

“There are Always Two Sides of Every Coin”

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Japan, ... not what I expected. Throughout my stay in Ashikaga, I have frequently been asked the same reoccurring questions; How is your life in Japan? What did you expect before coming? You could easily think that these were easy questions. They are in fact personal and subjective and there fore should have been relativeiy simple. Guess again! My life in Japan is anything but simple. My expectation before coming... well, lets just say that they are “out the window.”

I don't exactly know, nor can pin point what I thought about Japan before coming. However, I guess that being an Asian and having lived in an Asian country before, I probably thought that it wouldn't be too foreign. I do have to admit that I did fall into the common trap of having some preconceived stereotypes and expectations of Japanese students. In America, as a student, you constantly hear, or are being told about the math and science astute students...of Japan. No, I am not bitter! However, we are told in one way or another that we are being compared and are actually way behind in the academic race. My own response to this is, is there a race? I didn't know that our own personal education was a world wide contest. Well, statistics have shown that Asians are in fact continually scoring higher on standardized tests. Also, supposedly, these tests are non-bias and comparable in every factor. I am not sure if this is possible, but who am I to deny the validity of these statistical “geniuses.” So, I guess that it's a fact. Anyway, back to the point. I thought that I would be faced with students who probably already knew more than I could possibly teach them. Why did they need a “Gaijin” around? These students were supposed to be well-mannered, quite and highly studious students. These students are in fact the brightest of the world. The key words being “suppose to be.”

As you may have already figured out, they were not the little “Angles” that I expected. My impressions and my own experience with my Japanese Junior High School students are very varied and at times unpredictable. At some schools, which will remain nameless, so that I won't bias you and your visits in anyway, were a little less than perfect. Some students were not only not interested in English but in learning in general. I have seen some students climb out windows kick tables, yell back at teachers, push teachers, and basically do anything that they wanted. This was all done without the students being reprimanded in anyway. Although, to be fair, I have to say that it has never been done in my presence. This does not mean that it does not ever happen, even though I highly doubt it. There certainly isn't the concept of detention like we have in the States, even though the students already stay very late at school. During these times, I often feel as I am on display. Perhaps, I was not hired to be an actual teacher, but a traveling museum exhibit. “Here is the exhibition this year: A non-White American.”

However, I have also experienced the other end of the spectrum. I have taught at some schools were the students could have been “Angles.” The students actually look forward to my English lessons

and fully participate. Yes, it's true, despite what I just told you. They really make me smile when they come up to me to ask me a question, or just to say "Hi" outside of our English lessons. I know that it took a lot of courage for them to speak to me. I really have a lot of respect for those students and wish them all the luck in their studies. It really makes me feel useful for a change and not like a "one woman act", but an actual integral part of the learning process. For once I think that I am making a genuine contribution to their lives. English is not easy for the Japanese in anyway. Their own language system and structure is so different from the English language. Although, I still think that Japanese is much more difficult, at least it has been for me. I really do enjoy spending time with my students. I have even made plans with them outside school to go shopping, or to have lunch together on the weekends.

So, as you see, don't always believe the stereotypes, and what you read. At the same time, don't always expect the worse. My only real advice that I can give you is that "kids will be kids." No matter where you are, you will always encounter those highly studious students, to those practical jokers, which I am sure that we all probably were. I am not condoning in anyway the problems that I have seen at school as just "typical". There certainly exist some pressing problems with their school discipline system and the way that teachers and students interact. At the same time, there are many positive things that we can learn from their educational system. I know that this doesn't necessarily clear things up for you in anyway, but there are always two sides of every coin. I now have a newfound respect for all teachers. After being here for seven months, I realized that it was very idealistic of me to think that I alone could influence every student and that every student was interested. It's just not possible. I do realize that there are other comforts that I can take part in. I can feel successful if I can reach just one of my students and make that real difference in their lives. To hear that student say "I will always remember you, and thank you," is like them giving me a big present that I will always have in my heart.