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# *A Word to the Teacher*

## *Early Japan*

*660 B.C. – 1850 A.D.*

Early Japan . . . isolated . . . eager for China's knowledge . . . resistant to European influence . . . a country of paradox and intrigue . . .

In 660 B.C., according to legend, the Japanese Empire was founded by a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. As a result, all subsequent emperors traced their ancestry to this descendant and shared his divinity. This divine origin gave religious meaning to their gracious rituals, appreciation of beauty and reverence for nature. In the shadows of this orderly drama, however, were political factions, the Shogunate, warrior cliques and an intricate feudal system.

By 1850 A.D., the Europeans had been expelled, Christianity suppressed, Shinto had claimed superiority over Buddhism and Japan had become a largely literate country. The country was ready to transform itself into a nation, ready for its 19th century success in modernisation and in taking its place in the world.

In studying Japan's history, we can better understand how a small country can have such a powerful impact on the rest of the world.

“One can learn the campaigns of the civil war with dates, battles and characters without learning anything about why wars are fought between friends or what ideas can be generalised to other conflict situations.”

James Gallagher,  
*Teaching the Gifted Child, 1974*

## *Rationale for Self-directed Learning*

Our children's education must be more than the memorisation of capitals of the states, the products of countries, and dates and places of past wars. Most teachers and parents would agree that what is also wanted is for our children to learn to think for themselves, to organise their own time, to make wise choices, to work independently and to thoughtfully evaluate the results of their study.

### *Obstacles to Independent Learning*

In spite of the teacher's best efforts, many, if not most, classroom settings are organised in such a way that students are involved in timetables and organisational plans that foster dependence rather than the independence we prefer. Students are told what is to be learned and how long it will take them to learn it. The teacher not only defines the resources, but also decides whether the learning experience was a satisfactory and valuable one.

### *A Learning Atmosphere*

Each time we, as educators, focus on what our objectives are, we need to take a fresh look at our classroom mode of operation and evaluate the effectiveness of the way we teach. Quite naturally, for most of us, our teaching style has had more to do with how we were taught than with what recent research has shown about the learning process. Even our good instincts have been overcome by the years of conditioning we have known in our own educational process.

Like a breath of fresh air, the recent findings coming from the research on the brain and how it operates are supporting intuitive knowledge. This research is showing that our brains are receptive to learning only under certain conditions. Our job is to translate that information into a classroom atmosphere that provides:

- challenge
- freedom within structure
- trust and warmth
- opportunities to experience success
- personal involvement in the curriculum

A natural transition generally occurs that transforms the former “teacher-lecturer” into a “fellow-learner”. As a “fellow-learner”, the teacher becomes a resource person, a facilitator, a classroom manager. In this maturing atmosphere, students gradually come to see themselves as responsible for their own learning, and a foundation for self-direction is set.

At this point, a sometimes unexpected problem arises. We find students no more ready for their independent learning than we, as teachers, were ready to allow it. The common occurrence is mentioned repeatedly in the literature dealing with programming for the gifted, an area in which independent study and research are recommended as major curricular activities. See the Suggested Reading List: Maker (1982), Doherty and Evans (1980), and Feldhusen and Treffinger (1980).

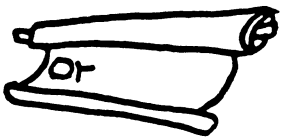
## *From Passive Learner to Active Participant* *(Bridging the Gap)*

The self-directed study unit was developed expressly to bridge that gap: to transport the student from the position of passive recipient to that of an active participant in his or her own pursuit of knowledge.

Within the defined structure of each unit, the students are given opportunities to:

- make choices
- learn at their own pace
- learn in a manner more closely suited to their own learning style
- expand their research skills
- use a variety of modalities
- plan their own time
- develop the skills of creative, critical and evaluative thinking
- experience whole-brain learning

# 1. In the Beginning



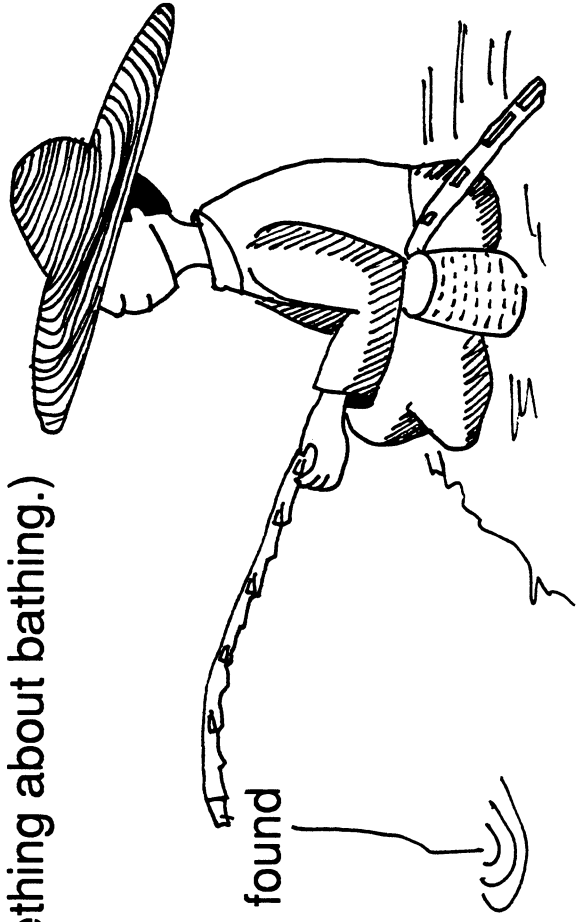
## READ, DISCOVER AND CREATE

Find all the books you can about Early Japan. (...also look in old issues of the National Geographic Magazine.)

- **Notice** the people, how they look and how they dress.
- **Notice** the houses and the temples.
- **Notice** the trees and bridges and every other thing that the Japanese had in their lives. (Be sure to find swords and something about bathing.)
- **Read** what you can.

**Choose** a way to share what you found

- # A book
- # A mural
- # A tape



# 1. In the Beginning – choose one –

## READ, DISCOVER AND CREATE

- Read at least one account of the myth describing the creation of Japan.

- Read about the Ainu people of Japan and report on how they are different from other Japanese. Compare their history to that of Australian Aboriginals. Share your findings.

- **Discover** why the mirror, the sword and the curved jewel are important in Japanese mythology. Make life-size models of these artefacts.

- **Compare** the myth describing the birth of Japan with the creation myth of another country. Share the results of your thinking in a way of your choice (e.g. a class presentation, project cubes, etc.)

- **Read about ...** then with a friend or by yourself ... **Make** a mural picturing the creation of the Japanese Islands by the Gods, or one of the adventures of the Sun Goddess, or an incident in the life of Jimmy, great grandson of the Sun Goddess, as he comes to earth to become Japan's first emperor.

