

Barbara Myers

Always Look on the Bright Side of 生活

It's difficult for me to write this essay because I prefer to go into things not knowing too much about what to expect, so I feel strange trying to tell you what to expect if you take this job. Generally, it's safe to assume you can go ahead and forget 90% of what you think you know about Japan. It's not futuristic and it's not traditional; not all of the men are short and not all of the women are beautiful. It is not a "land of contradictions." That is all wrong. However, if you have learned anything along the lines of "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down," keep that in mind.

See, the most important thing I've learned here is how to accept without surrendering. Accept that many of your students don't want to learn English. That's fine; many of them do, and they will make your day every day. Accept that you will never fit in. That's fine; look around and ask yourself if you really want to.

Accept that the people at your school might do things you think are at best strange and at worst disastrously counterproductive. They might stage a mini-marathon in December. They might wait until 5pm to turn the air conditioning on in July. They might wash their hands with cold water and no soap and then wonder why half the students have the flu. You will never be consulted on these matters and there is nothing you can do.

At the same time, the people at your school might do things that are wonderfully generous and kind. They might notice your bike lock is sticky and oil it while you're in class. They might give you cocoa mix from their personal stash because you were standing in the kitchen area looking sad. They might help you carry boxes home from the post office. They might be fantastic teachers who enrich the lives of the students.

This sort of thing carries over to every aspect of life here. If you accept one lame thing, a nice thing will probably happen to make up for it. Do what you can to change what you can, but realize there are many things you cannot change. And then realize that the unchangeable does not concern you. Try not to take things personally. Basically, don't come here if you are incapable of being even marginally stoic. Things can be awesome if you let them. The public bath is great. Raw shrimp with tiny eggs attached is delicious. Curry and rice under the kotatsu is one of life's sweetest pleasures. Teaching 28 Japanese 13-year-olds to sing "Yellow Submarine" is a blast. I guess that even more than "Be stoic" I'm saying "Don't get hung up on the negative." You will abide.