
Venture Into the Uncharted Territory

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I was only five years old when my family and I moved to America. At that time, I was still a little kid so I was not able to remember much, but I remember being put into a room full of kids around the same age as me. I thought that we were just going on a short vacation. I later learned that I was going to be staying there for quite some time.

A few years quickly passed by and English became my language inside and out. I spoke, wrote, and thought in English every day. All of my friends were Americans so I thought of myself as an American too. The teachers there were so encouraging and reminded us each day that every single one of our opinions mattered. In every class, we played games and everyone was so competitive. Asking questions during class was normal and the more you shared your opinion, the better. My classmates were from all over the world, but we were more like family than friends. There was nothing more important than them. I couldn't wait to go to middle school with all my friends and we even promised to go to the same college. I loved America and everything about my life. When I was in fifth grade, my parents told me that we were moving back to Japan. I never gave it much thought until there was only a month before I had to move. When the day came, I said my goodbyes to my friends. I didn't want to accept the fact that this was reality. I wasn't prepared at all for what was to come.

I had to go to a public Japanese school and from the moment I walked through the entrance, I felt like I didn't belong there. I was no longer in the country that I loved and with the people who I loved. I didn't know what to say or how to interact with my new classmates. I felt so small and fragile. I was so scared that I couldn't even look at the teacher or raise my hand during class. Nobody said anything during class anyways. Every class was like a lecture. Only the teacher spoke and everyone else had to be silent. The teachers there didn't encourage the students to speak up. When I had to introduce myself to my new classmates, I remember that I told them that I belonged in America. They all looked at me weirdly and confusion was written all over their face. I had no idea what everyone around me was talking about and I thought that there was no way I could survive the rest of the school year. Everything was the complete opposite of what I was used to in America.

Then one day at school, a classmate asked me if I liked Japan and I simply answered "No." She asked me why, but I couldn't answer. That made me realize that I didn't have a specific reason to hate or dislike Japan. I realized I was just not used to the differences. After the incident, I spent more than half of the school year

overanalyzing the situation I was in, trying to put the pieces back together, and justifying what could've and would've happened if I hadn't moved back to Japan. Since I kept comparing and holding on to the past, I wasn't able to move on. I was travelling backwards in time. I started to think that maybe if I tried to learn more about the culture and accept its differences, I could enjoy my life here in Japan as much as I did in America. I decided to stop focusing on the negatives of Japan and focus on the positives.

When I started to focus on the positives of Japan, my perspective changed. For instance, Japanese students are strictly taught to be respectful to the elders. They are not educated to state their own opinion as clearly as Americans for some opinions might hurt other people's feelings. These behaviors are regarded as being polite and having good manners. So while the teacher is talking during class, nobody else will interrupt. Also, Japanese students are not used to people who come from abroad because Japanese schools are filled with people who have never lived in another country besides Japan. But looking back at my school life in Japan, I've realized that they have tried to talk to me and they have made effort to get along with me. At that time, I wasn't able to notice those attempts.

Living in America and Japan, I've learned that no country can be perfect. I also learned that each country has a very different and unique culture. People from different cultures have different definitions for being polite and respectful. I judged Japan with my standards rather than trying to appreciate it. It took me a while to accept the changes and differences, but what really matters is, I did accept. Accepting something that you are not used to might sound easy, but to me, it was a tremendous step in life.

International exchange has given me the power to widen my perspectives and to look at conflicts from a different angle. Because of that, I now want to learn more about Japanese culture. I know that there are still a lot more positive things about Japan that I haven't discovered yet. I want to experience as many different tastes, sights, emotions, conflicts, and cultures as possible, so that I can expand the canvas of my memory and venture into the uncharted territory.