

from Reverend America

School (abridged) KYOKO MORI

Because we are a nation of immigrants, many Americans enter school with experiences of education in other cultures. This is particularly true of recent immigrants who enter college to learn English and prepare themselves for new careers in the United States. Award-winning novelist Kyoko Mori began her educational career in Japanese schools but left Japan in her twenties to study writing in English, her adopted language. In this selection from Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures (1997), Mori reflects on the differences of content and style between Japanese and American approaches to education and offers some eye-opening observations on the powers and limitations of both. She is an instructor of creative writing at St. Norbert's College in De Pere, Wisconsin. Her novel Shizuko's Daughter (1995) was a Publishers Weekly Book of the Year. In addition to several other novels for young adults, she is the author of The Dream of Water: A Memoir (1996).

During our senior year at college, some of my classmates said they could hardly wait to graduate, to join "the real world." They couldn't concentrate on classes, knowing that they would soon be out of school forever. I

didn't feel the same way at all. School seemed as "real" to me as "the outside world" — only more interesting.

I still don't trust the distinction often made between school and "the real world," which implies that there is something insubstantial or artificial about school. The business meetings I attended in Milwaukee as an inter-preter confirmed my suspicion that arcane and "academic" discussions don't happen only at colleges. The directors of two small companies, one Japanese and the other American, once had a twenty-minute debate about whether the plastic cover of a particular camera lens should be "pumpkin yellow" or "the yellow of raincoats." What each man meant by these terms was unclear to the other and had to be redefined many times over. This is the conversation I recall now when I attend academic conferences and cannot understand what is being said about a book I have read more than once.

School and "the real world" both have their absurd moments, but school is where people go when they are not satisfied with their "real world" lives and want a change. Many Americans in their thirties and forties go back to college to get trained for a different line of work or to pursue a life-long interest they couldn't afford to study earlier. Until they are in need of such second chances, most Americans take colleges for granted because they are always there — almost any adult can get into some college at any age.

Being able to go back to school is a particularly American opportunity. My Japanese friends will never be able to do the same. In Japan, school does not give anyone a second chance. Many of my Japanese friends are married women with money who already have college degrees. But none of them can go back to college to earn a second degree in art, education, or social work, as their American counterparts may do.

Recently, a few Japanese colleges have started accepting applications from adults who have been out of school for years, but these colleges are exceptions. The only way most people can get into a college in Japan is to take and pass the entrance examination for that particular college immediately after graduating from high school. The number of exams a student can sit for in a given year is limited, since many schools give their exams on the same day.

A student who does not get into any college will have to wait a year, attending a cram school. There is a word for a student in this situation — *ronin* (floating person). In feudal times, the word referred to samurai whose clan had been dissolved. Feudal *ronin* had to roam around until they could find a new master to serve. To be a modern *ronin* is scarcely better: while their friends move on to colleges or jobs, *ronin* must float around for a year, without any allegiance. In Japan, anyone who doesn't belong to the right group at the right time feels like a failure. If a *ronin* can't get into a college after a year at a cram school, he or she usually gives up and settles for a low-paying job rather than spending another year floating around.

In the States, young people who don't feel ready for college can work for a few years and then apply when they feel more motivated or mature.

Young Japanese people don't have the same chance. For older adults to go back to school to have a second chance — at a job or an artistic career or personal fulfillment — is practically impossible.

The very accessibility of schools in America adds to the perception that they are not real or substantial enough. Many Americans who criticize their own school system for being "too easy" idealize the Japanese school system because they are drawn to its tough image. The details Americans cite as the merits of the Japanese system actually reflect their ideal of the mythical "real world" where people must work hard — long hours, the emphasis on discipline and basic skills, the tough competition among peers. These people admire the Japanese school system because they see it as a samurai version of their own fantasies about the American work ethic.

My education at a traditional Japanese grade school was nothing so glorious. Day-to-day life at a Japanese public school was harsh but also boring. Until I transferred to a private school in seventh grade, I didn't learn anything that I couldn't have learned at home by reading and memorizing the same books with my mother's help.

Recently when I was in Japan, I was asked why I did not write my novels in Japanese, why I did not at least translate my own work. The question surprised me at first. The people who asked knew that for twelve years I have lived in a small Wisconsin town where I have few opportunities to speak Japanese. No one can write novels in a language she has not spoken every day for more than a decade. But there is another reason I could not possibly have written my novels or poems in Japanese: I was never taught to write in what was my native language. My public education in Japan prepared me to make the correct letters to spell out the correct sounds, but that is not the same as teaching me how to write.

When I started the first grade at six, I had not been taught to read at home — at least not in a formal way. Because my mother read to me all the time, I had memorized my favorite books and could read along with her. Sometimes, when my mother and I were standing on the street corner waiting for a taxi, I noticed that I could read the license plates of the cars passing by. I would read the plates and she would nod and smile because I was right, but no big fuss was made about my being able to read. Most of the other kids starting school with me were the same way: we sort of knew how to read because of our mothers, but we hadn't been formally trained.

In first grade, we were taught the fifty phonetic signs that make up the Japanese alphabet, a dozen simple pictorial characters, and the basic numbers. By the end of the year, everyone in our class could read our textbooks and write simple messages to our family and friends in our sprawling, uneven handwriting. People who admire the Japanese education system are partially right. Japanese schools are very good at teaching skills like basic

writing — which can only be learned through memorization and repeated practice.

Once we learned the alphabet and some pictorial characters, my classmates and I wrote compositions about our families, our vacations, our friends. Occasionally, our teachers had us write stories and poems as well. In summer, we were given notebooks in which we had to keep "picture diaries": on the upper, blank half we drew pictures, and on the lower, lined half we wrote sentences about what we did every day. These assignments gave us a lot of practice at writing.

When we got to the upper grades, though, our assignments changed. We no longer wrote stories or poems; our compositions weren't about our personal experiences or feelings. Almost every writing assignment was a book report or a summary of our reading. We had to follow a very strict formula, organizing our thoughts under predetermined headings like "plot," "characters," "setting," "themes," "what we learned from the book." If we didn't follow the format, we got poor grades.

The grades didn't always make sense. Luckily, I did well most of the time, but I wasn't sure what I did right aside from adhering to the format. The only suggestions I got were circled corrections where I had used the wrong pictorial characters or general remarks about my bad penmanship.

A few of my friends didn't do so well, but they were never given suggestions for improvement. They would simply get low grades and comments like "Your writing needs improvement," "You didn't really follow the directions for the assignment," or "I can see you tried some but you still have a long way to go." Often, our teachers openly scolded pupils. In front of the whole class, my friends were told to "pay better attention" and to "try harder." It didn't matter that most of them were serious and well-behaved students, not lazy and inattentive troublemakers; they were already trying hard, trying to pay attention.

No matter what the subject, our teachers never gave us very clear advice about how to do better. When I couldn't understand long division or fractions and decimals in math, I felt bad at first. On the timed tests we had every day, I could finish only half the problems before the teacher's stopwatch beeped, telling us to put down our pencils. The results were put up on the wall, and my name was always near the bottom. I was told to "try harder," but none of my teachers spent extra time with me to go over what I was doing wrong. Since I wasn't given a real chance to improve, I decided after a while that I didn't really care how I did.

Over and over again, our Japanese education offered this sort of harsh judgment combined with vague exhortation. In every subject, kids who didn't do well were made to feel ashamed and yet given no chance to improve. The humiliation was especially obvious in physical education classes. At our grade school we were expected to learn to swim in the same way we were expected to learn to write: by sheer repetition and "trying harder." We were left to swim around on our own, but the pool hours weren't just for

fun. Each of us had to wear a cloth swim-cap with the symbol that indicated our skill level. Students who couldn't swim at all were singled out by the big red circle sewn on top of their caps. "Red mark, red mark, you'll sink like a big hammer," some of the other kids taunted, and the teachers did nothing to stop them. I was glad that I already knew how to swim by the time I started school.

For those of us who could swim, there were monthly tests to determine how far we could go without stopping. For every five or ten meters we could swim, our mothers sewed red or black lines on the side of our caps. Those who could swim fifty meters in the crawl, sidestroke, or breaststroke got the best marks on their caps: five all-black lines. In fifth grade, when I passed the test for fifty meters, my teachers praised me for having "tried so hard," even though I was able to do so well only because my mother had taught me to swim in the river near her parents' home. Unlike my teachers, my mother enjoyed giving specific instructions. She drew diagrams on paper to show me what my arms and legs should be doing for crawl and sidestroke. Then she made me lie down on the sand on the river bank to practice the arm and leg movements. Once I was in the water, she stood on the bank shouting out instructions like "Stretch your arms all the way," "Turn your head sideways." When my form was wrong, she shoved me by imitating me — exaggerating my awkward movements and making me laugh. "I don't look like *that*," I protested, but I knew exactly what I needed to improve.

I did not learn how to write in Japanese because even at the private school I attended after seventh grade, Japanese language classes were taught by older men who had studied classical Japanese literature or Chinese poetry at the national universities before the war. They were the most conservative and traditional of all our teachers. In their classes, we read the works of famous authors and wrote essays to answer questions like "What is the theme?" "When does the main character realize the importance of morality?" "What important Buddhist philosophy is expressed in this passage?" All the writing we did for our extracurricular activities — for skits or school newspapers and magazines — was supervised by younger teachers who did not teach Japanese.

During those same years, we learned how to write in English. Our English teachers were young Japanese women who had studied in the States or England, and American women from small Midwestern towns who had just graduated from college. In their classes, we wrote essays about our families, friends, hobbies, future dreams — personal subjects we had not written about at school since third grade. We were given plenty of instruction about the specifics of writing: word choice, description, style. Our essays came back with comments both about our writing and about the thoughts we had expressed. I looked forward to writing essays and reading my teachers'

comments. By the time I was a high school senior, I wanted to be a writer, and English was the only language I could write in.

To study writing, I had to go to an American college. Creative writing was not — and still is not — offered at Japanese colleges, in English or in Japanese. I don't know how Japanese writers learn to write, since most of them, as children, must have had the same kind of education I had. There are no schools or writers' conferences where a person can study creative writing as an adult. I have never heard of people getting together to form a writing group or workshop.

Writing is not something that comes naturally to the chosen few. Most American writers of my generation didn't just learn to write on their own. Without the classes we took in creative writing and modern literature, we wouldn't have known what to read, how to read it, how to pay attention to form and content. We needed to be shown how to write good dialogue, smooth transitions, pared-down but vivid character descriptions. These things didn't come naturally. It would have taken us thirty years to learn, on our own, the same skills we learned in eight years of college and graduate school. My friends at graduate school came from average Midwestern homes; they were not children of famous writers. School gave us a chance we would never have had otherwise. In America, we are proof that the romantic notion of the natural writer is a myth. In Japan, where no formal training is offered in writing, the myth may be a sad reality that prevents many people from becoming writers.

In Japan, whether you are in school or at your private karate, judo, or *ikebana*¹ lesson, you can never question the authority of the teacher, whom you address simply as "sensei," literally, "one whose life comes first." Unless there are multiple teachers who need to be distinguished from one another, you do not even use their family names, much less first names (which you most likely do not know). The teacher is like the biblical God, whom you cannot name.

Students are not expected to question the competence of their teachers or the usefulness of their assignments; any more than Zen disciples can rebel against their master and his koans. Japanese students who study at American universities are amazed that at the end of the semester most universities ask their students to evaluate their teachers. Even though students in Japan complain to each other about their teachers, they would never think of writing an evaluation or filing official grievances.

In the teaching of many traditional Japanese art forms, the teacher's authority is backed up by a complex hierarchy called *ie* that controls instruction. Even the choice of this word, since it means both "house" and "family origin," reflects high expectations of allegiance. What is described in English as a "school" (such as a school of writing or painting) is actually a "family" in Japanese. Each *ie* is structured like a family hierarchy; at the top is

the head teacher, called *tennō* (source of the house), and under him are various assistant teachers who, in turn, take their own assistants. All these teachers are licensed by the *ie*. A beginner in *ikebana* or Japanese dance will study with a minor assistant teacher for a few years and then move on to a more advanced teacher. There are various levels of competence awarded along the way, but every advancement must be approved by the *ie*.

The system makes it impossible for a student to challenge any teacher's decision, since the teacher can invoke the authority of the whole clanlike hierarchy. Teachers can make any arbitrary decision so long as it can be backed up by the *ie*. When my cousin Kazumi studied *ikebana*, she was disillusioned by the unfair judgments her teachers made every year about who should be allowed to advance to the next level of competence. There were no tests or lists of tasks and qualities that determined the advancements. Who advanced and who didn't seemed entirely up to the teachers' whims. People who were related to any of the teachers rose through the ranks much faster than those who weren't.

In so many ways, Japan is a place of no second chances. Many of my friends are in very unhappy marriages. They write to me about the shouting and shoving matches they have with their husbands, about the night they tried to run away, only to have the husband chase them down the street, catch them, and drag them home. Unable to run away, my friends lock themselves up in the guest room or sleep in their daughters' rooms to avoid sleeping with their husbands. For most American women, leaving a bad marriage like theirs would be nothing but happiness. My friends stay because divorce still carries a big stigma in Japan. If they leave their husbands, they may never be able to see their children again. Certainly, they will not be able to marry again and try another chance at marriage. Nobody marries a divorced middle-aged woman in Japan.

Life in Japan is like an unending stint at a school where you have to keep taking tests — giving your answers under pressure without help or

guidance, knowing that you will get no second chance if you make a mistake. Japanese people have to make many of the big decisions of their lives — whom to marry, what company to join — without detailed information, since it is rude to ask direct questions even at *omiai* meetings² and job interviews. They have no choice but to trust authority and do their best, just as they were supposed to do in school. If their job or marriage turns out to be a disappointment, they will be given the same vague exhortations they heard from their teachers: keep trying, work hard, pay attention.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with trying harder. Sometimes when I see my former students in Green Bay seeming to flounder — waiting on tables or working clerical jobs they hate, the whole time talking about their big plans to "go back to school" soon — I think maybe a little Japanese perseverance might not hurt them. I know that for them or for anyone else, going back to school does not guarantee a job or happiness. Within school, too, when my students complain that everything we read in a modern American literature class is depressing or that I simply do not "like" their work (when every poem they wrote in the class is a love poem in couplets), I long for a little Japanese respect for authority. Some of my students would be better off if they trusted me a little rather than questioning my decisions at every turn. Still, I would rather have students who question too much than those who assume that I know best and don't owe them any explanations. No one should have power that is unjustified and unjustifiable, regardless of how convenient or efficient it may seem for the smooth running of the classroom, the educational system, or the country.

The problem with the Japanese system, ultimately, is that individual freedom — to question the teacher, to disagree — is sacrificed for the supposed convenience and protection of the whole group. The system works well for people who feel no desire to rebel. The Japanese *ie* system my cousin complained about does ensure that anyone who perseveres in a given art form will have some recognition; periodically, every student is asked to take part in public exhibitions or concerts. Most Japanese students have public-performance opportunities many of my American friends — artists and musicians — don't.

But for me — as well as for my cousin — the price is too high. The security comes with too many obligations. The *ie* system asks that you trust your teachers who have not earned or deserved your trust. What you are required to have is blind faith in the *ie*: like the church or the mosque, the *ie* is an institution that is designed to inspire total obedience to its rules. In Japan, if you reject your chance to enjoy the security that comes from joining the right group such as an *ie*, an elite school, a good company, or a respectable family, you will have to leave the country or live in it as an outcast. Life in Japan resembles the harshest interpretation of a religious faith: the Koran or the sword, either you are with Christ or against him, either you join the sheltering umbrella of Japanese security or you have nothing. In

²*Omiai* meetings: Meetings with a matchmaker to set up an arranged marriage.

school and elsewhere, people are rewarded for obeying the rules diligently, never for taking a chance and being different, or for asking good questions.

But words like *security* and *uncertainty* are misleading. Because Dutch-style flower arrangement is not as popular as *ikebana* and the association does not provide the same kind of protection that a traditional *te* gives its teachers, my cousin is struggling to get enough students for the classes she offers. She has quit her clerical job, which she did not like, and committed herself to the life of a flower-arrangement teacher. She isn't going to get a second chance at being a clerk or going back to *ikebana*. My cousin's life is uncertain and insecure. But daily, as she arranges her own flowers and watches her students cutting and arranging theirs, she is certain of other things. She knows when she is making a good arrangement and when she is not. In Dutch-style arrangements, my cousin has learned what colors and shapes look pleasing; she has a firm sense of what she considers beautiful. She also knows that she will tell her students exactly what she thinks about their work rather than keeping her criticism to herself or being vague. Kazumi feels a certainty about truth, beauty, honesty. That is the only certainty worth choosing.

ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. Why, according to Mori, do many Americans feel that the work they do in college is not directly related to "the real world"? Why do many Americans also feel that Japanese schools, by contrast, are worthy of admiration? To what extent do you agree that the world of American higher education is "unreal" and that Japanese schools appear to be more connected to prevailing social or economic realities?
2. What are the limitations of the Japanese educational system according to Mori? What is her view of the American educational system? To what extent have your experiences in American schools confirmed or challenged Mori's conclusions?
3. What does Mori find "paradoxical" about the styles of both the Japanese and American educational systems? How does she explain this paradox? Do you generally agree that American educators value "the overall spirit" of a student's work and spend more time in class offering advice about how to improve details and technique?

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

4. Compare Mori's view of American education with those of John Taylor Gatto (p. 152) and Deborah Tannen (p. 233). Which of these perspectives agrees most nearly with your own experiences in American schools?
5. Compare Mori's experience of learning English with that of Richard Rodriguez (p. 194). How would you account for the differences in their attitudes toward the English language?
6. How might Claude M. Steele (p. 211) evaluate the kinds of comments Mori finds to be typical of American writing teachers?

EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

7. Write a brief description of the style of the writing instruction you received in school. How does it compare with Mori's experience of learning Japanese and English in Japan? How well prepared has the instruction you received left you? What, if anything, do you wish your teachers had done differently?
8. If you have ever studied in another country, write a paper in which you compare the educational style of that nation with the style of education you have encountered since attending school or college in the United States. How does your crosscultural educational experience compare with that of Mori?