

The New Breed (Part 2)

By Shozaburo Kimura

The generation gap was brought forcefully home to me three years ago as I watched an NHK television program focused on a discussion between a group of people in their 60s and a group in their 20s. Yoshiro Kato, a well-known cartoonist, was one of the older group. "By the time I was twenty," he said, "I had decided to become a cartoonist and spent all of my time learning how to draw and making up stories." Turning to the younger group, Kato asked, "Have you set similar goals for your future?" Inherent in Kato's query was the assumption that they probably had not.

True enough, few of the younger group could claim to be striving for any kind of clear-cut goal, and one of the group took it upon himself to explain why.

"It was easier to choose a livelihood in the old days. If you were the eldest son in a farming family, you simply took over the farm. If you were a second or third son, you went to the city, got an education and became a bureaucrat or, if that didn't appeal to you, you could, like yourself become a cartoonist or something else. The fact is there weren't that many possibilities to choose from, and this made your decision easier.

"Things are different now. We are faced with an almost infinite choice of occupations and companies, and it's very hard to decide on the one you want." It's a much more complex world today, he seemed to be saying, and that is why so many young people seem so tentative.

When I graduated from college in 1953, Japan was still struggling to recover from the wartime devastation, we had yet to embark upon our era of rapid economic growth, and jobs were scarce. Everyone was poor and hungry. A friend of mine, now a university professor like myself, lived in a small room above a *soba* shop, earning a steady diet of noodles by tutoring his landlord's son. This staved off hunger, but could hardly be called a nutritionally balanced diet, and I am convinced that malnutrition was the cause of my friend's premature baldness.

As the youth on the NHK program said, we did not have the leisure of contemplating career choices. Any job that would guarantee a livelihood was welcome. It didn't matter whether we liked the job or not. If there was work available, we were glad to have it.

Staying loose

Things are quite different now. No one is starving in Japan. When people look for work, they look for something that is worthwhile, not simply a means of earning enough money to keep their stomachs full. The goal is to make a career choice that will foster your own personal growth and provide ample opportunity to develop your talents. The problem is in deciding what this career should be. No one, neither parent, sibling, mentor nor friend, much less the individual himself, knows for what he is best suited. There are innumerable possibilities, and seeking out the one career that will stimulate your own talents and capabilities is like looking for a needle in a haystack. It is not surprising that today's young people should be overwhelmed by it all.

The current corporate trend toward diversification into widely different fields also means that even after you've signed on with a certain company, you may find yourself assigned to some very unexpected positions. A beer company may have you growing flowers, or an electric appliance maker may assign you to its new fish farm division.

Today's young people have adapted to this confusing situation in the only way they know how—by avoiding personal commitment and doing everything "for the time being." It is this lack of direction that has prompted their elders to label them the *shin-jinrui*, the "new breed."

There is just no way of knowing anymore what kind of career you may end up with or whether this career will be truly fulfilling. So the young Japanese reasons he might as well go to college for the time being, taking care to choose a famous

school and a popular major so that he will have more job offers later.

Having graduated from college, he goes to work for a particular company for the time being, always alert to the possibility of job-hopping if something better comes along. Unlike his elders, he refuses to become the dedicated company man committed to the corporation from morning to night. In place of the corporate loyalty that characterized his predecessors, he is ever careful to maintain a certain distance between himself and his work.

The Japan Productivity Center and the Junior Executive Council of Japan have surveyed the new crop of graduates every year for the past 17 years, and their results substantiate this view of modern Japanese youth. In response to a question on the relationship between work and leisure, 90% of the new company employees most recently surveyed said that they saw the two as completely unrelated, a 12-point increase over 17 years ago. Only 7% said they felt work was more important than anything else, 12 points fewer than when the survey was started. A mere 4% said leisure was more important than work, not too much of a change from the 2% of 17 years ago.

There has been a pronounced increase in the number of young people who work hard and play hard, balanced by an equally drastic decline in the number of people still adhering to the old-fashioned work-first ethic. In another decade, as the older generation raised in hunger and hard times gives way to a younger generation unfamiliar with such deprivations, Japan will enter a period of social transition second only to the Meiji Restoration more than a century ago, and the Japanese work ethic will become more akin to that in other industrial nations, resulting in a general slowing of economic activity.

Broad-ranging interests

Today's young people devote themselves to both work and play with equal

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enthusiasm. Their interests are broad ranging and diverse, including travel, sports, music and other performing arts and hobbies of all kinds. They are not simply killing time or seeking idle entertainment, and they do not hesitate to invest time, energy and money in things that are important to them personally.

Even the nature of travel, always a popular Japanese pastime, is changing. Whereas brief overnight group trips were once the favorite form of diversion and recreation, today's young traveler prefers to spend a longer time in one place, hiking, cycling, fishing and otherwise getting to know the area and its people. These kinds of trips are usually made with just the family or a few friends.

The new breed perceives such personal pursuits, whether play or study, as the truly meaningful part of life, and work is simply something that has to be done to make such pursuits possible. The "old" breed was motivated to work by a primary need for food, shelter and clothing, but this need no longer motivates the new breed. Unwilling to dedicate themselves to society, the company or anyone else, the new breed is dedicated to its own development, and is willing to invest what it takes to lead a rich, full life as individuals.

This same phenomenon is evident among Japanese housewives. Freed by technology from their household tasks, housewives have considerably more leisure time than in the past, and they are using this time to join the many women's volleyball teams found throughout the country, to sing with local choral groups, to attend community colleges, to take up all kinds of handicrafts and other hobbies and to do volunteer social work.

This trend has been progressing for the past decade and every day is full of all kinds of activities for the housewife. Her dreams of a television, refrigerator, washing machine and car have come true, and the new dream is for time of her own. Her material needs met, she wants to use her one obviously finite resource—time—to the best advantage.

What each person chooses to do with his or her time varies considerably from individual to individual. One person may take the greatest pleasure in putting on a musical performance, another may prefer to spend time at a computer terminal and still others may choose overseas travel, sports, gourmet dining or puttering around the kitchen—with many people enjoying a number of activities.

At work everyone wears the same uniform blue or gray and attends to his du-

ties with a sameness of attitude that belies individual differences. But in their personal lives, young employees enjoy great diversity. One of the effects of this kind of split-personality lifestyle, however, has been to create gaps between co-workers, and even between husbands and wives, that are difficult to close.

Many faces

There once was a time when you could pigeonhole people almost at a glance. Students looked and acted like students, teachers like teachers, bankers like bankers. Now you are likely to find the same person performing in an amateur noh performance, enjoying sports or working in an office or factory—and looking just as at home in any of these pursuits.

My first awareness of this trend toward multiple personalities dawned some 20 years ago during the student uprisings of the 1960s. Scruffy students who wore helmets, cloaked their faces with towels, shouted protests and wielded bamboo staves against the police by day changed into respectable attire and rushed off to tutor neighborhood children in the evening. They could be convincing both protesting against the establishment and reinforcing its values because they were fully committed to neither role. Yet this lack of commitment did not mean that their efforts were only half-hearted, for they applied themselves with equal seriousness to both, each in its own time.

For the new breed there is no permanence in anything, not in work nor in marriage. Everything is "for the time being," and the only thing that is permanent is the sense of anticipation that something better may be just around the corner. But what this has done is to foster an extreme self-centeredness and inability to give oneself freely to any other person, no matter how close. Whatever the young Japanese does, however vigorous and outgoing he may seem, he does with a profound sense of lonely alienation. ●

(This is the third of six essays to be written by Mr. Kimura.)