

## *Riding Without Training Wheels*

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*After being airborne for sixteen hours, with one stop-over in Portland, Oregon, I arrived in Tokyo, Japan. Many emotions were running through my mind. I was a recent college graduate, leaving a dream internship in Washington, DC to teach English in Japan. For me, the experience would be much more than just teaching English. Until now, I had never spent any significant time outside The United States and had never studied foreign culture in detail. I could not speak Japanese and I did not have any material familiarity with Japanese culture. Yet, I was hungry for international experiences and understanding. Now that I have lived and worked in Japan for seven months, I can honestly say I have enjoyed my experience here. However, I had extreme difficulty adjusting to my new life in Japan. The two biggest obstacles I had to face were overcoming culture shock and adjusting to Japanese education in junior high schools. Once I was able to overcome culture shock and adjust to school life, I gained an appreciation for many virtues I found in Japanese culture. I have thus concluded that even though Japan and The United States are very different societies, there are a lot of ways we can learn from each other.*

*Culture shock seems to affect people in different ways. While some only suffer minor set backs, others completely close themselves off because their reaction to another culture is very negative. My experience was closer to the latter. The three biggest elements of Japanese culture which surprised me most were: group orientation, uncomfortableness with foreigners, and the oneness society strives to achieve. Group orientation was the biggest challenge for me. I must admit, it is still difficult for me to understand and accept the importance Japan places on the group. In America, we are socialized to believe a person must develop personal ambition and an independent ability to think, work, and live. Americans do appreciate the advantages and virtues of group work, but there is not a reliance on the group. As a result, everyone develops a uniqueness which is expressed in their life style, thinking, dress, work habits, friends, and associates. In Japan, the group is the foundation of society. Everything in life, whether it is work, play, family, or friends, begins with the group. It is common for people to travel in groups, work in groups, think in groups, and eat in groups. From this observation, I concluded that individuality or significant deviation from the group is discouraged. I felt pressure to assimilate my thinking and behaviors to the conscience of the group. My natural reaction was to resist this pressure with all my strength, which caused an unpleasant feeling for me.*

*Additionally Japanese people, in general, have an uncomfortableness with foreign people. Now, I must admit there are numerous examples of people who have gone out of their way to accommodate me and make me feel welcome in this country. I do not proclaim that every Japanese person does not like to associate with foreign people, but in my experience I have come across more people who reject than accept me. Those who reject foreigners and wish not to have any contact with*

them, seem to stand out most in my mind. I can not count the number of people who have stared intensely at me in public places, refused to sit in an open seat next to me on the train, stepped off the side walk so they would not have to pass me on the street, purposely misunderstood my attempts to speak Japanese so they would not have to talk to me or serve me in a restaurant, or totally ignored me as if I were invisible, as if I did not exist. I could not help but conclude that these people did not welcome me to their country. I can not help but think that these people believe I am irrelevant to their lives because I am not Japanese. These experiences pierce my heart and tear at my soul. I often hear the explanation that many Japanese people have never encountered a foreigner person before. Additionally, I have been told that Japanese people are very shy. While this argument may work for some people to explain away the previous described behaviors, it does not work for me. The world has become smaller through internationalization and the globalization of markets. Evidence of this fact is present here in Japan. For example, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Denny's, Red Lobster, 7-Eleven, and many other American companies have become household names in Japan. There are more American than Japanese movies available for viewing at movie theaters and rental shops. I constantly see Americans and other foreign nationals on television programs and commercials. Clothing labels from France and The United States are widely available and purchased in Japan. Many Japanese people are big consumers of foreign music. Yet, with all this internationalization present many Japanese still reject foreigners. I often joke about these occurrences to cover my own anger and frustration. I once told a friend that these same people who want nothing to do with me probably drink Coca-Cola and wear Nikes. Rejection is one of the most powerful and influencing emotional forces. I was not prepared to receive it upon arrival. It contributed to my unhappiness here in Japan.

Finally, the oneness society strives for, was difficult for me to accept. This oneness, which is similar to group conscientiousness, can be seen in almost every element of society. My observations have lead me to conclude that the oneness Japan strives for, begins with its requirements for citizenship and is reinforced by many societal elements. Two examples of these societal elements which oneness are uniforms and the school lunch program. In Japan, its impossible to obtain citizenship if you are not ethnically Japanese. This inherently creates a separate and subordinate class of people, foreigners. This policy makes it impossible for foreign nationals, who were born in Japan for the second and third generation, to gain access to the inside. Needless to say, this type of thinking sets the standard for visitors who live in Japan to be given third class status. Therefore, the oneness Japan attempts to achieve in its citizenry, whether purposely or incidentally, contributes to the alienation many foreigners, including myself feel.

Almost every where you turn in Japan, you will see people wearing uniforms. I believe uniforms are as much a part of the Japanese society as chopsticks or summo. All school children in junior high and high school wear uniforms. City office workers wear uniforms. Even office workers in travel agencies, sales offices, and banks wear uniforms. I have been told that these uniforms represent discipline and dedication, but to me they serve other purposes. Uniforms reinforce the common bond

*the Japanese people have and highlight the differences they have with foreigners. I believe this contributes to the general interest many Japanese people have in not mixing with foreigners. Another example of societal elements that reinforce this oneness is the school lunch program. The school lunch program in elementary and junior high schools provides the same lunch menu for every student and every teacher. Students work together to serve the lunch, they eat it together, and finally they remove the dishes and uneaten food together. Now, I must admit this system does a lot to teach responsibility, a sense of sharing, and commitment to fellow man. However, it reinforces oneness, discourages differences, and refuses to accommodate those who are different. The side affects of the school lunch program, as I see them, have a direct correlation to the societal element that contributed to my culture shock and alienation.*

*The second hurdle I had to jump concerned my orientation to junior high schools in Japan. When I was a student in America, I often heard legends about Japanese students. I was told they were extremely studious. Japanese pupils were portrayed as perfect students who had dedicated their childhood to serious study. Now that I have had an opportunity to teach in Japan, I wonder if the myths I heard about Japanese students were only propaganda to motivate American students to work harder. The most surprising aspect about the junior high schools was the behavior. I have seen students with: cellular phones that ring in class, super mini skirts as a part of their uniforms, red, orange, or green hair, elephant ear rings in their ears, and pants that are so baggy they are falling off their waist. In some of my classes I have to constantly ask students to stop talking so I can proceed with the lesson. I have also even witnessed students escaping from class because they do not want to attend the lesson. This type of behavior is not conducive for a learning environment and definitely contradicts the image of Japanese students I previously had. I was even more surprised to find there was not a structured discipline system in place to deal with such delinquency. In fairness, I must recognize that there are lots of students who are serious minded, well behaved pupils. These students come to school every day and give their best effort. Their hunger and pursuit of knowledge impresses me. Unfortunately, the students who are allowed to disrupt the academic setting are a detriment to themselves and those who earnestly want to learn.*

*The second aspect of the junior high schools that was most surprising is the emphasis the Japanese system places on standardized testing. Entrance exams are the ultimate indicator of a students' ability to perform in the future according to current thinking. Therefore, the curriculum in my opinion is geared toward helping students perform well on these test. The problem as I see it, lies in the fact that student attitudes about learning have been slanted in such a way that they only want to learn what will help them pass the test. As a result, I find myself being asked to plan lessons with this type of big picture goal in mind. This aim totally undermines what I previously thought the goal of my job was. Before I arrived, I was under the impression my job was to focus on teaching students to speak English, not preparing them for standardized testing. Since there are not weekly grades, that I have ever witnessed such as regularly checked homework and weekly test, I have no way of building upon concepts and testing them regularly to make sure they are understood. I have found myself*

*working with a curriculum which I half way believed in and was half way enthusiastic about teaching.*

*Once I was able to adapt to the culture and adjust my expectations in the junior high schools, I was able to appreciate the many virtues that can be found in Japanese society. I have observed an incredible interest among Japanese people to share. This willingness to share can be found in many aspects of daily life including gift giving rituals, tea serving, treating other people at bars and pubs, and the cooperative attitude people display while playing sports. I have been on the receiving end of numerous acts of kindness since my arrival in Japan. One night I was treated to four thousand yen worth of beer and pizza by a stranger who enjoyed talking with me at the bar. He refused to accept no for an answer and seemed to enjoy watching me consume the food and beverages he provided for me. Additionally, I have encountered numerous people in Tokyo who were very willing to point me in the right direction when I was lost. On a couple of occasions, some strangers have even have gone out of their way to walk with me to my destination to ensure I found it. These acts of kindness are very different from anything I have ever experienced in America. I have been impressed by the thoughtfulness some Japanese people have shown me. Finally, I have been fascinated by the Japanese appreciation for extra-curricular sports and academic activities. With the exception of a few students, almost every pupil participates in some activity after school. I totally support this effort and I was impressed that so many students have been mobilized to participate. I think extra-curricular activities provide students with a natural stress outlet, and allows them to make use of the skills they learn in class (academic activities). I envy this system and I wish there were some way we could get more students involved in after school clubs and sports in America.*

*Although I have experienced some adversity, I have truly enjoyed my experience in Japan. I have learned that all countries have positive and negative aspects of their culture and business operations. Furthermore, I have gained valuable insight about confronting stereo types of foreign people and countries. I imagine a person from Japan who taught Japanese in America would have similar observation and criticisms about my country. While there are many differences between America and Japan, I believe we can grow stronger if we learn from each other. No one person, culture, or country has all the answers, but it takes an open mind on both parts to understand and appreciate the differences that exist. In making this point I recognize there are many things I could have done to bridge the gap between myself and the Japanese. I could have made a better effort to read about Japanese customs, culture, and societal norms before I came here. Additionally, I could have tried to talk out my frustration with my Japanese co-workers. Just like riding a bicycle without training wheels, learning to live and survive in another country requires you to get up many times when you fall down.*