

Walking on Egg Shells

By Paul Tokunaga

We have an expression: *walking on egg shells*. We use it to describe those awkward moments when we need to be extra sensitive in how we say something. Maybe someone says something inappropriate or in poor taste and we want to hit the pause button so we can re-group and think of the perfect thing to say. Especially because often the first thing we want to say would have escalated the conversation to an even more awkward place.

Or put the shoe on the other foot: it's when we make that totally inappropriate comment. *I*—not the other person—created the egg shells moment.

We've all been there, done that and cringe when we recall it.

So...what are *cultural egg shells*? Cultural egg shells are the things related to race, ethnicity or the culture of others that create those awkward moments. They cause low level anxiety for us. We wonder about these things but we're not sure if we should talk about them or how to talk about them in a way that doesn't backfire on us and maybe cause us to lose the relationship... or even gets us fired. Cultural egg shells—especially in today's volatile environment—require us being extra careful and sensitive about our word choices.

Where do the athletes on our campuses come from these days? Atlanta. LA. Prairie du Chien, WI. Rancho Cucamonga, CA. They also come from Nigeria, Venezuela, South Korea and Greece. And when we recruit them, they're not always named Smith and Jones.

For some, a name is more than just a name. It's an identity that goes back generations. Family names often tell a story of one's livelihood—Toronto Blue Jays pitcher Matt Shoemaker's forbearers probably were not farmers originally. Cubs pitcher Kendall Graveman's forbearers probably were not physicians. Or names might capture virtues and qualities a family line holds dear. A name is more than just a name.

When I visited my grandfather's village in remote Northern Japan in 2007 to honor his memory, I met a woman and her daughter who shared my grandfather's name—Kumagai.



What made a memorable visit an amazing visit is when she looked at me and said something in Japanese with great pride. Since I speak very little Japanese I was glad I had a translator with me. Translation: “You know, Kumagai—we are royalty. We are samurai!”

I walked out of her home feeling like a warrior! My other family line I already knew were sumo. Growing up, whenever I had trouble with my weight, I would tell myself, “You come by it naturally. You can’t help it! You’re sumo! But now I was a sumo samurai! It doesn’t get much better than that if you’re Japanese!

Kumagai was my mother’s name. My father’s family name? Let me share it with you. Tokunaga.

Back in the ‘80s when direct mail was more of a thing, I started collecting address labels that created spelled my family name. I started cutting them off the envelopes. After a while, I decided I had enough—all with different spellings—to make a book cover!

My personal favorites: Paul Tokumunager. Tall Pokes-At-Gaga. P T Okunagua. OM Tokumaga.

So, how *is* my name pronounced? Let’s hear it. How do you pronounce my name?

Toe-koo-naw-ga. With most Japanese names, the emphasis is on the first syllable. “O’s” are almost always if not always long. “U’s” are short as are “A’s.”

You may be thinking, “What’s the big deal? It’s just a name. It’s the person that’s important, not their name.”

But one’s name, properly pronounced, especially by their superiors like their coaches or athletic directors, communicates respect. You’re not just the number on your back. It communicates, “I see *you*.”

Here’s what I would like you to do. It’s simple but it’s a start.

1. Think of a name of someone in your immediate world that has a name that you avoid because you aren’t sure how to say it correctly and you’ve never asked them how to pronounce it. Or a name of someone in your immediate world that

you've used and spoken but now that you think about it, you're not entirely sure you got it right. Got one?

2. Say the name or spell it out. Ask a friend, "Give me a tip or two on how to pronounce this name correctly."

*Another tip for later on: Go to the website pronouncenames.com and learn the correct pronunciation.

Mispronouncing a name or being paralyzed you'll mispronounce it. That's one example of a cultural egg shell that is close and personal to me

What are your cultural egg shells? Cultural egg shells can be on different levels. At the most basic level, some of them arise from stereotypes we grew up with. Some of them are born out of our innocent curiosity. They're not always malicious although under the surface they might be.

I put together a short list of questions someone might ask that are 'egg shell topics' that are driven by stereotypes. Put a check by those you've said or at least thought:

- "Where are you from? I mean, really from?"
- "How can you eat that food?"
- "Can you tan?"
- "Why don't your people tip at restaurants?"
- "I bet you can really dance."
- "I bet you really can't dance."
- "How come you can't let go of that? That happened years ago."
- "You must be great in math."
- "I'm sure he only got into Harvard because he is a good athlete."

And *then* there are the deeper questions that aren't so easily answered:

- "Why does it make you mad when someone kneels during the National Anthem?"
- "Why should I feel guilty for racial injustice when I treat everyone the same?"
- "How come it's okay for minorities to use derogative racial terms, but not majority culture people?"
- "Aren't we all discriminated against and judged by others in some way? Why is one person's injustice elevated over mine?"
- "If I'm white, am I always wrong?"
- "What do you think of the Georgetown students taxing themselves for how Georgetown's sale of slaves almost two centuries ago paid off the college's debts?"
- "Are some minority athletes/students given academic advantages over other majority culture athletes/students?"

How do we make these very uncomfortable and awkward cultural egg shells disappear from our lives? Sorry to disappoint you but they will never totally disappear. Because we all come from different cultures and backgrounds we will always have cultural egg

shells. That's life. It's messy. It's awkward but it's also incredibly rich when we have deep relationships with those of other cultures and backgrounds.

In closing, how do we navigate these cultural egg shells well? A few tips:

- You will step on egg shells. It happens to all of us.
- Most people can recover when you stick your foot in your mouth if you sincerely apologize. Unless you are a serial egg shell crusher, people are generally forgiving, especially if they like you.
- When in doubt, don't say it. Sleep on it. You'll be surprised how 24 hours can alter your perspective on things.
- Try Googling your question. You might save yourself from an awkward moment by getting your answer from Google!