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Growth Through Experience

"Only the educated are free." –Epictetus.

It took leaving the country for me to learn such a true, eye-opening lesson. I learned the importance of education and the aspiration it takes to learn a foreign language, but also the benefits to be had. I was in a home stay program this summer. A teenaged girl from Japan became a part of my home for two weeks; I did the same in her home. This was an absolutely amazing experience for me and I cannot stress any more how grateful I am for the Sister Cities Program (which sent me there). I learned by experience how lucky we are to have such easy access to education and the chance to learn foreign languages. The barrier of language keeps us from learning so much about other people, cultures, and places.

This hit me like a brick when I went to Japan. Here in the US, we would help the Japanese girls around, describe what we were doing, where we were going and why Americans do some of the things they do. We used hand signals, loud voices, facial expressions and everything in between to get our points across. At times it became a grueling game of charades. With our help, they got by fine, having studied English for a few years. The other four Americans and I, on the other hand, were a completely different story in Japan. We were lost when we tried to communicate with anyone who spoke only Japanese; it caused a lot of confusion. Although I have traveled overseas and into different countries, I never realized how strange it is that sometimes we cannot properly

communicate with people who speak another language and so we miss out on so much in life.

I had a very interesting situation when I got to Japan. Miho was my home stay partner; she came to the US a short, very young, boyish looking girl. She was kind and helpful, knowing the most English of all the girls. I found her to be very outgoing and ready to do anything our family enjoyed. She was a great houseguest, but very different from myself--she wasn't very emotional or sentimental, however this did not stop me from really loving her. When I went to her house in Japan, believe you me, I did not know exactly what to expect. It turned out that she would be very occupied with her basketball for the two weeks of my stay, and would not be attending most of the events planned for the group. I was okay with this; I would be with the other exchange students enough that it probably would not bother me that much. The first night I was there, I sat in the lightly furnished room and began to unpack. Then I saw two heads peak around the corner into my room. It was my home stay mother—Masami--and sister—Kumi. I adored them both and felt like they were my family immediately. They were so cute trying their hardest not to be intrusive, and politely Masami motioned putting her hands together as though she was about to pray. She was asking if it was okay to come in.

"Please, Please?" she giggled (and bowed).

"Come in, please," I smiled, bowing to show I respected her.

I was laughing at how embarrassed she was trying to communicate, while I was ashamed of myself for coming to this country, living in these people's house and not speaking their language. There was not much either of us could do but use our dictionaries to communicate and continue making fools of ourselves with our acting skills. During my stay this became a daily routine and Masami astounded me with her efforts to communicate. (Unfortunately, Miho and her brother were often too busy to help translate what we were trying to say to each other.) I knew that some nights Masami stayed up late and interpreted from dictionary to paper notes for me to read in the morning. Some of her notes would say,

"I want to talk with you and learn about you." I was touched by the fact that she did not let our language barrier stop me from knowing how much she cared about me.

I finally realized how lucky we are in the US to have public education and the opportunity to study foreign languages, unlike in third world countries such as Cambodia "where the education system is corrupted . . . people bribe their ways into getting degrees . . . Only rich people receive an education" (Barrientosi). Not only is this wrong, but the actual learning process is eliminated. In these situations people are working only towards a title, and not toward anything of actual value. "Education is not a product: mark, diploma, job, money – in that order, it is a process – a never ending one" –Kaufman (Dictionary of Quotations 144)

Although I believe in education for learning and not a degree or title that one carries, the truth is that education can greatly help gain respect. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Pap is uneducated and feels threatened by his son being able to read and write. Pap says to Huck, "You're educated too, say; can read and write. You think you're better'n your father, now don't you, because he can't. I'll take it out of you. Who told you you might meddle with such hifalut'n foolishness, hey? - who told you you could?" (Twain 19). But the fact that he can read and write is only a fraction of what Huck has gained. He has gained a newly opened mind, in school he learns about foreign countries, history and math – but more importantly he has grasped an accomplishment. In the society that this story takes place, an education is rare. When Pap finds that his son goes to school, he is angry because he assumes that Huck now thinks himself a "good deal of a big-bug" (Twain 19). Huck is merely luckier than his father to have the opportunity of an education.

My experience was somewhat like this; I was lucky to gain new knowledge from my trip. I wanted so badly to talk to Masami like she was my own mother, which I felt she was in many ways. She cared about me and wanted me to be safe and happy. I think that we expressed a lot to each other with the small amount of each other's language we knew. However, this wasn't enough. I could say "Arigato gozimasu" (thank you) to her, but could

never tell her why something was important to me. I could laugh at something I saw, but never share with her why I thought it was funny. It always ended up being confusing and she thought I wanted her to buy me what I was laughing at because I pointed at it. I also learned that basic humor is eliminated with a language barrier, sarcasm is not detected and mockery can easily be mistaken for poor manners. As the trip progressed, it became more and more possible to express these different emotions, but it was never quite the same.

Over all, my eyes were opened, and I feel that I changed simply with the realization of how much is lost when trying to get over a language barrier. There is probably no other way that I could have learned this and had such a real experience. I do not think the ease of getting by and expressing oneself can be realized unless you have experienced otherwise. Also I learned to appreciate the opportunity we have to learn foreign languages at school, the education program that is available to us, and finally to respect those who are bilingual. It takes a lot of work to study a foreign language, but I think it shows a more world conscious person. I am glad I got the chance to grow so much as a human being through this experience. This lesson is out there for anyone to take hold of, perhaps not through a teacher, but through an open-minded experience.

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