

Encountering Western Individualism for the First Time

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Four years ago, I entered an English language school which was a full-time course where one can learn speaking, listening and writing in English. English is a required course in Japanese high schools, but it is mainly for the university entrance exams. The reason I went to that school was to become able to speak English. At my high school, I learned grammar and could read English to a certain degree, but I never had the chance to learn how to speak English until I went to that language school. During the first three-week summer vacation, I also decided to go on a home stay visit to San Diego in order to put myself in an English environment, and also to learn more about foreign culture.

In the past, I have been to England and some other countries in Europe. However, these trips were part of excursion when I was in high school and I was with my Japanese friends all the time, sight-seeing. So this trip to San Diego was not only my first time to go to the United States, but also my first time to go overseas by myself. As my level of speaking English was not high, the experience was very challenging and I was very excited about it. Right before the trip, I found out that there would be another student from Switzerland who would stay with the same host family. I felt relieved because I was a little nervous about staying with an American family by myself, when I didn't have enough skill to communicate well in English.

With all my expectations, I arrived at San Diego. The girl from Switzerland, whose name was Maria arrived at the airport at around the same time. That first night, we just had dinner with our host family. I found out that she was the same age as me, and was happy because every one was very nice.

The following few days went by quickly. We took some classes together at a language school, five days a week in the morning, and we hung out with some new

friends after school every day. It went very well for the first few days. I really enjoyed the new environment. However, I gradually started to feel that Maria was selfish and aggressive. For example, her English was much better than mine and when I didn't understand what she said, she showed her irritation very clearly. We both loved shopping so we went to malls almost everyday after school, but she didn't care how long she made me wait, and didn't wait for me when I took time. Also, our host family had a nine year old daughter who was cute and lively, but Maria thought that she was sometimes annoying. When she asked us if we would like to do something with her, Maria often said no, even though the family was taking care of us. All these actions are considered very rude in Japan, and I had never met someone like her before. So I started to become offended by her behavior after spending a week with her.

However, what surprised me a lot was that another girl, whose name was Ina and also came from Switzerland, said that Maria was very cool. I could not believe it at first because I thought that she was harsh and unpleasant. I asked Ina why she thought that Maria was cool. She told me that a girl like Maria, who always expresses her opinion without hesitation and does whatever she wants with confidence, is considered a cool person in Switzerland. I am not sure if this is actually the standard of cool girls in Switzerland because I have never asked anyone else from thereabout it. However, for me at the time, with barely any experience outside Tokyo, it was very surprising that someone would think about Maria like that. I had heard that Western people were not at all like Japanese people, but it was the first time that I had actually experienced it.

Then I started to think that maybe Maria was not being rude, or at least that was not her intention, and that I was just judging her from my point of view. At the same time, as I was not used to it, I was still a little offended by her actions at times. However, I tried to accept it as something in her culture. Also, I realized that being nice to her in a Japanese way was probably not cool for her, because it seemed like I was being indecisive and not confident. I wanted to know how it would feel to act like Maria, and how she would react to it. I started to answer with "yes" and "no", and stated what I wanted to do nicely, but very clearly, without caring for what Maria wanted. She seemed more comfortable with this attitude and we gradually became better friends. I don't know if it was because I got used to her attitude or because I changed my attitude to something that she liked better, but surprisingly, I started to feel that she was not that

unpleasant and was open and frank in a good way. We hung out and went home together every day for the next two weeks, until the end of our home stay.

I don't think adjusting oneself to other people is not always a good solution to this kind of problem. There are a lot of different ways to go about it, and behaving like someone else can be very stressful after a while. In my case, it was only a three week stay and that might have been the reason why I could adjust myself easily. No one knew me there, and so I could become any kind of person. I wanted to learn as much as possible from that trip so it was worth taking on a new character. It did not change my personality radically, but it affected me in some ways. I learned that showing confidence and expressing opinions clearly is not always a bad thing. I also stopped caring too much about what other people would think about my ideas or actions. Looking back, the balance of mixing what I found out in San Diego and what I already knew from typical Japanese society was good. I felt more confident after that, which was pleasant and comforting, and I was not too aggressive as to be unaccepted by Japanese society.

Now I go to Sophia University where there are many international students. I went to the states two more times after the home stay, each for over a month, so now I've come to accept the fact that there are cultural differences that affect people's personalities. However, I still remember how it struck me at the time, getting to know people with different cultural backgrounds. It surely affected the way my personality was shaped later.

When it comes to cultural differences, what is important is that there is no such thing as right and wrong. Things that seem wrong in one's own culture can be of no problem in another culture. It is better to know that there are always different ways of looking at things. If people keep that in your mind, it would be less stressful when one enters an environment that is completely different from the society one knows, and one would be able to enjoy the differences. I think one can say the same thing within one's own society as well. After my home staying experience, I started to think that I should not judge people fairly by relying on only my point of view, because people are different even when they are all Japanese. As a result, it made me get along with people more easily.

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