

Smaller Than A Flower

I teach English to elementary and junior high school students in a small town in Gunma, Japan. I moved here from Philadelphia Pennsylvania to be a part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET). When I first arrived in Gunma, I visited the Tomihiro Museum. Tomohiro Hoshino was a local gymnastics teacher turned painter and poet after a horrific accident left him paralyzed. He creates touching floral paintings and poems by painting with his mouth and writing with his heart. I was particularly fascinated by one of his works of art. It simply read "Be smaller than a flower". That seemed like an odd goal to me. After all, I was from America, the land of bigger is better, and biggest is best. I couldn't understand why anyone would strive to be smaller than a flower. However, four years living abroad has a way of changing a person's perspective.

My life in Japan has been filled with new challenges and new experiences. Those experiences were not made possible by increasing my confidence. They were made possible by shrinking my ego. I had an overblown sense of self-importance. My big head left little room for new experiences. If I tried something new and failed, it would damage my self-image. So I rarely strayed far from what I did best or from what I knew well. Once I stopped

worrying about failing or looking foolish, I was free to try anything. A big city kid learned to appreciate flower viewing, planting, and hiking. A guy who was afraid of heights fell in love with skydiving, bungee jumping and parasailing. A man who never owned a pet, found himself petting tigers, feeding lions, riding on elephants, and swimming with dolphins. I hated cold weather, yet I learned to ski and snowboard. I couldn't swim yet I learned to scuba dive. I had never even met a Japanese person, yet now I'm proud to call many of them my friends and family.

To be part of a group I had to be willing to surrender a part of myself. Initially, I was reluctant to do that with my coworkers or my students. When I first started teaching I was the center of my 300 students' attention. All those watchful eyes were closely monitoring my every move. That attention only served to fuel my already inflated ego. I secretly revelled in my new found fame. However, the problem with thinking that you are larger than life is that you lose sight of the little things. So I stopped talking down to my students and I started talking with them. I realized that they had more to teach me than I had to teach them. They have taught me about everything from origami to pop culture. My 300 students have become my 300 teachers, each with a unique lesson to impart. When I am teaching,

My Journey Home

My luck changed in 2007, I am now lucky. I was selected to be among a group of fourteen vibrant and innovative individuals chosen from different parishes in Jamaica. As a group, we travelled eighteen hours to be immersed in a culture completely different from ours for at least one year. I was tremendously excited to participate in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme and I was so absorbed in the subsequent preparations for my new role that I had little time to think about what life would actually be like once I left Jamaica – the land of wood and water. It was not until the last night of the orientation at the grandiose Keio Plaza hotel in Tokyo that I became cognizant of the major step I had taken.

My roommate was sleeping soundly. Maybe she had already come to terms with the idea of being thousands of miles away from home, but my heart throbbed noisily and painfully as I tossed and turned in the bed reflecting. I had never been this far away from home or been away from my family for more than two months. Who will prepare dinner? Who will care for me when I get sick? Who will talk to me when I get home from work? Who will be there...? Who? Consumed with anxious thoughts I scarcely slept that night.

Then it was *time*, time to say goodbye to my fellow Jamaicans and time to be on *my* way to Kishiwada City in Southern Osaka.

Upon arriving in Kishiwada City, I exited the ticket gate at Kumeda station and there she was, waiting in her family car for my supervisor and I. When she saw us she alighted from the vehicle and immediately relieved me of my luggage and then told me her name, all the time wearing a beautiful, welcoming smile. No sooner had she introduced herself to me than I had forgotten her name due to my preoccupation with being so far away from home. Everything was happening so fast- one minute I was being introduced to my principal and vice principal and the next I was awkwardly stamping my seal on contracts. Then finally someone said, "Ogawa san is your landlady" at that point her name was rooted in my brain. My bags and suitcases were then placed into Ogawa san's car and off we went to my new house, my home away from home.

Little did I know that my summer schedule was drafted in advance by Ogawa san and approved by my base school, thus leaving the final approval to me. My first weekend ended with



Icy Jones

they all still stare at me with admiring eyes, but now I look up to them too.

By realizing that the world does not revolve around me, I came to see my coworkers differently as well. I was surprised to discover that Japanese teachers all sit together in the same room. Sitting with coworkers to the left and right of me was very uncomfortable at first. I was accustomed to my own office with lots of breathing room. In America, even those of us who are forced to work closely together have some degree of privacy. We work in our little cubicles and try our best to tune out the world around us. However, Japan offered no such seclusion or privacy. The only wall that existed between my Japanese coworkers and myself was the language barrier. However, they slowly began chipping away at that barrier using gestures, dictionaries, and smiles.

The open sitting arrangement gradually turned into a source of pleasure and even comfort. The closeness fostered a sense of community and teamwork. I found myself looking forward to hearing about my coworkers' lives and sharing the details of my own life. I have spent time with teachers' families, attended their weddings; we have drank together and sang together. They willingly

adopted me into their lives so I feel a kinship to them. In fact, I fondly refer to one of my coworkers as dad. I will be returning to America soon. It is sad because it does not feel like I am leaving a job. It feels like I am leaving home. But I take comfort in the fact that I will always be a part of something bigger than myself.

I used to proudly talk about coming from humble beginnings like humbleness was a quality to run away from. However, the Japanese willingly show humility by bowing to each other as a sign of mutual respect. Humbleness can be more than a starting point, it can be a destination. I have bowed thousands of times since moving to Japan. Maybe each bow has been a small step towards that destination.

The JET Programme is about more than teaching English. It is about encouraging students and teachers to see the world differently. We get a close up view of each other's strengths and weaknesses. Everyone can see that foreigners are just people. None of us are icons to be worshiped or giants to be feared. Recently, I visited the Tomihiro Museum again. I came across the same painting and I finally understood the meaning. By becoming smaller than a flower, I have grown so much.

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Omara Turner

a party hosted by Ogawa san. There she introduced me to her husband, her two children and their families. It was also at this party that I learned the traditional Japanese way of sitting and where I ate my first Japanese home cooked meal; both of which marked my initiation into Japanese customs and culture and to some degree my initiation into the Ogawa family. The party ended with me being informed of a family trip to Tokushima where I later met Ogawa san's extended family and participated in the Awa Dance Festival with them.

My first summer in Japan was defined by a steady bonding experience with the Ogawas via various family activities, but as the temperatures fell so did my physical strength. Soon I fell ill. The cold weather left me shivering and wishing I was home, in Jamaica, where the temperature hardly fell below twenty five degrees Celsius. On many occasions I have fallen ill while living in Japan, but never was I expected to care for myself during my bouts of illnesses. Ogawa san was and is always there to: drive me to the doctor's office (which is ten minutes away from my house on foot), take my temperature, administer my medicine, make dinner and sometimes

make my bed.

Whether I am ill or healthy Ogawa san is always around. She is not just my landlady and neighbor but also a wonderful mother. She is there when I get home from work, she is there when I need someone to talk to, she is and will always be there...Ogawa san is indeed my *Okaasan!*

She remains a constant presence in my life and a major part of my Japan experience. If it were not for the JET Programme I would never have met Ogawa san and by extension her family, a family that was willing to look beyond the language barrier and foster a deep bond with the first Jamaican they had ever met. This same family has made me feel as if we are biologically related. This very same family also bid me a tearful goodbye when I went home for Christmas vacation and was also anxiously awaiting my return and was there to greet me at the airport with open arms and relieved smiles because I was *home*, safe. My Ogawa family has undoubtedly enriched my experience in Japan.

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