
Looking Past the Surface

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Accept differences and become familiar with the unfamiliar, it's not easy, but it has proven itself to change people for the better. Joining hands with a stranger, understanding differences, and accepting completely new ideas are things we face in our daily lives. Take this across the comfort of our own borders to something completely alien and new — that is when we experience international relationship.

Born in England, raised in America, but 100 % Japanese, that is my identity. Being raised in America, I knew little about my Japanese culture. Of course I knew the language, and a vague idea of its culture, but it wasn't enough for me to live up to my Japanese name. As much as I knew this, living in America left me indifferent to my lack of culture and more so geared my mind into thinking I was American. But soon enough reality hit me. It was at a peak in my freshman year: I had passed the audition to get into the dance team and my school orchestra had won a spot on the national competition that was to be held the next year. At such a pinnacle in my freshman year, my parents told me that we had to move to Japan. There wasn't a word to describe my shock at that moment. More than half of my life living in America, and almost zero years living in Japan left me nervous and terrified of the life I was to live. August 6th, I landed in Japan, my heart broken from leaving America, and my mind still unable to take it in. For the first few months, I could only think of how much better life would be if I were still in America. I could only wonder what I would've been doing and I couldn't accept the fact I was no longer where I used to be. It seemed like I was trying to prove myself that my life in America was better only because that was what I grew up with. In the first few months, I was comparing everything from the lifestyle, the people, and the food in Japan to the American culture I grew up with. Every time I used the train, I thought of the car rides I used to take in America. Every time I talked to people at school, I thought of the conversations I had with my American classmates. Everything was so different, and that was what I didn't like about it. I was so used to the classes where I sat on the edge of my chair, nervous to get picked on, where individual values and opinions were greatly respected, and where multiple activities were created to encourage individuals to speak their own opinions. Even though I wasn't always one to speak my opinion, being picked on during class made me pay attention, think about my personal opinions, and also prepare me for college classes. In America, children learn at a young age the importance of speaking their mind and standing up for their own values and beliefs. But in Japan, the classes are mostly one way lectures where students just listen

to the teacher and take notes. In addition, students are only rarely asked for their opinions, and when the time comes, they are not ready and confident enough to speak due to the lack of experience. Unlike American students, Japanese students are more encouraged to conformity than individuality, and their actions are not a resemblance of individuality but actions that satisfy their friends, their teachers, or even their family. At first I could only see the negatives of Japan. It was only after a couple of months, when I was finally getting used to the lifestyle, that I could see Japan in a clearer light. I could see that this conformity and willingness to satisfy has created people that excel in working together, keeping order, and also working to bring happiness to others.

Unfamiliarity brings fear and uncertainty. And there is nothing wrong with feeling a little uncertain, but the important aspect is to stop judging unfamiliar things without a willingness to understand it. I knew little about my Japanese culture, yet I still judged it based on the small portion I wished to see: its surface. I only felt I understood what the culture was, after carelessly criticizing what was unfamiliar to me. Yet when I dug deeper, there was a hidden light, a gem that shined as bright as the gem I found in America. And that's when I realized. Many people easily back away from the unfamiliar, whether it's a culture or an idea, it is hard for us to accept something different from our own ideas. But diversity is necessary, it is what makes our society what it is and is what helps improve our society for the better. Becoming familiar to the unfamiliar is what helps us understand a world far beyond the confined views we preserve within ourselves. It doesn't have to be a country; it could also be an interaction of people with different views and morals. Nevertheless, everything has a hidden gem. No matter far you have to dig to get there and no matter how rugged the surface may be, the harder it is to see, the more worthwhile.

Living in America and Japan, I've learned the differences between these countries both good and bad: what each country lacks in, and what each country excels in. But I realized it wasn't just the countries I learned about; I also learned about myself. The person I am now is a product of the relations I made throughout my life in America and in Japan. Through international relationship, I have been able to incorporate the assets of each country into my own morals and values and improve myself as I do so. I know that through future international relationships, I can incorporate a gamut of different morals and values to widen my perspectives and my network to an international scale.