

## *"All God's Children Can Dance"*

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Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami once wrote a short story, titled, in English, "All God's Children Can Dance." Regardless of religious implication or how true it is that everyone can dance (I personally can dance, just not very well), the statement has a ring of truth to it, even if the statement itself is false. The meaning, I believe, I would not have discovered before coming to Japan.

I came to Japan for various reasons. It was perfectly in line with my studies at my University: I studied English and always enjoyed sharing my knowledge of it with others, and I also studied Japanese language, history, and culture. As an ALT, I could share my language, but also have the chance to improve my language skills and experience the culture that, until then, I could only experience indirectly through books and movies. I was honored to accept the position and I came to Japan with more enthusiasm and excitement than I had ever had for anything I had ever done. I was finally going to see my studies come to fruition: I was going to meet the Japanese culture and immerse myself firsthand.

However, a certain amount of naiveté was involved, I realize that now. Everyone has preconceptions about foreign cultures. There was at least one that I had which turned out to be "off the mark." At the time, I believed Japanese students would all be very obedient, shy, and always eager to learn English. This was obviously wrong. Japanese students can be obedient, shy, and eager about their studies, but it wasn't all of them and nobody was all three. I think Americans think that just because Japanese students bow to their teachers that means that they are governed by an iron cultural rule that makes them meeker and milder than American students. I was a student in America once, and I remembered how rowdy my classmates and I could be. What surprised me and what would probably surprise most Americans is that Japanese students can be every bit as outrageous as their American counterparts.

There was a brief time when my job as an ALT became a burden. My misconceptions about Japanese students fell apart as I saw my 3rd-year students mouth off, rest their heads on their desks in boredom, or pass around little drawings of me as a walrus. I started to become discouraged and angry, as if I had been cheated out of the perfect angels that I should have been teaching. And yet I couldn't help but recognize how similar this behavior seemed. This wasn't new: I had seen this when I was their age in my own country. So, I dug deep into my memories and recalled the great teachers I admired as a child. What had they done that had made them special? Could I do as they had done, break through the boredom and make the lesson interesting? If I was going to be successful as an ALT, I had to stop believing in the lie that Japanese people were any different from Americans.

So, I started easing the disciplinarian approach, because it had backfired on my teachers. I started laughing off the small jokes at my expense, I started to teach them some English slang during free time, and, most importantly, I started treating each student as an individual instead of the homogenous choir of angels I had expected them to be. And, slowly but surely, things got better. There are problem students still, slow days, and a few everyday difficulties, but they aren't so bad any more. The job has become more fun and rewarding on the whole.

This revelation about the Japanese people helped me to see a strange irony of my journey. I came to Japan to experience Japanese culture, and what makes something exotic out of something mundane are the differences. The language, the customs, the architecture, the art, the music, the religion, and the food these are the little differences that make life in Japan exhilarating and wonderful. However, when I get tired or lonely for my homeland, I take comfort not in the differences, but in the similarities.

There are certain constants that exist both in Japan and the U.S., and I wouldn't be surprised if they existed everywhere. These are things which are always there, always recognizable; when people celebrate, they go drinking with their friends, children beg their parents for candy at checkout lines at grocery stores, and when a group hears a song everyone knows, everyone taps their toes in time with the rhythm.

So, I'm happy to bury old ideas about my students. Seeing how much I was like them at one time is more rewarding than that old choir of angels anyway. That fundamental sameness is refreshing no matter how well a lesson is going. It makes me happy to know how little difference an ocean and a 15-hour time difference makes. To hell with my image of straight-backed, stiff, wide-eyed students: All god's children can dance!