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If I were to describe my study abroad experience in one word, it would be “growth.” Studying abroad in any foreign country, no matter where you are or where you’ve come from, has a way of pulling you out of your comfort zone in so many different areas both academic and non-academic. Suddenly, simple everyday tasks like throwing away trash or commuting to class requires a new skillset and alternative ways of approaching things. But it is through these experiences, combined with the overwhelming hospitality of Japan and its people, that I feel I was able to explore new avenues and really grow not just a student but more importantly as a person.

I still remember the excitement that washed over me at several points in my journey—beginning from my acceptance to the study abroad program at the University of Tokyo, to applying for this scholarship, to boarding the plane, to being dropped off in front of the dorm, to the first day of classes, to travelling across Japan to different cities, to experiencing the customs and traditions of Japanese culture. That excitement stayed with me and accompanied me along my five-month journey as a study abroad student in Japan. Even after returning to the States, it continues to remain by my side, resurfacing each time someone mentions studying abroad or I am arbitrarily reminded of Japan.

At the University of Tokyo, I was able to take in-depth classes on several different aspects of Japanese culture, ranging from literature to history to Japan’s contemporary performance culture. A class I took that revolved around a cultural interpretation of Japanese modernism introduced me to a cross-section between Japanese society and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies—an area in which I had very little background but have developed a deep and profound interest. As I continue with my studies at my home university, this intersection will no doubt provide a framework for future areas of research as I set my sights forward towards graduate school and beyond.

While academics played a large, defining role in my study abroad semester, the experiences outside the classroom and the people that I have been fortunate enough to cross paths with are more so what have contributed to the growth that I referenced in the beginning of this account. When I recall what originally peaked my interests in Japan, I think back to my 9-year old self, entranced by traditional forms of Japanese dance and the culture and country that it represented. Fast forward over a decade, and I am standing in a dance studio taking my first, and five months later, my last dance class in Japan. Thanking my dance instructor after that last class was a bittersweet moment, but one in which I could feel the barriers of language and culture fall away and I was grateful for this community that welcomed and accepted me despite our differing origins.

When you study abroad, I think you come to numerous realizations both during your journey and after, as you reflect upon your experiences. Over the past five months, I’ve learned how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, how to embrace change and new perspectives, how to not shy away from challenges. In other words, I’ve grown.

I would like to thank the Japan-America Society of Washington D.C. and the Tanaka and Green Scholarship Program for enabling me to have this incredible experience abroad in Japan. It has been five months of forming friendships, bridging two cultures, and growth and I could not be more grateful for this experience.