

The Japanese Path to Phronimos Education

Shuzaburo Takeda, PhD

Executive Director, BUF of Japan

Professor and Advisor, Waseda University

US National Superintendents Round-Table, Fall 2008 Meeting,
Long Island Marriott Hotel & Conference Center,
101 Doolittle Boulevard
Uniondale, NY

Financial Crisis and Great Leap Forward

I would like to start my talk by referring to the present chaotic situation into which our world has been plunged. The financial crisis has developed into a huge global dilemma. On top of this we are inundated with aggravating problems of terrorism, high oil prices, global warming, a worsening HIV/AIDS pandemic, a rampant drug trade and substance abuse, indiscriminate killing and growing numbers of juvenile crimes.

Some there are who groundlessly fear the imminent collapse of the world, but there are others among us who believe that we are on the eve of yet another paradigm shift—a great leap forward.

There are basic differences in these contrasting views. According to Arne Ness, a Norwegian philosopher who developed a new ecosophical theory known as Deep Ecology in the late 20th century, the former (favored by the doom-sayers) belongs to a shallow, human-centric (self-centered and arbitrary) way of thinking, while the latter springs from a deep and nature-centric (non-anthropocentric, rational) world view—*Weltanschauung*.¹ The former is also a partial view while the latter is holistic.

We learn from history that both these views have been vindicated to a point. That is to say, there have been societies that collapsed, but that was as a result of being unsuccessful at their grand challenge. Humankind on the whole has continued to leap forward toward a better society.

Even quite recently, great leaps forward occurred during the 19th century in societies that succeeded in their grand challenges, shifting their centers of gravity to science, rationality, openness and democratic ways, and away from their conventional acceptance of superstition, entrapment and feudalism. In other words, they successfully shifted their mindset that had been centered on feudalistic mores and the individual's station in society to a more open and democratic one based on scientific rationality. Needless to say, science was heuristic and not foolproof, just as democracy was not, crude still, with too many imperfections. That does not subtract from the fact that on the whole these societies represented better

thinking and governance.

This applies to the paradigm shift we are entering today in which there will be a grand leap forward for the better in terms of science, rationality, openness and democratic governance. The center of gravity will shift from pursuing materialistic gratification to spiritual fulfillment.

As you can see, I belong to the latter way of thinking: that we are on the eve of another grand leap forward, and not a breakdown. The leap will not take place all at once in a clap of thunder, but in one field at a time over decades or perhaps centuries. In fact, a great leap took place in Japan a few decades ago in the fields of quality control and manufacturing led by students of William Deming. I believe this time it will be in the financial sector, followed by sustainable ecology, climate change, terror, economy, industry, technology—and the wave will surely engulf education¹.

Deming, in republishing his book on his mentor William Shewhart, wrote in the foreword that it would probably take the next fifty years for the world to understand Dr. Shewhart's contribution to education, science and industry, and I believe that was a correct assessment.

Apart from the question of how many of us here today will live to witness it, I for one am convinced that there will be not just a shallow but a profound new approach to education, science, industry (certainly finance), and terror by the end of this century.

This does not mean that we can sit and twiddle our thumbs in anticipation of a better future. We know there is a fine highway beyond the muddy and potholed road we are now on. Can we all make it to the highway? Perhaps some will be stuck in the mud while others may go back out of nostalgia for the predictable past.

For these reasons, unexpected tensions are apt to arise during the great leap forward. Everett Rogers, the pioneer of the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, pointed out that in any social reform there will be innovators and laggards³. The difference between the two is enormous. For example, in the last leap were the people who lived as the barbaroi in the northern forests of the European Continent and as the pioneer in the new Continent, and who then came onto center stage. In Asia, it was Japan, 'the Eastern Barbaroi' as the Chinese saw them, who joined the innovators and came downstage. China that until then had ruled unchallenged, and a divided India, struggling to maintain its independence and integrity, was forced to give way to the forces of change (attachment)².

Unpredictable tensions will undoubtedly accompany the leap

this time. Today, the US and Japan are the first and second world economic powers. The US has led the world also in military science, technology and education. Neither is promised the same status in the wake of the next great leap. Actually, I fear there are already signs that if nothing is done both countries might fall behind, as China and India did before them—if only for lack of imaginative leaders able to meet the challenges of the times.

(the first part only)