

The Man Who Talked With His Shovel

John W. Gehring
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The Value of Digging



“A dream doesn’t become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination and hard work.” - Gen. Colin Powell

Have you ever done serious labor with a shovel or pick? Tackled a day with sweat on your brow earned by digging shovel by shovel towards a measurable goal. At the end of your labor did your muscles sing out, a reminder of the price you were willing to pay to reach your goal? If you have had those feeling my friend we share something special.

In life, my mind can unexpectedly race off and forget it has a body but this is not the case on days when I spend time digging. Some unspoken arrangement seems to take place between mind and body where they agree to work together to accomplish the desired results. This time of stress free unity brings its own sense of joy and adds to the quality of my life.

This talk of digging is related to a special story that happened in the community of Das Marinas in the Philippines. A group of volunteers from the RYS were building a small bridge that would help link the Christian and Muslim sides of the community. We called the structure when it was completed the International Bridge of Love.

Our team with representatives from 16 nations was supposed to all speak English the designated language for communication. Helping to build the bridge was a young Japanese man who spoke a little English, maybe even a little less than a little. We called this unassuming young man Tak; it probably was short for Takahashi or Takamitsu.

Digging In



photo credit: adventuresofthelonewanderer.blogspot.com

When we arrived at our work sight, we were welcomed by a series of hot days and repetitious hard work. We dug soil, put soil in buckets, passed the buckets down a long

line of hands, emptied the soil and repeated the process. For variety, we moved buckets of cement.

When we had breaks they were often filled with lively conversations. Tak would have liked to join our discussions but his natural shyness and his inability to speak English put a real limit on his verbal interaction.

Unfortunately none of us spoke Japanese so verbal communication was not happening.

Tak simply never complained, he kept on schedule, he attended all the programs, team meetings and remained friendly in his quiet way. It was just a little sad that we could not understand nor he express what was going on in his inside.

Being Number One

When I dig, I don’t like to have people dig harder and more effectively than me. I like the feeling of being the best digger, or at least close to the best. I admit it; it’s a kind of macho thing. When I was younger, I took some comfort living with the illusion that I was one of the best ‘diggers’ around. When I see people who are supposed to be working but are just goofing off instead, it makes me wonder if they realize what they are missing.

On the worksite a transformation took place. Quiet Tak became Demon Tak. Tak would take a shovel in hand and set out digging and with an unforgiving intensity set to the pace of his own unique internal clock. Some of us, foolish challengers, went shovel for shovel with him in an attempt to take him on. “He’s just a sprinter I thought” with a cocky arrogance. I imagined he would fade in a little while and we big guys would set the tempo for the rest of the morning.

Tak was not a sprinter. Tak was a high precision Japanese machine that functioned on levels we did not know existed. He would start digging in the morning and only stop when we had our official breaks.

During the breaks we would hang around in groups and mix with the Filipino engineer students who were also working at the site. Tak did not hang around much or chat. To my vexation he was anxiously finished his snack so that he could get back to work. Tak's inner clock was set, he was the first to head back to work after the breaks and he would maintain that standard. Once the shovel and his hand reunited they seemed to continue in an unbroken rapid pace.

Healthy Competition



In the first days of our work we imagined that the heavier food of lunch would metabolically slow him down. No, not Tak. For those of us who considered challenging Tak the weight of the moist tropic heat and a partially digested meal served to temper our ambitions. We restarted work, a little slower and less focused. For Tak, the 'work demon', lunch simply re-energize him and he continued to move into the afternoon at the same rapid work pace.

As the workday moved to its close our muscles no longer responded to our brain and shovels were transformed into heavy weights. Stirred by a competitive spirit we managed to drag ourselves on to the merciful end. Our only solace as we looked at Tak finish with a sprint was the whimsical hope that Tak would fad tomorrow. Day after day Tak proved our hopes were built on shifting sand. He remained the one constant. Tak continued to shine.

It did not take long for us to recognize that Tak was the bright star of the work galaxy. We initially tried to rationalize why Tak was so much better at this work than us but our reluctance melted and was replaced by a growing respect. His quiet ways and his determined example won our admiration.

This is a lovely thing about healthy competition, you get to see what you and others are made of and you hopefully succeed in pulling the best out of each other. Without Tak, our standard would have been much lower as a group and we would personally have settled for much less from ourselves. We often had to push ourselves beyond our 'normal' limitations because we knew there was one person always doing that. It is interesting to see the power one person can stealthily exert on a group.

The Heart of Demon-Tak

In time, some of us grew to realize that Tak worked so hard because that was what he felt he could do best. He could not meet us in conversations and he had difficulty in sharing what was inside but he could show us he cared by the way he worked. What this little story is about is not the great physical work of our teammate Tak; rather it is about what we all learned from his goodbye.

For some reason, Tak had to leave our project two days early and return to Japan. We were all gathered in a large room to give Tak a warm send off. After singing some songs and sharing conversations we turned to Tak and asked if he could offer us a few words. Tak reluctantly walked to the front of the large room seeming so much more uncomfortable without the shovel in his hand.

Tak looked around at all our anticipating faces; he stood quietly as something was visibly moving him that had been trapped deep inside. He offered a deep bow of respect and then stood for a long time before breaking his silence. Words started to come out but they were soon choked by uncontrollable weeping. Sobs and tears streamed down the face of this "high precision Japanese machine" as he literally broke down in front of our eyes. It was all too much for him as he hurriedly exited the room to a place where his tears would no longer be seen.

We were amazed at the level of emotion Tak had shown. If we knew more about the internal nature of Japanese culture we would have been even more amazed. Japanese men are not given to showing their emotions, as too much emotion is a sign of weakness. Yet, Tak was bursting with emotion. He had so much he was feeling, so much he wanted to say, so much he yearned to express.

After taking some good amount of time Tak regained the confidence to reappear and give his farewell. No longer the 'demon of the work sight' he was simply a very special young man who we were just beginning to understand. He returned to the front of the stage and looked at his friends from all parts of the world, he again broke into uncontrollable sobs. It just was too much, a flood of emotions had burst out and there was no way to put them back.

What is happening inside a person is often unfathomable to those around them. We realized that this quiet, kind young man was going through experiences that would change his life forever. On the eve of his departure, we got a glimpse at the beauty, strength and fragility of Tak's soul. We were grateful that this could happen but from what we saw, we only wished it had happened earlier

Work can be liberating

The world needs free thinkers, but what it needs more are free thinkers who are willing to dig the soil of this earth.

While digging, all the problems of the world are shrunk to one single objective, move that dirt. It's all so refreshingly simple, not complicated like a highly charged emotional relationship or career planning, nor ethereal like, "Let's make a world of peace." Digging is a wonderful way to narrow all our worries and troubles down to a simple singular concern with clear measurable results.