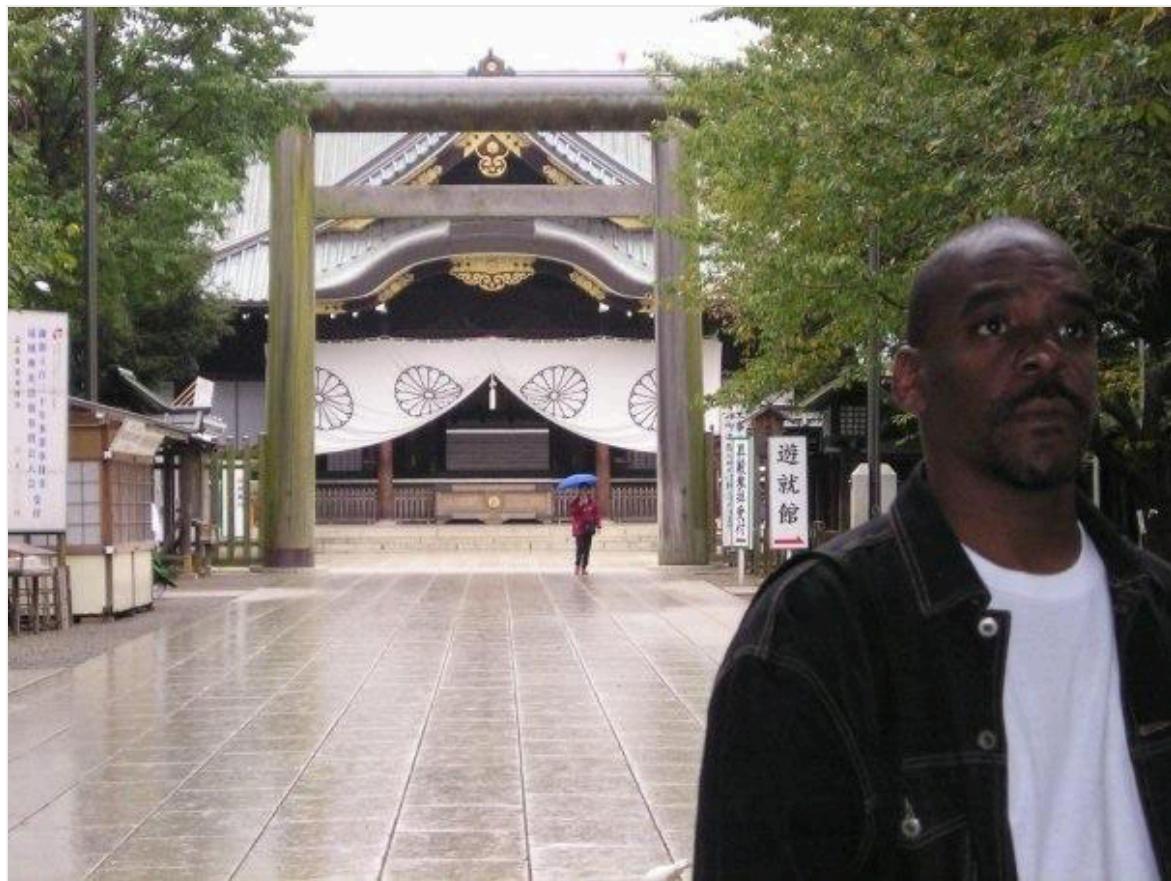


A high price to pay for a little peace of mind



Sometimes it's hard to believe the American that emerged, naked and naive, from Narita International Airport back in 2004 and the person writing this column are one and the same. Life in Japan has made me, unmade me and remade me. I've unpacked and sorted through all sorts of *koto* (generally, things without material form such as ideas and feelings), uncovering things about myself that I likely wouldn't have if I had stayed in the U.S. Some of these changes have been minor, others major, yet each represents "the Creator's hands in molding your character into the wiser, more worldly, man you are now," as my mama once told me.

Mama would be pleased to hear that some of those values and ideals she instilled in me have managed to remain intact. I still respect my elders as well as people who respect me. I still think for myself and stand behind those thoughts — right or wrong.

I've even managed to retain a value she has often lauded: in *almost* all situations, whether or not it places you in a good light, honesty is the best policy — particularly in regards to oneself. However, there has been one casualty that would certainly disappoint her. My life in Japan has often called into question the universality of an ideal she held in high regard: One should refrain from judging other humans by anything other than the content of their character.

I put up a good fight but it's hard to overcome the perception that one's character and

abilities are indelibly linked to one's race or nationality. It's a perception that many Japanese people (and, to be sure, many non-Japanese living here, too) will convey every day in 100 different ways: "We are exceptional," they say, "uniquely different from everyone else in the world." I resisted with all the evidence to the contrary I've accumulated over the course of a lifetime. Nevertheless, I have slowly succumbed to judging Japanese people as a group of exceptions rather than exceptional. I realized this, sadly, marked the beginning of the end of an ideal I held most dear.

At first, I would catch myself joining the chorus of legal aliens here who generalize about the friendliness, kindness and politeness of Japanese people. The superiority of customer service here and the overall safety and cleanliness of the environment would somehow be linked to Japanese character and, sometimes, even their race.

And later, among my boys, I would chime in on jam sessions, where remarks such as "Japanese girls are so ..." and "Japanese guys are so ..." are frequently spat from non-Japanese mouths. Unless someone disagreed, there would only be nods of agreement all around.

Generalizing about the positive and negative traits of Japanese people as a whole is the norm among non-Japanese here. Of course, if you make the very same generalizations but replace "Japanese" with "black" or "white" or "Polish," it would give many of these people pause for thought. I'd be among the first to say "Whoa, bruh! We're not gonna have any of that."

Before coming to Japan, I found generalizations problematic and so I refrained from doing so. However, once I found myself in an environment where this is done, ad nauseam, by natives and foreigners alike, I felt entitled to bend that golden rule from time to time. Living here among the Japanese so long and experiencing these often generalized qualities, both good and bad, first-hand on a regular basis (as opposed to, say, seeing them appear on TV) only helped reinforce this view.

However, it was the persistent dehumanization that typically occurs here that licensed me to go beyond bending and, ultimately, break that golden rule.

A Japanese man or woman walking ahead of me will often turn and spot me in a crowd of people walking behind them. They will then proceed to behave conspicuously as if they have spotted a predator stalking from the tall grass. (If you need a detailed description of how to tell if someone believes you are following them, consider yourself very fortunate.) I used to keep moving forward, telling myself to simply ignore them. The person walking ahead of me might suddenly shift gears and increase their walking speed or even break into a run. Or they might stop and peer into a shop window and watch me until I pass, then resume walking. I would pretend not to notice. I would sometimes label it paranoia and let it go at that. Other times

though, I'd stop and do something that an agent conducting surveillance in a movie might do, such as tie my shoes, and then resume once they've passed me again — just to distress them for criminalizing me. By the time I got home, I would have identified something funny or poignant in the scenario and sometimes write a blog post about it.

I remember thinking of a conversation in James Clavell's 1975 novel "Shogun," where the Lady Mariko explains the meaning of an ancient Japanese poem, "The Eightfold Fence," to captured British pilot John Blackthorne, who is given the title Anjin-san (which is often translated as honorable pilot in works referencing the novel). "Sunset watching is a great help or listening to the rain," she says. "Anjin-san, have you noticed the different sounds of rain? If you really listen, then the present vanishes, neh? Listening to blossoms falling and to rocks growing are exceptionally good exercises. Of course, you're not supposed to see the things, they're only signs, messages to your *hara*, your center, to remind you of the transience of life, to help you gain *wa*, harmony, Anjin-san, perfect harmony, which is the most sought-after quality in all Japanese life." I wanted to cop some of that *wa* in the worst way.

In a last-ditch effort to hold on to this ideal, I used to focus on my own version of "The Eightfold Fence." Instead of concentrating on all the obvious acts of anxiety and discomfort that erupt when my presence is noticed — for instance, a woman who shifts her pocketbook away from me or a guy who suddenly changes queues on a subway platform upon seeing me behind him — I'd tune my ears to the recording of a bird warbling over the station's loudspeakers. Instead of wasting any energy on a salaryman securing his wallet in his back pocket, or a panic-stricken mother suddenly shielding her child or a young man shamelessly throwing himself between his girlfriend and I in a bizarre act of unwarranted heroism once he notices me in close proximity, I'd lock my eyes on a certain kanji character in an advertisement, dissect it by its radicals and let its meaning wash over me like a waterfall of *wa*.

Yeah, not so much, Mariko. That didn't work for me (nor Anjin-san, as I recall) — I just ain't built for nirvana-seeking amid habitual incivility.

Nowadays, I simply ignore this behavior as often as possible. When this proves impossible, I give them a plastic grin, move away or say something in Japanese, which tends to help at times.

I walk an ultrathin tightrope between alleviating the anxiety of mostly innocent victims of irrational fear, misinformation and ignorance, and maintaining my dignity, but I walk it almost like it's a natural reflex these days. I've modified my soul's response to this behavior that has effectively become part of me. Anger has been replaced by a pitylike emotion I don't really have a word for.

I refrain from labeling such people as racists. I simply think of them as exceptions and

hold them to a different standard — a decidedly lower one — than I reserve for most people. This allows me to enjoy all the great things Japan has to offer.

This stance is a high price to pay for a little peace of mind, at least as far as I am concerned.

If I told my mother all of this, I know exactly what she would say.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, boy,” she’d grumble. “I raised you right, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders and the Creator knows you’ve got a good heart. But I don’t want those people over there damaging it, so you need to seriously think about booking your butt a ticket on the next thing smoking outta Asia!”

And yet the latest snippets of news from the United States — militarized police officers killing unarmed black men at an alarming rate, including a teenager who was shot two weeks ago in Ferguson, Missouri, an event that has sparked violence across the country — doesn’t exactly suggest that “home” is a sanctuary either.

Besides, I wager neither Japan nor the Creator are done with me yet.

Black Eye, which appears in print on the third Thursday of every month, focuses on the experience of living in Japan from the perspective of people of African descent. Baye McNeil is the author of two books and writes the Loco in Yokohama blog. See www.bayemcneil.com. Comments and ideas: community@japantimes.co.jp