

# American Thinking Glimpsed through a Personal Advice Column

Eriko Toyama

## Introduction

We can see the American way of thinking by looking at advisory columns in newspapers. The process of people's problem solving is very open there, trying to get as much as possible, from members of any age group, any profession; in fact, any people concerned and willing to contribute their opinions. The ones who seek advice seem to be ready to accept any opinions which these advisors might have.

Through looking at their problems, we will be able to know who Americans are, their typical thinking, what is going on in their society, what the trends of young people in America are, and their main concerns or the conflicts they might have. It will probably become easier to understand ordinary Americans and their daily lives through those advisory columns. Using every day language, they very explicitly and openly express themselves. Since they write anonymously, they are free from the fear of being identified. Their worries and their opinions are a mirror reflecting present day America.

Medical care issues, relationships with mothers-in-law, children's education, dating, drugs, alcohol, jobs, adopting children, marriage and divorce, funerals and weddings, gay rights, manners, love affairs: people's agonies and problems are many and varied. They seem to be endless. Just naming a few, we would sometimes comment "Wow! Americans have the same kind of problems we have. They are not so different from us." Then suddenly, we might start to feel somewhat closer to them. Indeed, some problems are world-wide and we have much we can share.

However, their problem solving is very different from ours. Very unique, realistic, practical, and more than that, very humorous; and in those styles in which columnists answer, we witness the essence of American thinking. This American way of thinking is well demonstrated in each problem and answer. We will see some of them. The first chapter will analyze examples dealing with Health, the second chapter, Family Ties, and the last chapter other matters. This miscellaneous chapter comes last but is not the least in terms of importance.

## I Health

### 1) "runaholic" husband (p.21, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Ann Landers: Are you aware of another kind of "holic" these days? Add to the alcoholic and the workaholic—the runaholic. . . .

We have had one vacation in nine years. I was thrilled that he wanted to go to a resort near Duluth. When we were 30 miles from our destination he told me he was running in a marathon. Of the seven days, he was gone four. The children were seven and five years of age, I was alone without a car.

Every day he runs at least six miles. And then he works out after the running. He says he "owes it to himself" and that he has to do it or he doesn't feel right. If this isn't a disease, what is?

The man has so many good qualities. He doesn't smoke, drink, gamble or chase women. But he is so self-centered, it's sickening. He never shows up for anything at school. Some people think I'm a widow. When the teacher asked our 5-year-old what his daddy does, he replied, "He runs."

Please tell those men who are hell-bent on keeping their bodies in shape that isn't worth it if it destroys their marriage.—Fed Up

Reading this problem of Fed Up's, the first thing we acknowledge is how funny it is. We will surely laugh at the scene when the kid answered, "He runs," when asked his father's occupation. The child's innocence and father's obsessive engagement in one activity made such a contrast and subsequently enhanced the humor.

We also notice that this sort of problem is not unfamiliar to most of us. As this solution seeker wrote, his running is not worth destroying their marriage. Yet, this husband thinks his running is just the extension of one of his hobbies, and he would probably be shocked to read her comments. The jargon "runaholic" is a well coined word, which is on the same line with alcoholic and workaholic. The only difference is "runaholic" does not sound very serious compared with the last two, but to the wife concerned, this behavior is a pain in the neck which she can hardly bear.

The columnist Ann Landers answers thus: Dear Fed: Your husband is addicted to running and he will continue to run, no matter what you say. The larger problem is his selfishness. You'll feel a lot better when you, too, start doing your own thing. (p.21) This is a very down-to-earth answer. Indeed for this kind of light question, not speaking of a life or death problem, the columnist's answer is an easy, relaxed one.

### 2) AIDS (pp.6-7, *Dear Abby, II*)

Dear Abby: I am a 21-year-old woman who was recently diagnosed as having AIDS. I started having sex at age 15 and have had too many partners to know who I contracted it

from. I have never used drugs or had a blood transfusion.

At the urging of several boyfriends, I went on the pill so I wouldn't get pregnant. I didn't know that I could get something far worse than that.

Anyone who is having sex, unless you have been in a long-term monogamous relationship, please listen to me. When you sleep with someone, you are also sleeping with everyone that person has been with. Are you willing to take that risk?

Abby, please print this. I want your readers to know that going on the pill or using another form of birth control other than a condom can be giving yourself a death sentence. You have to be very stupid these days to have sex without a condom.

It's too late for me, although my parents and I still pray for a cure, but this letter will save other lives.—BARBARA H., QUEENS, N.Y.

The main purpose of this disclosure is not to seeking for the writer, but just to reveal her present condition as it is, and to let us know about what she learned about AIDS. Although her careless behavior is costing her her life, her approach to her fate is rather brave, we have to say. This 21-year-old is still young enough to fear impending death.

As we already know, the AIDS problem is not a problem in only one country, but one that all nations must tackle together. A recent newspaper article in *Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun* said that the disease is still spreading, and in fact, the cure or treatment in hospitals has not caught up with the speed of its spread. It is horrendous to know that in Asia, and eastern Europe we have an increasing number of patients. Also, the death rate from AIDS in Africa and some parts of South America is still the highest. In modern society, in which we travel world wide, if we are unlucky enough, any of us might become its next victim.

Abby, a twin sister of Ann Landers, answered BARBARA about this problem as follows. She first thanked her for writing by saying that her letter would save many people. Then she continued that there are no "absolutes," that a condom alone cannot be considered "absolutely" safe. However, with proper use and the additional use of a spermicide containing Nonoxynol-9, one could reduce the chances of infection from the AIDS virus. Further, Abby added a supplementary explanation about AIDS. Those supplements were more professional and specific, enough to enlighten people who were not yet informed.

### 3) Cancer Notification (p.88, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Abby: My father, who is 68, went to the hospital for what was supposed to be minor prostate surgery, but it turned out to be much more serious. The doctor discovered cancer so far gone he closed Dad up.

My mother made the doctor promise he wouldn't tell Dad. Don't you think Dad has a right to know? It will just be a matter of time before he catches on.

We, the children, are trying to persuade Mother to change her mind, but she insists that Dad is better off not knowing. She says, "Ignorance is bliss."

What do you think?—THE CHILDREN

Abby answers that there is little bliss in ignorance that creates false hope. She strongly urged them to tell the truth to the father, so that he could attend to any unfinished business.

Promptly, another reader who had the same kind of situation a few years ago supported Abby's advice. (pp.88-89, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Abby: To "THE CHILDREN," whose father has inoperable cancer and his wife refuses to tell him:

Our family was in exactly the same situation years ago. Mom refused to tell Dad, and we reluctantly went along with it. I will always regret that decision.

As a result, we all acted like nothing was seriously wrong with Dad. Meanwhile, he grew sicker and sicker. We created a false atmosphere of hope and optimism that was more painful than the real one.

No honest or meaningful conversations ever took place because no one admitted that there was anything wrong. I'm sure Dad knew he was dying, but he held back so as to prolong Mom's avoidance of reality.

What a terrible, terrible loss! We could have confronted each other, cried and hugged and spoken what was in our hearts and minds, but we didn't.

I'm glad you advise people to be honest with each other in such situations. It's the only way.—TOO LATE FOR US

In Japan, cancer notification has been becoming more common these days. It is a grave issue related not only to the person himself/herself but also his/her family. That is what makes the notification difficult. And yet, precisely for this reason, parents and children have to face the reality together. The columnist is honest and brave, and many other readers are good supporters as they wrote such back up letters immediately.

#### 4) Suffering from a big nose (p.57, *Ann Landers'*, D-41)

Dear Ann Landers: My problem is a very big, ugly, repulsive looking nose. I have hated it ever since I was four years old. ( I am 17 now.) Kids have treated me about my shnozz as far back as I can remember. I pretend like it doesn't bother me, but it's as if a knife is being jabbed into my flesh every time someone mentions it.

I told my mom exactly how I felt when I was 13 years old. She said nobody is perfect and I should accept the nose God gave me. She wanted to make an appointment with psychiatrist who would help me "straighten out my thinking," but I refused to go. I KNOW what my problem is and I don't see my points in going to a shrink to discuss it. Then my dad got into the act. He said I had a ridiculous set of values and added, "Look at Barbra Streisand." I told him if I could sing like Barbra Streisand my nose wouldn't bother me so much.

I am completely miserable because of my ugly nose. I stay away from people, thinking they couldn't possibly care to get to know me, so why try to be friendly? My life is lonely and I feel rotten about my future. I really need someone to help me with this problem. Will you be the one? —IN THE GUTTER

Ann Landers is very sympathetic in her response. She suggested he get plastic surgery. Since he feels rotten right now, he may feel that his life will start again if he has an operation in order to change his looks. At the same time, she does not forget to add that all nose surgeries are not always successful. Therefore, the best and safest plan would be to ask an ex-patient whose redone nose he likes, "Who did the operation?", explaining that the best recommendation for any kind of cosmetic surgery is a pleased patient. Her warning is correct. At first it seems a little irresponsible, but after thorough reading, it turns out to be very helpful.

## II Family Ties

In this chapter, we will examine family ties in America. Between parents and children, and between grandparents and grandchildren, the relationships of some Americans are quite close, but the others seem intentionally to keep distant. Among the three generations, views of family ties differ greatly.

### 5) paying parents room and board (p.70, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Abby: A reader asked you how much room and board per week should parents expect of grown children who are employed and living at home. You reply: "There is no flat fee: much would depend upon the parents' finances."

Abby, I think it stinks that any parents would expect their children to pay room and board for living at home. Children don't ask to be born—their parents brought them into this world, and those parents are responsible for feeding, clothing and housing their children until they decide to leave home.

If parents are really that hard up, I can see asking their children to help out once in a while, but as for charging them room and board, like I say, Abby, I think that stinks.—  
FURIOUS IN DALLAS

Immediately after this letter appeared, another reader wrote the following letter. (pp. 70-71, *Ibid*)

Dear Abby: To "Furious in Dallas,"

When I finished my schooling and entered the working world, I, the child, was required to pay my parents room and board every week. My family was fairly well off, so at first I was angry, but my parents told me it was for my own good—that it would teach responsibility and prepare me for the "real" world.

They were right. That's how I learned the value of money—how to spend it and how to save and how to live within my means.

The day I went to buy my wedding gown, my wonderful mother pulled out a little book and gave it to me. Inside was a savings account with all the money I had paid for room and

board! She smiled and said, "It's yours."

Actually, I learned two lessons: responsibility and love.—LEARNED IN PENNSYLVANIA

This apparently backs up the parents who insisted that their children pay room and board, even though nothing as fabulous happens to everybody as happened to the above girl. In educational situations, or family financial situations, every family should have their own policy. Therefore, from this perspective it is not at all strange if parents' upbringing style differs from family to family.

Here is another type of parent who aggressively insists that grown-up children pay money to parents.

**6) Free-loading days are over when a child reaches 18** (p.90, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Abby: My wife and I are in strong disagreement over what to do about our son, who will be 18 soon. "Peter" (not his real name) dropped out of high school at 17 to "work in the real world," but so far he has not found a job. He has been very selective in his job hunting. He's not really qualified for anything, but no job seems good enough.

I suggested that he take a paper route until he can get the kind of job he wants, but he won't even consider it.

I told Peter that his free-loading days will be over when he reaches 18, that he will be expected to pay room and board while he lives with us. My wife says I am totally unreasonable to demand such a thing from our son.

I maintain that when children turn 18, they are no longer minors and they should support themselves. Also, there is no law stating that parents have an obligation to send their children to college, either. Your opinion on both questions, please?—NEW YORKER

Abby answers very humorously using an example of birds: "I vote with you on both counts. Some birds won't even attempt to fly until they're kicked out of the nest. But all 18-year-olds are not alike. Many need parental assistance and deserve it." (p.90, *Dear Abby II*) She seems it rather cruel to ask 18-year-old boy to pay money to parents.

In the topic of family, putting older parents in a nursing home is another unavoidable one. America is not an exception. Many people have a guilty conscious when they face this problem. Feeling guilty, some are hesitant to send their parents to those institutions.

**7) the senile elderly parent** (p.50, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Abby: How does one answer the senile elderly nursing home patient who asks, "Why am I here?"

My mother, who is in her late 80s, has been in a small, comfortable nursing facility for almost five years. She is in fairly good physical health, but her mind has been failing for 10 to 15 years.

There are days when she doesn't know me, and nights when she gets up at 2 a.m. to prowls the nursing home searching for her husband who has been dead for five years, but in her more lucid moments, she asks, "Why am I living here with strangers?"

She says she is a "prisoner" and wants to live where she has more freedom. But in order for her to be "free," a still-productive member of the family with other responsibilities would then become the prisoner.

How can I answer my mother? This is the heartbreak of my life. —GETTING OLD MYSELF

Here is another one who is experiencing a new stage of relationship between old parents.

**8) exercising patience in Missouri** (p.34, *Ann Landers'*, D-41)

Dear Ann Landers: This is not a complaint, it is merely a comment to help your readers understand what it is like to maintain a pleasant relationship with very old parents.

My in-laws, both 90, are in reasonably good health. We go to see them often, bring them to our place to dinner and take them out to eat. There are endless complaints about the way the car rides, the quality of the food, the service, the price of doctors and medicine, how rude young people are, how rotten TV has become, how terrible the music on the radio is, how trashy the ads in the magazines are, how junky newspapers have become, etc.

They talk on and on about things that happened 60 years ago. We have heard it all a million times.

We love them dearly and will continue to do what we can to make their lives pleasant, but it does wear us out. —Exercising Patience in Missouri.

Both letters are concerned with the aging problem, which actually never settles down. People just want to express their feelings. They are not really looking for advice. They just need someone to talk to. Maybe, we, when we need to unload a burden, talk to somebody, anybody. Even to a stranger, because we will never see him or her again. Besides, we can tell the story any way we like. In other words, the advisors, Ann or Abby, do not have to be professional advisors. They can be good listeners so that people can say anything relaxed. The role of advisory column in America is, in a way, an outlet for complaints.

Next is a strong grandma, complaining about her children's selfishness, asking her to baby-sit their kids.

**9) eternal baby-sitter** (p.10, *Ann Landers'*, D-45)

Dear Ann Landers: Am I a rotten person because I do not want to baby-sit my grandchildren? I raised my six kids with no help, and I believe my sons and daughters should do the same—especially since they have only two apiece, not six like I had.

Five days last week I was a prisoner in my own home. I had seven grandchildren here, off

and on. Three were overnights. One got sick and threw up all over the furniture. Also, Ann, they are not the best-behaved kids in the world. Often I must resort to punishment to get them to mind. They were never trained not to touch things that don't belong to them so I have to put away all my nice knick-knacks. Three of the kids (over five years of age) are bed-wetters. My wash machine was going constantly.

My husband gets mad at me for being such a patsy. He is retired now and wants me to go fishing with him and take little weekend car trips. We didn't get to go to a darned place this past summer because our kids dumped their kids on us. Please tell me what to do. —Fed Up And Exhausted In The Midwest

This seems very American. To her, becoming sacrificed herself due to their grandchildren is unbearable. It is OK to see those young children once in a while, but not always. Grandma has the right to have her own time and privacy. She cannot stand anything to ruin her privilege. Compared to this grandma's trouble, her six children's selfishness is enhanced. They take it for granted that their parents will take care of their grandchildren.

Then the last one is about the elder brother who is in a jail and mother does not know whether she should take the younger boys to see his brother in the jail.

**10) Take the boys (p.14, *Ann Landers'* D-45)**

Dear Ann Landers: Our son, who is 20 years old, is in prison. Jack will be there for a long time to come.

The problem is my husband. He refuses to let our younger sons go visit him. We went last year and took the kids (eight and 11 years old) and they were very sad all the way home. They also asked a lot of questions that were difficult to answer. That evening my husband said, "That's the last time we're taking the boys. If you want to go see 'Jack,' I'll drive you, but the young ones stay home."

The children love each other, Ann. I believe they are old enough to understand. In my opinion the visit was not all harmful. We have argued about this so much these past few months that we now know a third party must help us decide what is right. You're the one we chose. Please help.—Massachusetts Miseries

Ann Lander's answer is encouraging the mother to continue taking the young ones to the jail to see their older brother. She even adds the old saying, "hate the sin but love the sinner." Yet, we see the point from Father, too. He seems to worry the bad influence to the young brothers. The 20-year-old son is sort of a family disgrace, a bad example to the younger brothers. Besides, they are too young to understand the meaning of crime and punishment.

Nevertheless, if this is the one example of American way of thinking, it seems to derive from the deep humanism. And this sort of humanistic approach makes us realize that it will lead to strengthen the family ties.



### III Miscellaneous

The last chapter is about common usages of language, and etiquette that we should remember.

#### 11) common usages of language (pp.60-61, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Abby: My family and I have made a game of counting the times a person uses “basically” in one speech or commentary. I have counted as many as eight “basicallys”. It means “as a basis for” or “fundamentally”, but it’s now used as a filler and means nothing.

My prize story concerns a prominent athlete who was asked in a television interview where he was born. He replied, “Well, I was basically born in New York.” Need I say more?  
—JEAN IN MASON CITY, IOWA

#### Another one: (Ibid, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Abby: Hooray for “Tired of ‘OK’ in Arizona” who complained about the annoying habit so many people have of terminating every sentence with “OK?” as though it were a question.

I am also tired of hearing “right?” tacked onto every sentence when no question is asked. For example, John is telling Jane what happened the other day: “I picked up my kid sister, right? Then she asked if I’d mind stopping for a few minutes at the library, right? So I stopped at the library, right?”

Abby, what is the point of ending every sentence with a “right”? Sign me. . .—RIGHT IS WRONG IN MAINE.

Language problem is not only in America. Actually, it is not a problem, but a matter of personal taste; whether one likes to use it or not. Since it is closely related with young culture, the old people tend to feel disgusted. If they once get used to familiarizing themselves with the language, it is OK, and they will accept it all right.

The columnist does not make particular suggestion nor insist on her ideas, just suggests to let go by until the time settles down. Whether it becomes cliché, or obsolete, it is just the luck that language has.

The last deals with manner and etiquette, the subject most “fussy” women like Ann or Abby are good at.

#### 12) Tired of Giving (p.36, *Ann Landers’, D-41*)

Dear Ann Landers: When, if at all, should one check on a gift that has not been acknowledged?

I have grown sour on gift-giving. My income is limited, and so is my energy. It is a financial sacrifice to send a nice gift—then there's the time to shop, the gift-wrapping and the wait in the line at the post office. Also the insurance isn't exactly cheap.

I've sent Christmas gifts, wedding gifts, shower gifts, new-baby gifts, even new-home gifts. Not only do I not hear if the gift was liked, I don't even hear if it was received.

What is a person to do? Check by phone? (This isn't free either.) How long should a person wait before asking, "I wonder if you received my gift?" I have always acknowledged every gift—and promptly—but I'm beginning to think I'm a freak and that gift-giving isn't worth the trouble anymore. What do you say?—Maybe I'm Foolish In Missouri.

Ann Lander's answer is very explicit. She suggests to give the recipient two months. Then if she still does not receive the answer, give a call and ask if the gift is received. Tell that it was insured and if lost you have the right to put in a claim. The funniest part is the next. She said "if the gift was received and the recipient is embarrassed by your call, don't feel guilty. She (or he) deserved the red face." (*Ibid*)

True, the embarrassed is not the sender but the receiver. It is not fair for the sender to feel unsettled because of the rude person is the forgetful person.

Here is another example of acknowledging a gift.

### 13) Acknowledging a gift has "faded away"? (p.82, *Dear Abby II*)

Dear Abby: Several months ago I mailed a birthday card with a generous check to my granddaughter. I heard nothing from her, but when she visited me at Christmas, I asked her in a nice, polite way if she had received my card and check. She said she had. Then I said, also in a nice, polite way, that I had half expected her to let me know that it had been received.

Then she said, "Oh, that's not done anymore! That old custom has faded away" —or words along that line.

I was flabbergasted. She is a smart girl, Phi Beta Kappa and a last-year medical student.

I am an old man, but I still have all my marbles (I think), and I cannot believe that the common courtesy of acknowledging a gift has "faded away" —at least not in our West civilization. Or am I mistaken?

Also, what do you think my attitude should be regarding future gifts to this granddaughter?  
—GRANDPA

Abby says nothing has faded away, except the granddaughter's good manners. Also as for future gifts, she suggests that he quit sending if she keeps the same attitude and resents over acknowledging.

## Conclusion

There are many more interesting articles to introduce, but since there is such a multitude, just a few are mentioned here. The variety of problems are worthy of stopping to consider. They make us realize that so many people have so many problems, and also there are so many solutions. And the difference on problem solving style shows the different quality, uniqueness that each nation has.

In reviewing the first chapter, it seems amazing that the big nose problem and the fatal, most serious disease, AIDS were talked over at the same table. If people are pessimistic enough, they will not share their personal problems right away. Yet the 21-year-old girl who revealed her AIDS condition was generous and brave. Not only for her own sake, but for everybody else, she wrote and warned. Her frankness is something we must admire.

Family ties are important to a life of quality, but they are weakening these days. A different column explained how a young man drowned to death in a swimming pool. The lifeguard did not help him because it was not his territory. Further, two men stood watching an elderly woman drown because they said the water was too cold. Are we living in an age in which such strangely uncaring people are becoming the norm? If so, family ties should be emphasized more to help us become aware of their importance.

When we think about the difficulties of living in modern society, the role of this kind of advisory column seems to become more and more important. Owing a lot to the columnists' humanistic, sincere approach, newspaper advice columns in America have long been very popular. Though sometimes quite cynical, often times their advice is witty and exact. They welcome other opinions, too. If they do not know the solutions, they are always ready to ask for professional ones. As long as they are supported by readers, these columns will keep prospering.

## References

- 1 *Dear Abby* II, Abigail Van Buren, Yumi Press, 1988, Tokyo, Japan.
- 2 *Ann Landers'*, Columns in *The Asahi Evening News*, Taiyosha (D-41), 1982, Tokyo, Japan.
- 3 *Ann Landers'*, Advice in *The Asahi Evening News*, Taiyosha (D-45), 1984, Tokyo, Japan.
- 4 *Ann Landers'*, Letters in *The Asahi Evening News*, Taiyosha (D-41), 1985, Tokyo, Japan.