

Language school

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When I was learning to be a missionary in Japan, I went to language school. Five mornings a week, we got together in small classes with only about eight students in each classroom, because the emphasis was on oral language learning and drills. There, we met missionaries from other traditions as well as students in Japan for more secular pursuits.

Eventually we would go to our assignments, either as pastors or as English language teachers. But at that point our main responsibility was to learn the language, at least enough to get started at communication and relationships. Our language classes did not give us the ability (for example) to understand or speak in religious terms, but we learned to ask questions and understand the answers, and we learned some basic sentence structure and vocabulary. After six months we were launched into our prospective vocations, where we would (presumably) continue to learn Japanese at the same time we were sharing the gospel.

I think language school is a good idea. I sort of wish I had language school right now.

I am about to leave the congregation I have served for 17 years. This congregation is located in the part of the country where I grew up. I know the culture here so well that perhaps I take it for granted. I am an expert on the upper Midwest, its language and its idiosyncrasies. I know that you can call a casserole a "hot dish" and that it is all right to invite someone to go along with you somewhere by asking the question, "Do you want to come **with**?" I know that you should not park on certain streets after it snows. I know the variations of city, suburban, and rural life here.

My new church is in an area of the country I have only visited a couple of times. They have alligators there. And they don't have winter, really. Different flowers bloom at different times. I know I will have to learn to say "you all", and I suspect that "you all" is just the tip of the iceberg.

I sort of wish I had language school, a time set aside to learn the language, but not just the language. One of the things I remember about the time of "language school"

was the time spent doing other things: the afternoon we spent at a sumo wrestling match, the time I got lost because I took the wrong train, wandering around Shibuya station one day and seeing the statue of Hachiko, the famous dog that waited for his master every day. I remember going to Yokohama and eating octopus, visiting parks and admiring tea sets, and learning to read, but not just the language.

I am pretty sure that I never really mastered Japanese, although I did improve over the years. I may be fooling myself as well that I have mastered Midwestern, too. I have lived here most of my life, and perhaps I take it too much for granted. Now, traveling to a new place, I suspect that I will be learning a new language, one that I will not master, although I hope to improve.

I don't have time set aside for "language school" this time, but perhaps it would be wise to set some time aside for it anyway. Perhaps it would be wise to remember that I am not just called to speak, but to listen, not just teach, but to learn, not just to find, but to get lost, and be found. Perhaps it would be wise for me to remember, as missionaries have told me before, that I am not bringing the Word to people, I am not bringing Jesus to people, I am not bringing the Holy Spirit. God is already there.

For the Word became flesh, and inhabits each particular language and culture, breaking bread, eating rice, getting lost and found, with us.

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