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Writing Showcase (2015 Vol 7 #1)

Everett N K Ofori



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Good writers are not magicians. They often bleed in solitude to create gems that give us a glimpse of the possibilities of the human mind.

- Everett Ofori (Editor)

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Perspective

The late former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, said: “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” The truth of this statement is revealed everytime you watch a courtroom drama or television talkshow where opponents are brought together. Of course, we see many more examples in real life - among our friends, family members, or acquaintances.

In literature also, a good writer pays careful attention to perspective or point of view. For starters, the position, personality, or values of the narrator, not surprisingly, influences what is said and how it is said. The narrator’s own judgment may intrude on the story.

A writer who does not pay attention to point of view will soon get critics on his or her back. Point of view is not just a mental construct; it can also be literal.

The physical location from which a character observes events will affect how that character tells the story. Another character from a different location might see something entirely different.

Here are a number of points of view that a writer might use:

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a) Objective Point of View

The narrator speaking from an objective point of view simply reports on what she sees or hears, and does not get into the minds of the other characters since she cannot know how others are feeling.

b) First Person Point of View

The narrator tells the story from his or her personal standpoint; we need to remember then, that, other people involved might have a completely different view of how events might have unfolded.

c) Third Person Point of View

The third person is an outside voice that has intimate knowledge of what the characters went through. The third person might even speculate about the feelings of the characters.

d) Omniscient Point of View

An omniscient character is “Godlike” in the sense of knowing everything about every character.

e) Limited Omniscient Point of View

A narrator with a limited omniscient point of view knows all about one character or some characters but not about others.

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Mutsumi Matsugu
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. Japanese Food is Cool in the U.S.!

I was in Sacramento, California in the U.S. this past January and February.

It takes two hours from San Francisco to Sacramento. The weather is hot in summer, however, January and February were so sunny and comfortable. It is said that Sacramento is not a safe town, however, as I lived in a suburb of Sacramento, I spent the time in a relaxed mood.

My colleagues and neighbors were American. Sometimes, I met some Asian immigrants in the town, however, I did not have any opportunity to meet Japanese. I did not mind, however; I was more concerned about how American people would communicate with me.

I soon found out that I did not need to have any anxiety about meeting my colleagues and neighbors. When I introduced myself to them, they were attentive to me. I was so glad about their attitude. Though it came gradually, I began to smile and be bright when communicating with people in the U.S.. They often gave me the same comment, “Japanese food is cool,” “Japanese food is so awesome!” or “I went to the Japanese restaurant, ARIGATO,” in the suburb of our town. “I really like the restaurant. Absolutely, I would like to visit Japan and eat delicious food!”

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Japanese Food is Cool in the U.S.! ...continued

I was so glad many people were interested in Japanese food and freely complimented Japanese culture. Surely, I was OK in my surroundings in the U.S., however, the only thing I missed was Japanese food!

I have been to the restaurant, ARIGATO, twice.

I was so surprised that many American people enjoyed eating Japanese meals. I ate a “lunch box meal,” which included salmon, mackerel, California sushi, tempura, green soybeans and miso soup. The taste was good and the same as Japanese food which I ate in Japan. I had imagined that the taste had been changed to suit the palates of the American people, however, it was the same as food one might eat in a Japanese restaurant. I did not see any Japanese people in this area, however, I felt Japanese food is valued in the local area. According to one friend of mine, there are a few Japanese restaurants in the area.

I have watched a Japanese TV program which features elements of Japanese culture. Of course, Japanese culture is not only about food, however, Japanese mass media and people need to spread Japanese food culture more in the world. And I am not just talking about *tempura* and *sushi*; local Japanese dishes also need to be widely known.

I recommend “*oden*,” which includes vegetables, tofu, and fish dumplings stewed in a soy soup; this might become popular around the world.

I will go to Sacramento again next month. Therefore, I would like to re-encounter the fascination of Japanese food there.

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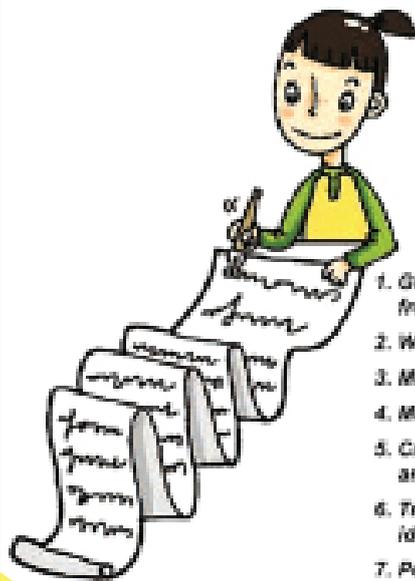
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Making Sense of Japan and Japanese Sensibilities

Recently, I found a 5-year-old article from Japan Times headlined “Saudis learn from Japan to combine tradition and modernization.”

The article reports on a special TV series on the nation that shows how outstanding Japan’s manners and morality are and suggests Saudi Arabia should learn from Japan.

The reporter says, “I’m surprised...They took the wallet (containing ¥7000) to the police.”

Actually, this is not the first time we have got this kind of compliment. I assume such “honesty” stems from Japan’s “relatively” low unemployment rate coupled with its “relatively” minor socioeconomic class gap.

Moreover, it could be said the meek nature of its people may also be a determining factor. However, the most notable thing about this is that even with all the severe Islamic punishments, they seem to fail to surpass Japan’s “intensive (suffocating) mutual surveillance totalitarian society,” in terms of manners and morals.

Japan’s Surveillance Society: How does it work?

When a citizen does something “wrong” in such an environment of “everybody is watching,” the rule-breakers would be harshly condemned by the society so that they would feel ashamed of what they had done. This shaming can be very subtle offline but is often blatant when done under anonymity such as online.

The surveillance is not only done by our worldly pals. This might sound hard to believe for many who believe Japan is a faithless country, but many Japanese can more or less sense an unexplainable “wind and shadow” from “another world” in which some spiritual existence and/or one’s deceased ancestors apparently reside.

Another example of this can be found in a set of interesting articles I’ve read recently, which describes a habit amongst bachelors attending university. When they do something private in their bedroom, they close the doors of their family Buddhist altar where their ancestors’ pictures are displayed, in hope that their forebears could not ‘see’ their ‘misbehavior.’

The ancient Japanese people might have believed natural disasters came from God’s wrath and that their clean-living could soothe such wrath, which might have been the way for them to cope with the everyday devastating reality in such a disaster-prone country.

A noted Japanese religious scholar, Testuo Yamaori, speculates that Japanese traditional religion is a faith to “sense” and not to “believe.”

Shintoism doesn’t preach teachings but you have to “sense” something out of nature or sublunary phenomenon, and find your answer on your own.

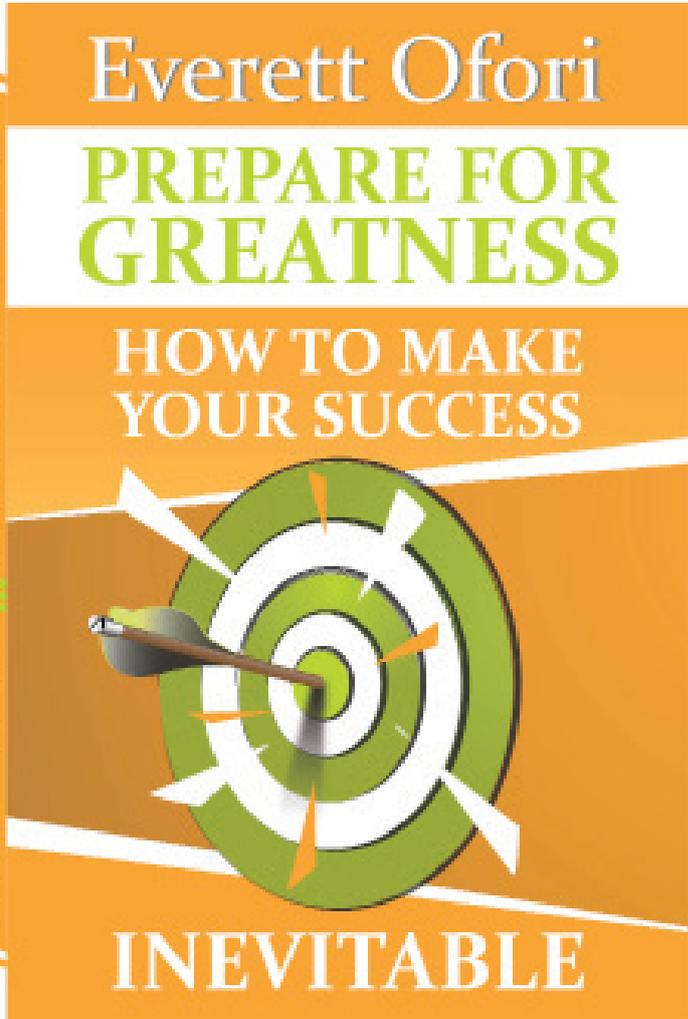
As also seen in *Ju-do*, *lai-do* or *Sa-do* etc., “*tou-do*” is to pursue your lifelong “way” to mature and discipline yourself. All things considered, I have to wonder if it’s something another country can easily adopt.

Reference

Takayama, Hiroyasu. Saudis learn from Japan to combine tradition and modernization. *Japan Times*, May 18, 2010.

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Reprint / Release 2013:
Check it out!!!



A wise person does not seek to learn everything in life through direct experience. While we are often enriched by our experiences, good and bad, there are times when we profit most from learning from others. Through the experiences of others, we can chart a better course through life by avoiding the clear and present dangers that others have marked out. We can also keep our eyes on the markers of success that have been placed along life's highway so that we do not get lost on bypaths and deadends. Pick up powerful personal and professional insights from Prepare for Greatness: How to Make Your Success Inevitable.

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No Slavery, No Freedom?

In historian Orlando Patterson's book, *Slavery and Social Death*, he writes:

It has been my objective in this book to come to a definitive statement of the fundamental processes of slavery, to grasp its internal structure and the institutionalized patterns that support it. Throughout this work, however, the ghost of another concept has haunted my analysis, and in this final chapter I have tried to exorcise it. That is the problem of freedom. Beyond the socio-historical findings is the unsettling discovery that an ideal cherished in the West beyond all others emerged as a necessary consequence of the degradation of slavery and the effort to negate it. The first men and women to struggle for freedom, the first to think of themselves as free in the only meaningful sense of the term, were freedmen. And without slavery there would have been no freedom.

We arrive then at a strange and bewildering enigma: are we to esteem slavery for what it has wrought, or must we challenge our conception of freedom and the value we place upon it? (pp. 341- 342)

Introduction

In coming to the conclusion that without slavery, freedom as we know it would not exist, Orlando Patterson raises another question that leaves for the reader or thinker little room for maneuver, asking:

Are we to esteem slavery for what it has wrought?" namely, for being the conduit through which we now enjoy freedom, or "must we challenge our conception of freedom and the value we place upon it?"

To this, it must be answered that despite any supposed benefits that slavery might have yielded it has been an institution whose effects continue to poison society up to this day, and rather than praising the freedom that has supposedly emerged from slavery, it is probably better to reflect on why some societies throughout history continually chose the path of slavery rather than the path of freedom. Certainly, there were many other societies that were content to live without slavery or to adopt benign forms of slavery that were essentially forms of employment in disguise.

No Freedom without Slavery?

There is no question that slavery has a long history. We get a sense of this from the description of the days of early agriculture where there was no surplus to speak of. As Milton Meltzer, author of *Slavery: A World History*, notes, "A farming family could raise little more than what was necessary to feed themselves. When tribes went to war and took prisoners, the captives were usually sacrificed. It was foolish to keep them because they would have been a drain on the food supply."

In the next stage of human progress, when humans are able to cultivate more than they can eat, and ostensibly, can see clearly the relationship between cultivation of the soil and a potentially healthy harvest, they see the advantage and practicality of getting others to do the hard work.

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As Meltzer further notes,

Instead of killing a defeated enemy, the victor enslaved him. The loser kept his life and, in return, was made to work. Man had already learned how to tame animals. Now he found that his own kind – like cattle, sheep, or dogs – could be domesticated, too.

The other sources of slaves, including people who failed to pay their debt, people too weak to survive on their own, and those “who voluntarily chose the shelter of slavery rather than the hunger and risks of freedom” (Meltzer) all substantiate the notion that slavery has a long history, but it does nothing to confirm Patterson’s insinuation with absolute certainty that freedom emerged out of slavery.

Of the Zanj, blacks from East Africa, who, in the 9th century, rebelled in Iraq on account of their ill treatment, David Brion Davis, author of *Slavery and Human Progress*, writes: “For years the Zanj continued to repel government attacks, to raid the countryside, and to retire safely into their marshland stronghold.” The above description does not fit a people whose whole world had been enmeshed in slavery to the point of knowing nothing about freedom. On the contrary, it seems that the Zanj were willing to fight for their freedom because they had known the value of freedom in their lives before.

Likewise, though the long period of the transatlantic slave trade has come to link Africans almost permanently with the idea of slavery, when the Europeans first made their way to the west coast of Africa, “they found strong states and strong rulers. There was no reason for the whites to consider the Africans their inferiors... Not until the nineteenth century would the European powers force their way into the interior” (Meltzer).

In Slavery, Little to Esteem

As long as it is the voices of those in the dominant class who are expounding about slavery, it is hardly surprising that slavery is seen in a positive light. Even though we learn that, in ancient Greece, for example, slaves were employed in all fields of endeavor, the truth remains, as Meltzer points out, that:

In the ancient world, governments were not much concerned with the health of workers, especially when they were slaves or condemned criminals sent to the quarries and mines. Ancient medical tradition shows no concern for the dreadful effects of their trade upon miners or metalworkers. As Aristotle put it, slaves were ‘human instruments’ expected to perform like machinery.’

The suggestion has been made that slaves had a life that was not entirely bad and that public slaves in ancient Greece could become officials, have their own houses, marry and take care of their children and even take care of religious ceremonies.

While slaves were fed, they were subject to the whims of their masters. As Meltzer notes, “Greek literature provides evidence enough that slaves were beaten and tortured.”

The branding of slaves, the throwing overboard of slaves such as was done during the Middle Passage, and in the Americas the encouragement of the Indians “by the white slave traders to make war upon one another” (Meltzer) visited pain and heartache on the enslaved to which the slavemasters seemed completely insensitive. As with any terrible institution, there were degrees of cruelty. In that sense, the fact that, “During one period Roman imperial slaves performed administrative functions rather similar to those of the trusted slaves of later Muslim caliphs and sultans” is no comfort when it becomes clear that for such an “esteemed” slave as for any other, “The slave...could have no honor because he had no power and no independent social existence, hence no public worth” (Patterson).

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Questioning the Value of Freedom?

Despite the many types of slavery that have prevailed throughout history, the value of freedom and its importance has never been lost on enslaver and enslaved alike. This is because even though there are cases where people surrendered themselves into slavery to escape a debt or some other social burden, it does not appear to have been a step that people took lightly. It was a step people took because they found themselves between a rock and a hard place, so to speak.

It must also be noted that the institution of slavery was perpetuated through the threat of violence and the need for the master to enhance his own security, wealth, and public safety at the expense of another. As Patterson explains, “There is no known slaveholding society where the whip was not considered an indispensable instrument.”

The Founding Fathers of the United States did not need slavery to know that freedom was the birth-right of every human being. “Most of the Founding Fathers were large-scale slave owners, including George Washington, “father of his country,” Patrick Henry, author of the stirring cry “Give me liberty or give me death,” and Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.”

What these men and others who similarly could not break away readily from their involvement in the slave trade may have lacked was the simple ability to recognize the humanity of the “other,” in this case, African-originated slaves and their descendants.

Even where slaves were of the same ethnicity, human beings have always found some reason to put themselves in a superior position in relation to others, whether as a matter of class or some other marker of difference.

No matter how far back we go, it is difficult to say that all human beings were in the state of slavery. The total domination of one group by another had to start somewhere, and it must have started from knowing, from the very beginning, on the part of both slavemasters and the enslaved, how sweet it was to be free.

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Writing Showcase

This newsletter offers an opportunity for English learners around the world to share their thoughts and experiences and get some writing practice in the process. In many areas of life, most people would readily agree that quality is more important than quantity. This is no less true when it comes to writing. To get to the point where you can produce quality writing on a consistent basis, however, you may have to get into the habit of writing regularly knowing that much of what you produce might win no prizes for excellence. As you keep on writing and thinking, however, who knows what hidden gems might emerge?

Writing Showcase is published on a bimonthly basis (every two months). If you are interested in contributing to it, please contact the editor, Everett Ofori.



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#2	March 15	February 28, 2015
#3	May 15	April 30, 2015
#4	July 15	June 30, 2015
#5	September 15	August 31, 2015
#6	November 15	October 31, 2015

* Maximum number of words = 300 (exceptions occasionally made)