

Subject: New Year's Inspirational Message: Lessons Learned in a Faraway Land

Friends, Family, and Colleagues,

As we usher in a new year of new possibilities, I wanted to take this opportunity to send you one of my semiannual inspirational messages, this one a summary of what I learned from my two-month professional and personal sabbatical in South Korea. Simply put, I am forever changed by it; the decision to go was one of the best I have made in my life so far. It was an enlightening and restorative journey.

However, before I begin, I wanted to say thank you for the overwhelmingly positive responses I received to my last message about the challenge of change. They humbled me. Many of you were so personally moved by Becky Grace's and my stories of change that you forwarded the message to friends, and others replied that the email helped you think differently about change in your own life. Thanks for being such engaged readers – I always enjoy connecting personally with you and hope this note will inspire dialogue as well!

So, I figure the best way to do this is to describe some of the most important lessons I learned during the trip. I will limit the list to five (adult learning theory at its best!), but if you want to hear more, just let me know. As always, I will end each lesson below with some questions designed to help you apply the lessons to your own life.

- **We all need to be foreigners at least once in our lives.** Not being able to read the language and needing to rely on the kindness of strangers awakened me. Rather, it jolted me. I thought I had experienced being in the minority as a gay man in the US, but if I choose not to tell someone about that, then it remains hidden. On the contrary, I could not hide in Korea. I was a Caucasian North American in a sea of Koreans, and as soon as I walked into a shop, they knew I was different. I grew from the experience because I had to slow down and unlearn so much of what I had taken for granted (i.e. being able to read food labels in a grocery store or decipher a street sign on a busy road). And with those barriers finally down, I saw with clarity how differently people can live and how kind they can be. I truly lived among the Koreans – talking with them on buses and trains, jogging with them at the Cheonan Sports Complex, thanking the jovial owner of our favorite galbi (Korean BBQ) restaurant for the masitda (delicious) food, and shopping once a week at the neighborhood Korean supermarket with its brash fluorescent lighting, man barking daily specials via a headset microphone every few minutes, and woman stocking the shelves who warns me about the maewoyo (spicy) soup I am about to buy and smiles at me with thumbs up exclaiming, “Obama!”. I spoke broken Korean at best, and people embraced me more than they shunned me. Overall, I am better for the experience because it humbled me. It helped me see that the way I live my life is not the only way. And it softened me (though many of you know I am already a big softie!). The next time I encounter people struggling with English, I will help them because I know what it's like to feel out of place in a foreign environment. Of course we all extol the importance of diversity in our organizations and in our lives, but it really comes to life when you actually go to live in another culture for an extended period.
 - **Questions for You: How can you step outside of what you know? What benefits might it bring, and what might you learn?**
- **You can build community anywhere.** I learned this lesson on Christmas Eve, my final night in Korea, as I watched Jon and his foreign teacher friends gather for a potluck supper of favorites from home – chicken, Stove Top stuffing, mashed potatoes, pizza, fruit salad, chocolate peanut butter corn flake balls (trust me – they are divine!), and M and M cookies. Though some of the ingredients had been flown in with the help of the US and Korean postal services, we sat down to eat this bounty in the middle of South Korea, a world away from the US and Canada. These people were very far away from home, but they bonded; they were united. And Koreans were part of the experience, too;

their Tae Kwon Do teacher, his son, and another Korean Tae Kwon Do student were a part of the festivities and the community. Smiles and laughter were abundant, and I could feel their warmth and closeness. For those of you who know me well, you know one of my passions is community building. These teachers had created a community for themselves in a faraway land, and I was part of it. This potluck supper was probably one of the most meaningful experiences of my trip.

- **Questions for You: Where can you build community in your world? How will you build it?**
- **Take the big risk.** I left my job and the city that I was comfortable with, as well as my family and friends, to take this professional and personal sabbatical. And I grew in a way not possible at home – toward love, career passion and values, and toward who I am at the core. New surroundings helped me see that I had been on autopilot in the US. Possibilities were unleashed as I traveled with Jon, wrote 3.5 chapters of my book of memoirs, prepared syllabi, and made friends with Korean nationals and expats. I was outside of my proverbial box, and it felt refreshing, as if someone had thrust open the windows of my dusty, dim house. I was finally asking myself the tough questions. Why can't I teach for a living? Do I need to work for a corporation? What really prevents me from moving to Korea or some other country full-time? I experienced all of this growth because I had the courage to leave behind what was comfortable and safe.
 - **Questions for You: Is there a big risk you have thought about taking? Or perhaps just an incremental change you want to make in your life? What's holding you back?**
- **We can do anything we set our minds to.** We certainly hear this old adage time and again, but I felt alive in Korea, in a way I had not felt alive before. I was actually living the adage. I locked my sights on taking this trip, and I executed my mission! During my stay in the Far East, I chanted with Buddhist monks on a mountaintop, taught Korean kindergarteners about Judaism and Chanukah, ascended Victoria Peak in Hong Kong, learned about Chiang Kai-shek in Taipei, ate Portuguese food in Macao, visited Joseon dynasty palaces in Seoul, stood amidst a cemetery of Koreans who fought for democracy in Gwangju, and hiked through the breathtaking Seoraksan National Park at the peak of the fall foliage. And when I was not traveling, I was reflecting on what is next for me professionally, writing my book, doing consulting work, and spending quality time with Jon. And all I could keep thinking to myself was, "Isn't life sweet?"
 - **Questions for You: What can you set your mind to? What previously unexplored possibilities exist for you?**
- **Replace the ladder with the path.** This whole journey came to life when I realized I was climbing a ladder that was leaning against the wrong wall (a metaphor for my previous life in the US). So, I climbed down that ladder (i.e. left home), created an opportunity for myself (i.e. the sabbatical), seized it, and left Korea forever changed as a result. Actually, I originally thought I was going to Korea to identify a new ladder to climb, one that would not be defined by my past employers and job titles. Yet instead I learned that ladder climbing was not the correct metaphor. Surely, you can climb a ladder at work if you're passionate about the work, but the ladder does not define you. While in Korea, I discovered that I am not climbing a ladder, but rather meandering a non-linear path, one that will bend and zig zag often. It will bring me to faraway places, and it will help me to find my home. I desperately needed this trip – it called to me, and I did not ignore the call. I stepped off a ladder and found my path, and as a result, I feel more grounded, connected, and whole. And you know the best thing about discovering my path? I know the wind of change will blow me, and the path, in a new direction once again at some point in the future, and I will use what I have learned to bend into that wind with grace, much like my friend Becky has done in her situation.
 - **Questions for You: Who and/or what are you becoming? Are you happy; do you want more of your life as it is? If yes, savor your happiness and**

reflect on why you are so happy. If no, who and/or what can you become instead? What's missing?

Before I conclude this message, I want to send a special thank you to Jon. He helped open my eyes and encouraged me to look beyond my box. Jon, you are such a special person, and your goodness shines.

Is there someone you can thank in the new year for supporting you as a human becoming (one of my favorite borrowed terms from Edge Learning Institute's Increasing Human Effectiveness seminar; learn more at www.edgelearning.com)? If so, thank him, her, or them today! To help you understand how powerful a thank-you message can be, I will share what I gave to my immediate family for Chanukah this year. I decided to send my parents and sister lengthy emails that detailed why I love them and how thankful I am to have them in my life. They loved the emails and can pull them out whenever they need some love in their lives. And it felt great to express my love to them. One of the most powerful things we can do in life is to give our love to others.

As always, I stand by your side in my favorite role, one of your best supporting actors. Please contact me at any time if I can help you in any way. I encourage you to make this year YOUR year. Life is too short not to!

Best wishes for a happy, healthy, and peaceful new year.

Regards from Philadelphia,

Brian Fishbone

Senior Corporate Training and Global Talent Management Specialist
Adjunct Professor, Human Resources Management and Business Administration
MBA in Human Resources Management, Temple University
Community Builder, Muhlenberg College Alumni Board

**Principal, Becoming
Passion, Values, Purpose. -- Coaching, Courses, and Consulting.**

BFish@aol.com

www.linkedin.com/in/brianfishbone

Have you invested in your community today?

PS – If you would like to forward my message to others, please feel free to do so. If they would like to be added to the distribution list, please have them email me at BFish@aol.com. And if you ever decide you'd like to be removed from the list, please email me at BFish@aol.com.

PPS – If you love to travel like I do, I have provided links below to my online photo albums for Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao photos. Enjoy!

Pictures:

1. Korea:

http://www1.snapfish.com/thumbnaillshare/AlbumID=246726875/a=1590685_1590685/t_1590685

2. Taiwan:

http://www1.snapfish.com/thumbnaillshare/AlbumID=263982402/a=1590685_1590685/t_1590685

3. Hong Kong:

http://www1.snapfish.com/thumbnailshare/AlbumID=264185596/a=1590685_1590685/t_1590685

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4. Macao:

http://www1.snapfish.com/thumbnailshare/AlbumID=264186520/a=1590685_1590685/t_1590685

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