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JASWDC Tanaka and Green Scholarship Essay

O-kaeri

My journey into Japan started 6 years ago, when I first started taking Japanese language classes in high school. Unlike many of my classmates, I had never played Pokémon or watched anime; I had taken up Japanese for the challenge of it. I did not know at the time just how much I would be challenged or where my journey would take me. It turns out that I not only developed a love of Japanese language and culture, but it also became a passion that has shaped my studies and future career.

The first time I went to Japan was in August of 2015. My team had placed third in the AATJ National Japan Bowl competition that April, and had been invited on a two-week Kakehashi trip to Japan as a reward. It was thrilling and scary to receive my first passport and travel out of the country for the first time. We saw many things in those two weeks, including the emotional remembrance of the Hiroshima bombing, the innovative success of the Japanese automotive industry, and the tradition and glory of the Japanese imperial family. I had limited language skills at that point and could not communicate as effectively as I wanted to with all the people I met, but the memories I made remained with me.

The second time I found myself in Japan was by chance. My father's job relocated our family to Yokosuka, Japan for my senior year of high school. Although I lived and went to school surrounded by English speakers, having Japan right outside my doorstep was motivation for me to explore and analyze my community in ways I had not considered. My experience living in Japan not only furthered my conviction to someday attain fluency in the Japanese language, but opened my eyes to the complex relationships between peoples and cultures, leading me to declare Global Studies as my college major the next year.

My International and Global Studies major requires a study abroad experience, which is what led me back to Japan this past semester. This time, it was a completely immersive experience. Although ICU is a bilingual university, my home institution, Middlebury College, required that we speak only Japanese during our time there. I didn't have the comfort of returning to an English-speaking base, and our teachers from Middlebury, while friendly and familiar, were there to enforce our Language Pledge.

Although being Pledged was scary, it is undeniable that I gained a lot from the experience. I made Japanese friends in my classes and extracurriculars, adapting to the flow of casual friendly conversation in Japanese rather than the slightly more formal classroom speech. I picked up a large amount of vocabulary that I had never been taught in Japanese language class, especially related to my interests in music and linguistics. Unlike living on the military base in Yokosuka, I did not feel any sort of distance or removal from the Japanese community around me. I volunteered 8 hours a week in the local elementary school and got to know more about Japanese childhood and early education. I got involved in extracurriculars at school, playing two concerts with the college Wind Ensemble. I was truly part of the community, despite it being so different from anything I was used to. Putting into practice the cultural practices I had read about,

remembering to use *aisatsu* in my conversations, following correct bus etiquette, all of that took time, but it happened, slowly but surely. I was definitely still a foreigner, still an outsider *gaijin*, but at the same time I felt welcomed, and certainly by the end I felt a sense of belonging.

More than that, I felt a surprising sense of homecoming. Although I had never been immersed in Japanese society before, Japan and the study of its language and culture has been such a fundamental part of my identity for a long time. Being so close to my old high school home was odd as well, as I went to some places with my new friends that I used to visit with my family as a teenager. Being in Japan felt good and right a lot of the time, less strange than I had imagined. When I returned to ICU from a field trip to Tottori prefecture, it really hit me. After having missed the last two orchestra meetings, my flautist friends greeted me with the expression “*o-kaeri*.” That greeting comes from the word *kaeru*, meaning “to return home.” Being greeted with this expression confers a sense of belonging. I belong here. This can be a home.

At ICU, in Tokyo, I was thousands of miles from my American friends and family, isolated from my native language, taking on a challenge I had never imagined that I would be ready for. Yet, at the same time I had immersed myself into a new and vibrant community, and, with my transitory military brat background, I know that that is all it takes to make a home. Someday, if my journey leads me back to Japan, which I hope it will, I know that the friends I made this semester will be happy to welcome me back with “*O-kaeri*.”

Whether or not I ever make it back to Japan, this semester has shown me the complexities and challenges as well as the amazing benefits of immersion in cultures other than one’s own. I believe that I now have the experience and the intercultural skill set to look outside of an America-focused perspective as I continue to study international relations and the complex interactions between states and peoples. I know that my experience of integration into Japanese culture has given me the tools to better understand the challenges of intercultural business and negotiation as well as the possibilities of opening one’s mind to different perspectives. I have been given the amazing blessing of being able to make a home in two nations, and I will not forget that in my future professional life.