

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Reflections on Japan

Posted: 21 Apr 2010 5:14 PM PDT

If I don't write, I don't sleep. Impressions of our time in Japan have begged to be captured so that I didn't lose them and could freely focus on the next unique experience.

Keeping up to date has been a challenge on this trip because my T-Mobile Blackberry didn't have service in Japan, Ray's modern touch-pad Verizon Blackberry had service but its super-sensitive system confounded me, and the Hyatt's computer wouldn't allow me to send messages. I was forced to await our arrival in India to offer these impressions of Japan.

With the exception of the shared religious influence of Buddhism, the heavy emphasis placed on familial responsibility, narrow gender role expectations, the steering wheel being on the right, and the lack of comfort in discussions of sexuality, Japan and Indian culture seem to have little in common.

Japan is an exceedingly clean, reserved, and well-ordered country where black is the most common color of clothing, people wait for others to depart subway cars, there is no loud music, there is no litter or graffiti, vendors do not hawk their goods, the homeless do not beg, crime is negligent, terrorism is foreign, no one crosses against the light, people sit erect with both feet on the floor, smokers are generally invisible, shrines are bountiful, statues and fountains are rare, technology is cutting edge, ground transportation is excellent, people who vacuum subway stairs and wash the glass panels on escalators take great pride in their work, English is not commonly spoken, water is potable, everyone minds his or her own business and never makes eye contact unless engaged in conversation, and homogeneity is greatly valued. In Japan it is said that the protruding nail gets hammered. This seemed very true to us. There is very little deviation in dress or manner.

After New York and London, Tokyo is the largest financial center in the world. The population is 12 million. It prides itself in adaptability and ingenuity, having rebuilt itself from scratch after the devastating earthquake of 1923 and the Allied bombing at the end of World War II. Until recently, Japan was the leading exporter in the world. Its people are hard working, with the caricature of the Japanese manager being a man who wears black suits, arrives at work early, stays late, socializes with other businessmen until after his children are asleep, and sees his respectful wife and well-behaved offspring only on weekends.

The birthrate in Japan has dropped for the third consecutive year, as has tourism. Though the country has traditionally looked with aghast at the economic disparity of the American people, Japan now recognizes its own significant percentage of people living below the poverty line. The younger generations of Japanese have different attitudes toward sexuality and family than their parents, influenced heavily by the Internet, time abroad, Western films and television, and exposure to Western tourists.

I was brought to Tokyo by Bank of America/Merrill Lynch and Goldman Sachs to help educate their senior executives on gay and transgender issues. This education is part of their war for talent. In order to attract and retain the best and brightest people, it is commonly accepted in the business world that you have to create an environment in which people feel safe and valued. There are few openly gay Japanese nationals in the workplace. Those who are out at work tend to be Western. Both gay Japanese and Western workers at Merrill and Goldman predicted that the Japanese executives in my audiences would be keenly interested in knowing how better to relate to gay Westerners but they would not see the information as applicable to the Japanese, where homosexuality is tolerated as an oddity. It was my challenge to make the case that the protruding nail actually gets promoted in corporations in Japan as elsewhere.

Another goal of the presentations was to help the banks more effectively market to the gay community locally. In every country in the world there are wealthy gay people who want to be treated with respect and who will loyally support companies that make a good effort to address their unique needs.

To fully prepare myself to understand the unique cultural challenges I faced in addressing these issues in Japan, I did homework in advance by reading extensively on Japanese culture and what influences attitudes there, and by speaking at length with Japanese gay men in the United States and with gay Western men in Japan. (Japanese lesbians are less visible and accessible.) To that end Kenji Yoshino, the esteemed professor of law and celebrated author at New York University's School of Law, Steven Golden at Goldman Sachs, and Jason Kendy at Merrill Lynch were extraordinarily helpful. From them I learned, among other things, that the lack of fundamentalist religious influence in Japan and the absence of the often polarizing Gay Rights Movement allowed gay people in Japan to live safe if not celebrated lives.

Once we arrived in Japan, Ray expertly navigated the subways to help me get a flavor for the culture by visiting several historic museums, parks, cemeteries, and shrines. We also took the high-speed train to Kyoto to get a better sense of the Japanese countryside and to view the uniquely beautiful Shogun castle and temples there.

Pagoda-style shrines dotted the mountainous countryside and small rivers snaked their way through villages but there was little charm to be found among the electrical and telephone wires and concrete buildings that could have been outside a train traveling through almost anywhere in the world. Baseball teams practiced in open fields surrounded by houses with ceramic tiled roofs, but there was little that felt exotic beyond the respectful bow that the train attendant gave the car's passengers each time she moved from our car to the next. (I tried in vain to imagine a conductor on a train in New York or Boston doing the same.)

Ray and I left our home in Ft. Lauderdale on Thursday, April 15 at 6:00am and arrived in our room at the Grand Hyatt at 6:00pm on Friday. American Airlines took us from Miami to Tokyo via Dallas. The flight attendant on the leg from Dallas ended up being a friend of Ray's cousin, Jim Struble, so we got extra ice cream. Ray watched four movies, including the horrible "Did You Hear About the Morgans?" I spent much of my time trying to figure out if the cute guy sitting across the aisle who made extended eye contact was gay. After noting that all he watched were re-runs of "The Office" I decided that he was straight or bi-curious.

My sister Kathy sent Ray and me inflatable seat cushions that made a big difference in our comfort on the long flights and on the two-and-a-half hour train ride to Kyoto. Ray's back pain and my chronic sciatica were regrettable challenges to our full enjoyment of the trip.

At the Grand Hyatt in Tokyo, we upgraded to have access to the lounge where we saved money morning and night by eating our breakfast and making the appetizers our dinner each day. Tokyo is a very expensive city. We also saved money, and experienced the city like the locals, by riding the extensive subway system. Ray loved the challenge of figuring it out for each outing.

Though the cherry blossoms bloomed in abundance—along with azaleas, dogwoods, and camellias—during the week we were there, it also snowed on the first morning, the latest such occurrence for Tokyo in decades.

My actual workday began on Tuesday when I spoke at Bank of America/Merrill Lynch from 5:00 to 7:00, followed by reception and dinner with the Global Diversity team, including the Executive Director Geri Thomas from Atlanta.

Half of my audience at the BA/ML talk was from other firms, banking and otherwise. I felt very good about my time with the group and received a wonderful response. Kenji Kawashima, the Deputy President, and Representative Director of the firm told me and others he thought it was the best presentation he had heard on any subject. That was nice to hear.

During the talk and in the reception afterward, we had a terrific discussion about cultural differences between the West and the East and whether it was not patronizing for any Westerner to assume that Japan was incapable of shifting attitudes on homogeneity and the value of the protruding nail. One Englishman had challenged my belief that every person wants to die knowing he or she had been true to themselves and had experienced their uniqueness. He said that people in Japan and elsewhere might well die content that their lives had served the greater good. I acknowledged my Western bias but was then supported in small group discussion by Japanese women and men who said that in their hearts they seek individual affirmation too. The significance of this discussion is of course whether it's possible for a corporate ideal of valuing individual differences to effectively transcend cultural norms. Several of the Japanese audience members privately speculated that the homogeneity that is commonly associated with Japan is more a unique characteristic of Tokyo and is necessitated by the good order required for the smooth running of such a large city. People in more rural areas were considered to be far less alike.

After the reception that followed my presentation, Jason Kendy, the firm's openly gay and exceedingly charming and entertaining head of public relations and marketing in Japan hosted Ray and me and a small group of diversity professionals for a wonderfully unique and authentic Japanese dining experience around a fire pit on the second floor of a very old building in which we shared everything from sushimi and miso soup to fish grilled on sticks in the fire between us and chicken, pork, and beef that we grilled ourselves. It was a really fun evening.

One of the things that most impressed Ray and me about the gay bankers in Tokyo was the network of friendship and cooperation they have established among themselves. An inter-bank group meets regularly both socially and professionally. It is a multicultural cadre of wonderful young men,

including several American nationals who are extraordinarily proficient in Japanese. At both of my presentations and at all related social gatherings there were representatives of other investment banks, including Nomura, Citi, Morgan Stanley, UBS, and Barclays. They are all pioneers in this important work, feeling frustrated at times by the seeming lack of significant progress. I assured them all of their extraordinary significance as role modeling messengers.

The gay men from the inter-bank group—many of whom were Asian but none Japanese—told me that the arguments they frequently get in opposition to gay diversity initiatives are that Japan is unique and will not change. It is an isolated island nation and very unlike the West in attitudes. I told them that I had heard it all before: "We don't have any gay people in Maine. They all live in San Francisco", "Black people aren't gay. It's a white problem", "We're not like New York. This is the South and the Bible Belt", "This is not the U.S. This is the U.K. We're very different", "Spain is very Catholic and conservative", "It's illegal here in Singapore", "We don't have any gay people in Cambodia. They all live in Thailand".

Each excuse is an attempt to stop things from changing. Gay people themselves can be the obstructionists: "Leave well enough alone. People ignore us".

I remind my Japanese audience members of their historic record of adaptability and the reverence they have for Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) who ended Japanese isolation, reached out to the West, and introduced new technology to the country. Additionally, though they may not feel comfortable acknowledging it, the experiences of Japanese gay youth are no different than that of gay youth globally— isolation, fear, and loneliness. Those gay youths each have parents who regardless of the culture have an innate instinct to protect their offspring from rejection.

On our final day in Tokyo, I met for lunch with members of the gay employee group at Goldman Sachs during which we strategized on meeting their organizational goals. That evening I spoke to over 300 Goldman Sachs employees, many of whom were listening in from offices in other parts of Asia.