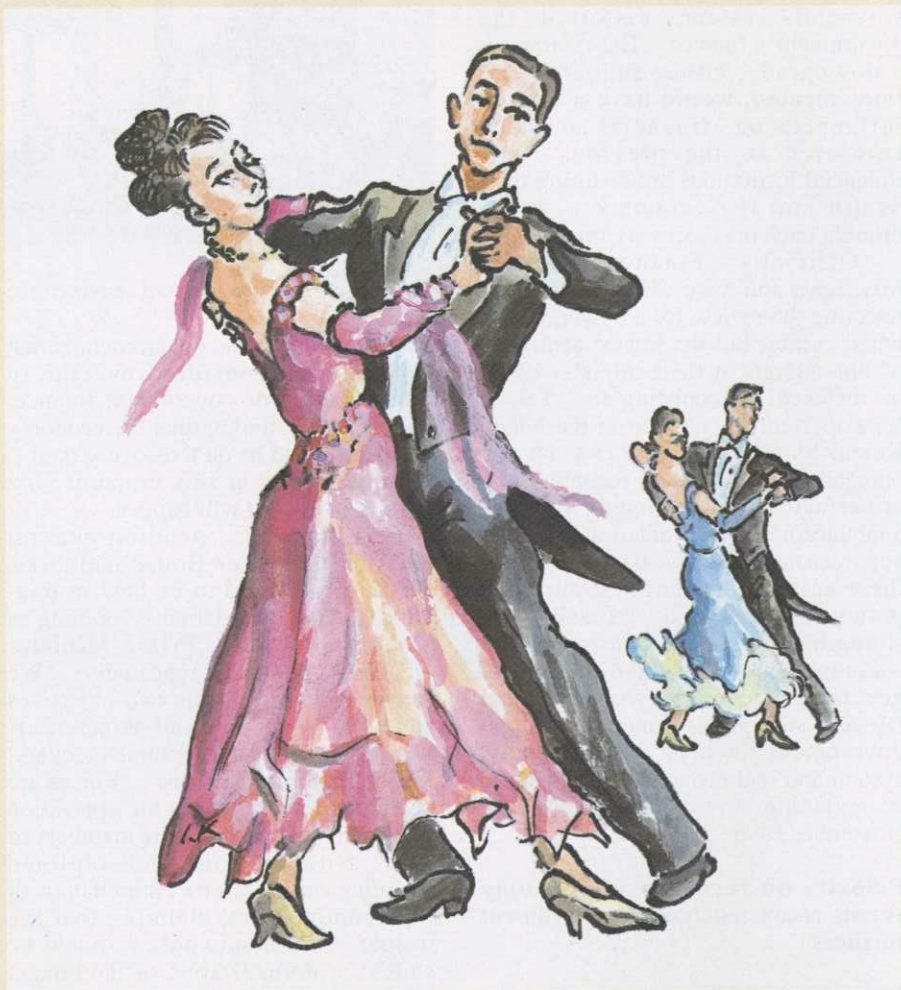
Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

Several years ago Suo Masayuki's movie "Shall We Dance?" made a splash at the Fine Arts Building Movie Theater in Chicago. As the lights flicked on at the end of the performance, much to my surprise and delight, a spontaneous ovation broke out, something I hadn't heard at a movie theater since my youth. The movie charmed us with a sympathetic and humorous tale of a beleaguered businessman, played by Yakusho Koji, who took to the dance floor to find meaning in life.

"Shall We Dance?" has fanned a flurry of formal ballroom dancing in Japan, even in the crusty old-fashioned area where I live. Hearing an ovation after a movie surprised me, and I left the Chicago Movie Theater with a longing to dance again, mixed with a sense of bewilderment.

After eight years of putting up with ballroom dancing lessons from the age of eight to fourteen and after waltzing at the Boston Cotillion in long white gloves as a debutante, I realized that I don't really know how to dance at all. As with many activities from hobbies to daily habits, Japan has taught me that although there may be many ways of doing things in this life, there is only one "right way." The clumsy box step that I was taught, with the emphasis on conversation and proper manners had none of the glitter and grace of what I see on the dance floors of Japan. Here women in flared skirts skim the floors in professional dance heels; the men glide with impeccable posture in suits and light weight dance slippers.

My childhood dance lessons were focused on male-female socialization. The boys were forced to choose their partners and initiate small conversation with them. A ruler was frequently produced to make sure that we danced at the "proper" distance of one foot from each other. During the breaks, the boys were trained to inquire whether



their partner wanted cookies and juice or crackers and tea. They were obligated to serve us our snacks. We young barbarians were thus initiated to the formalities of polite society.

Lost in the process, however, were the graceful swirling steps, the dipping of shoulders and the turnings of heads. We were expected to square off and talk through our rudimentary steps. Looking back, it strikes me that the real purpose of these sessions must have been to knock some manners into us.

So, after seven years of dance school, I am fit to do little but a clumsy two-step and follow a partner. I'm now determined to start all over and learn dancing, this time with grace and skill. In Japan, no matter what is attempted, the execution, the rituals and perfection of style are of utmost importance.

Swimming is still another example. Despite having spent three months every summer at the seashore swimming with abandon in the Atlantic Ocean, I face humiliation at the Tokyo

swimming pool. My neighbors who swim all do so with impeccable form, reaching their arms over their heads, each forming a certain perfected angle with the water in the process. The result is beautiful to behold.

Everything I experience in Japan represents the epitome of form and process. This country teams with the perfection of rituals seen not only in traditional activities such as the tea ceremony or the proper way to carry and give a gift, but in the details of everyday life.

Just today as I sat in the subway, I noticed that all shoes, apart from mine, were shining with polish. Care is given to this sort of detail. To most Japanese, it is a vital barometer of normalcy that shoes should be kept unscuffed and well tended. Shabby shoes reflect poorly on one's character. The same goes for the failure to carry a handkerchief. You won't find many Japanese men or women without a clean cloth handkerchief in their pocket or handbag - a commodity that no longer can be purchased in most American stores, but is sold even in the subway kiosks of Japan. The lack of a handkerchief reflects poor upbringing.

Many of Japan's traditions have the word "do" in them, meaning "path." *Sado*, the path of tea; *kado*, the path of flowers; *judo* and *kendo*, the paths of martial arts; *kodo*, the path of incense - are just a few examples. The kanji character expressing "do" in these names signifies that undertaking the activity involves a special way of living and a distinctive attitude. It encompasses peace and order and a diligent focus on the event at hand. The "path" or performance is just as important - perhaps even more important - than the results.

Approaching an activity in the correct way is more important than the taste of the tea, the correct identification of incense or the success in martial arts. The movement, the style and grace with which the end is accomplished is of chief concern.

It is no wonder that in such a society manuals and set procedures are

sacrosanct. After the Kobe earthquake, there was a flutter of re-writing of emergency manuals. Rescue operations had been delayed in a snafu related to the order of procedure. The necessity of following the proper line of command had held up relief as the response of the mayor and the reticence of neighboring officials to move in on someone else's turf brought quick reaction to a halt. Recently, a huge new tome has been penned to solve future problems.

In such emergency situations, a decentralized uncharted confusion draws a relatively smooth response in the United States, where just about everyone acts on their own volition without pause for procedure. Is it the lack of Confucian heritage or a lack of respect for authority that inspires the average American citizen to kick in and react in whatever way he or she deems appropriate? It always impresses me that while U.S. subways and other transportation systems are largely undependable and rarely follow a schedule, when an emergency surfaces, things go surprisingly smoothly, as if the system were tailored for just such events.



I am impressed with Japan's precision and high standards. Department store manuals indicate the exact angle at which their employees should bow and exactly how to approach a customer. Volunteer firemen practice their operations by the book with the appearance of a magnificently choreographed ballet. Every move has

been decided and ritualized.

As a result of this inherent exactitude, whenever I go to my bank and try to take money out, I'm faced with a nearly insurmountable problem. Most Japanese, when they aren't using cash cards, use their name seals in place of signatures. At my bank, though, I decided not to use a seal, but my own signature in line with American custom. The first time I tried to take out money, my signature was rejected three separate times because it didn't look exactly like my original sample. I wrote it again, and again after fifteen minutes of inspection it was rejected because I hadn't dotted one of the "i"s in Kiritani. Then after another fifteen minutes the next signature was rejected because of the way I crossed my "t".

Even though by now my local bankers know me very well, I'm still faced with this curious ordeal whenever I try to take out money using my signature. In all my years of dashing off careless signatures on checks in Boston, my signature was never once rejected, despite occasional failures of crossing "t"s and dotting "i"s and a wide range of script styles. Name seals are practical and always produce acceptable results. With such exacting care taken at Japanese banks, a personal check system like they have in the U.S. would grind business to a halt. In fact, in Japan personal checks are not used. Money orders and bank transfers take their place.

Inspired by such experiences, I'm starting all over to try to establish control and exactitude in my activities. I'm having a name seal made. And if all goes well and I adhere to my dance lessons, in a few years I hope to graduate from my awkward "tripping the light fantastic" to glide along the floorboards with grace and elegance. **JTI**

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Her husband, Kiritani Itsuo, is an artist who has held exhibitions in several countries.