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Art, Math, and Empowering Allies

Escapism through education

When describing his education journey, Dr Maeda recounts his formative years with a generous sprinkling of nostalgia and humor. For instance, he quips that going to school was considerably easier than working in the family-owned tofu factory. He also says that attending well-resourced middle and high schools in Seattle during the 1970s and 1980s set the course for climbing the academic ladder. Continuing his academic journey at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where he later taught as a professor, and at the Institute of Art and Design at the University of Tsukuba, Tokyo, where he completed his PhD in design, was to a large extent driven by parental expectancies and personal curiosity, says Dr Maeda.

As a youth, home for Dr Maeda was in Seattle's Chinatown, now referred to as Seattle's Chinatown-International District or the International District, where his family owned and operated the Star Tofu Manufacturing Company. As Japanese immigrants, as Dr Maeda explains, his parents, Yoji and Elinor Maeda who had not gone to college, were pursuing the American dream. And a strategic part of realizing the dream, especially for Dr Maeda's father, was for their sons and daughter



Star Tofu Manufacturing Company owned and operated by Dr Maeda's parents



Dr Maeda with his parents in front of the family tofu factory

to study at a top-tier college which would provide them with a choice of career opportunities so they would not have to make tofu to earn a living.

The colleges of choice were preferably MIT or Harvard, the two institutions of higher learning Dr Maeda's father knew topped the tables for a prestigious education and future career preparation, even though he had little knowledge about the rigorous academics required to achieve the demanding admission standards. Furthermore, while Dr Maeda's parents understood the value of what a prestigious college education could mean, there was the pressing issue of balancing academic pursuits with the intense work of helping to run the family business.

Like many children of immigrant families, when not at school, Dr Maeda and his siblings worked in the family business, under the guidance of his hardworking artisan father. "We worked six days a week ... sometimes seven," Dr Maeda recalls.

"It was intense, long hours of hard work, which some actually call 'character building'," Dr Maeda observes. "You wake up at 1am and work continuously to 6pm making the tofu."

The business sold tofu to two kinds of customers: regular people like teachers and gardeners and businesses like restaurants.

"My father believed it was unprofitable to have workers, so in the mornings we helped to make the tofu and after school we would work in the store that sold the tofu," Dr Maeda adds.



Dr Maeda (front right) with his parents and siblings

“Since we were always working, I didn’t have any time to play, so school became a vacation villa; a wonderful place to escape.”

While the young John Maeda may have found working in the family tofu business arduous, from an early age the experience instilled in him a lifelong respect for simplicity coupled with quality and function.

“You make something that someone wants to eat, they eat it which makes them happy, and they come back for more,” he notes.

Another learning experience that emerged from working in the family business was the impact that design can have on a brand or product. In this case it was his mother’s arrangement of tofu cooking photographs she creatively displayed at the front of the store, which often led to people mistaking the tofu factory for a restaurant.¹

Favorable circumstances

Located in the affluent northern part of Seattle, the R. H. Thomson Junior High where Dr Maeda enjoyed studying in the 1970s was a 40-minute cross-town bus journey from the neighborhood where he lived with its under-resourced schools. Later he transferred to Franklin High School, which had computers, and that was where Dr Maeda’s nascent relationship with computation began.

The circumstances that led to Dr Maeda being able to study at Franklin High School, which had better resources than the schools in his own neighborhood, can be attributed to one of the many “random” but fortunate “occurrences” Dr Maeda acknowledges he has benefited from. In this case a major effort in the 1950s and 1960s by the American civil rights movement that ultimately led to a Supreme Court ruling that brought about the desegregation of public schools across

the United States.² For the first time, white, black, and Asian children as well as children of other ethnicities were able to attend school together. Responding to the Supreme Court ruling, Seattle Public Schools launched a program that would allow parents to voluntarily send their children to schools outside of their neighborhood. As steadfast believers that education could break down the walls that lead to success, Dr Maeda's parents were keen to leverage every opportunity that would provide their children with an education that would help them to achieve the American dream. And in fact, their dream was realized with each of their four children receiving a college education.

Dr Maeda has neither forgotten the circumstances nor the outcome of what studying at a well-resourced school enabled him to achieve. He often refers to his educational journey as winning a “golden education lottery ticket.” Although he was only one-and-a-half years old when Dr Martin Luther King, Jr— a leading member of the American civil rights movement—was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, when speaking about his early education, Dr Maeda credits Dr King for laying the stepping stones for his early educational pathway by pushing for the desegregation of public schools. In a speech Dr Maeda gave in 2009 to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr Day at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island³ (which shares its name with the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, where Dr King was a co-pastor with his father),⁴ he told the audience how he found it pleasingly

fitting that Seattle's Empire Way, the longest stretch of road he traveled along on his daily commute to school, was later renamed as Martin Luther King Jr Way.

Seattle at a time of change

Known as the Emerald City because it is green all year round, even in the winter due to the evergreen trees surrounding the city, Seattle today is a very different place than it was when Dr Maeda was a high school student. These days Seattle is the global headquarters of tech giants Amazon and Microsoft, the latter of which was founded by native sons of Seattle, Bill Gates and Paul Allen. The city is also host to a vibrant community of tech companies, many of which have relocated from Silicon Valley.

In the early 1970s, however, Seattle's major employer was the Boeing aircraft company, which at the time was facing severe turbulence caused by a devastating recession which resulted in thousands of jobs losses, and even saw the company teetering on the verge of bankruptcy.⁵ The gloomy economic sentiment Seattle was experiencing was famously satirized in April 1971 by a billboard erected by real estate agents Bob McDonald and Jim Youngren, located near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, which read: "Will the last person leaving Seattle—Turn out the lights." It was one of the first signs seen by visitors arriving in Seattle. However, the 1970s was a decade in which nothing in Seattle stayed the same.

As Seattle's federally funded economic recovery program moved into full swing in the 1970s, the goal was to build a stable economy. This meant developing an economy that was no longer anchored to the fortunes of a single company such as Boeing. Looking beyond the city's boundaries, Seattle was at the forefront of a resumption of trade relations with China, encapsulated in 1979 when China's senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, made a visit to the city, which included a tour of the Boeing 747 plant.⁶

Seattle was also in the nascent stages of laying the foundations for a cachet that would become known worldwide thanks in part to the city's coffee culture. Although it would be more than a decade before one of today's most internationally recognizable coffee brands would serve its first *café latte*, cappuccino, or Confetti Cookie Coffee Frappuccino, established in 1971, from its outlet on the cobblestone streets of Seattle's historic Pike Place Market, Starbucks began selling coffee beans and coffee making equipment.⁷

Diverse influences

While Dr Maeda excelled at school, working long hours in the family tofu business meant he was unable to take part in the extracurricular activities and courses that would help him to achieve the necessary grades to secure a place at a top-tier college. It was against this backdrop that Dr Maeda, a somewhat reserved but academically gifted student, recalls a school parent-teacher meeting where a teacher pointed