

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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On the Threshold

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28 Uguisudani-machi  
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

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Dear Dick:

Buckminster Fuller was in Tokyo for a day and a half this week and invited a few friends to dinner. Karen and I were fortunate enough to be included. The company was varied, including long-time Fuller associate Commander Francis Fane, who is a specialist in submersible operations, a young physicist and his actress wife, and Hidetoshi Shibata, former right-hand man to Matsutaro Shoriki (who controls a vast empire including the Yomiuri Newspaper, the Yomiuri Symphony, the Yomiuri Giants (baseball team), the TBS Television Network, the Sogo Department Store, and Yomiuriland (Japan's response to Disneyland)). Southern Illinois University where Dr. Fuller is in residence has been asked by the Thai Government to establish a design-science institute in Bangkok, and he was stopping over on the way to a ten-day launching conference. From Bangkok, he had stops in India and at Oxford University, in connection with his architectural firm, before returning to the United States. Five days later, he was scheduled to fly back to Israel for ground breaking ceremonies for a kibutz he has designed. The pace is by no means atypical, but, at 73, he is as warm and vital as ever, drinking orange juice sparingly and tea in remarkable quantities while others belabor their bodies with cocktails and coffee.

Conversation was brisk on the 16th floor of the New Otani Hotel overlooking Tokyo's lights. As a nation, Fuller observed, the Japanese appear to enjoy work. This is at variance with the norm one finds elsewhere in the world. Energetic persons emerge everywhere, but such behaviour can not be said to be characteristic of entire peoples. Though no one present had thought about it in such a straight-forward manner before, all admitted that enthusiasm for work is characteristic not only of students and intellectuals in Japan, but of those engaged in menial tasks as well (One privately adds the reservation that there is a very considerable amount of waste effort.). Fuller also finds significant the fact that, at this relatively advanced stage in history, the Japanese national flag should still be emblazoned with the sun. It is a testimony, he thinks, "of the people's enduring and fundamental comprehension of the sun's importance in the regenerative scheme of Universe." He easily traces these and other traits of the Japanese to their original condition as Sea People. The sea, Dr. Fuller likes to observe, is a hard task master and doesn't allow those who live on or near it to relax their vigilance or slacken their efforts.

Concerning his stopover in India, the renowned architect mentioned that there was an indigenous barrier to effectively helping people there to improve their condition. Since the aims of the average Indian in this life are religiously directed towards earning a better next life, any energies squandered on the present are likely to endanger future prospects and are, therefore, rejected. Shibata asked what might be done to educate peoples whose beliefs inhibit the implementation of the sweeping changes that are increasingly necessary. Fuller responded that "you can't change man, it's perfectly obvious that you can't. What you can do is to change the physical constituents of his environment." The proper environment, he said, will allow man to be what he ought to be. It is imperative for each individual to begin to discover for himself rather than being told what to believe (essentially the approach used in most present-day schooling). Each human being, he continued, can discover God (transcendent order) by his own observation, that this was the pattern even for great religious figures such as Buddha, Mohammed, and Christ. They were not told, but experienced realizations within themselves. Fuller clearly has a profound faith in the natural intuitive faculty of man, and resents the ways in which it is distorted and repressed by the fixed and often erroneous ideas of adults.

Ideas and talk succeed far less, in the presence of cultural or linguistic barriers, than objects that work: design science. A bird, to stay aloft, is forced to expend large amounts of energy and to keep its mass relatively slight. Hence, it eats frequently, but in small quantities, insects and seeds. The young cannot be carried within the mother's body for aerodynamic reasons, and eggs, which can be very swiftly generated, have evolved as temporary, semi-portable shelters. Energy additives are still required, in addition to the egg-contained nutrients, and this has led to the nest and the practice of sitting, which provides the necessary heat (energy) transfer. When the nutrients have been consumed and the bird can move freely, he has gained the strength to break the shell and emerge.

Species of animals that become too specialized, however, are doomed to extinction, Fuller noted. As other elements of our world have survived evolutionary forces by reason of their particular functions and capacities (plants - photosynthesis, animals - instinctive ability to differentiate between nourishing and poisonous foodstuffs), man continues by reason of his intuitive capacity for recognizing generalized principles and implementing them. Computers, Dr. Fuller feels, will free man from the obligations of the specialist and allow him to think again. Everything, Fuller believes, is designed to be a success, and human beings are only now, metaphorically, breaking out of their shell and becoming aware of their function as catalytic mind. (He, incidentally, insists on a distinction between brain (physical) and mind (meta-physical): "mind is the weightless, abstract, uniquely human faculty which surveys the ever larger inventory of special case experiences stored in the brain bank

and, from time to time, discovers one of the rare, scientifically generalized principles.") I asked whether he thought that the intense physicality of young persons in modern life was a reaction to their subconscious recognition of this emerging responsibility (the "adulthood" of man). By all means, he answered. Young persons have become exceedingly intolerant of wasteful, useless systems, and the educational structure is attacked because it is so clearly vulnerable.

The evening was permeated with examples drawn from the world of sea and ships. When we first gathered, Dr. Fuller showed a series of superb color photos of his Bear Island home off the coast of Maine. These featured prominently his newly acquired sloop, INTUITION, remarks on which comprised the essay he donated to our CROSS TALK INTERMEDIA program box (more about this in subsequent newsletters). The keel of the ship, he observed, became the crossbeam of the land structure, the rib became the arch. Inverted, the hull that was designed to withstand the buffeting of the sea from below easily carried the demands of the land. A string of entomological relationships provide confirmation: naus, nautic, naval, nave (of a church). It frequently happens, Fuller commented, that wooden constructions are eventually replaced in stone, and the transition seems more than plausible. As a counterpoint to Fuller's continuing reference to the Japanese as a Sea People, Shibata was reminded of a festival in the Japanese Alps which consists basically in hauling a ship from a town to the top of a mountain. Such a ceremony could well be an enactment of an archtypal portage connected with the original exploration of the Japanese Archipelago, Fuller said. (The migratory movement into Japan is not clearly fixed, though it seems to have been both from Mongolia and Siberia through the Korean peninsula, and up through the Ryukyu chain. Though the southern approach would suggest South Pacific origins, this does not seem to be the case.)

I asked about Angkor Wat, the unique capitol city built by Suryavarman II (1113-1150) in what is now Cambodia, and inexplicably abandoned by the Khmer people in 1432. I remembered reading that the arch principle was not used in the Gargantuan structure - only the more primitive column. The response was immediate and exhaustive. Constructions such as Angkor Wat and the Pyramids, Dr. Fuller said, were solely Cosmological models intended to facilitate the king's entrance into the best possible after-life. The ancients were familiar with the stationary North Star, and with the East-West movement of the sun (birth - death - rebirth cycle). Thus four-sided monuments (the known land), surrounded by water-filled moats (the ocean), and gradually rising, as most land masses do, to an elevational high-point (mountains). Mountains, mythologically, function as points to which deities descended from above, and from which they could most logically ascend. There was no need for large, arched halls in cosmological models such as Angkor Wat, for they were constructed in support of and were intended for use

by earthly deities alone. They are stone mountains, in effect, which need provide no shelter. In time, the after-life of the nobles too was attended to, and finally that of the common man. The next historical step was to provide for the present life of the king-emperor-deity, then of his nobles (the Magna Charta), and, in the end, through the Industrial Revolution, the present life of all men. These developments, according to Dr. Fuller, are cardinal moments in the history of mankind.

Because of the condensed and necessarily disconnected form in which memory allows me to pass on the above thoughts, a good deal of the genuinely awesome experience of time spent with this formidable man is sacrificed. One finds that many of Buckminster Fuller's remarks have the effect of revelation - seemingly obvious perspectives that one has, somehow, not come across. The breadth of his thinking, as well as his capacity for making remote associations, illuminates and enhances one's view of a variety of phenomena which are habitually taken for granted. His lifelong impatience with the wasteful and lethargic performance of academic, social, and intellectual bureaucracies is strikingly relevant and admirable to present-day youth. And with all his awareness, and the frustration he must of necessity deal with, he remains luminously optimistic. "...living upon the eternal threshold between yesterday and tomorrow, we are aware of the vast multiplication of experiences from which to improve our understanding and preparedness for tomorrow."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Reynolds', with a large, stylized flourish extending to the right.

Roger Reynolds

Received in New York May 12, 1969.