

# Acceptance: A Two Way Street

Many people proclaim that you can never fully assimilate into Japanese society if you are an “outsider”, no matter how good your Japanese or how long you have lived in the country. In essence, I feel this is also true. However, I don’t really understand the resentment. I look completely different and come from an entirely different culture. So, rather than futilely striving for equality, I am happy to accept my given role in society as the “*gaijin*” and I’m better off for it. You don’t have to change who you are to be accepted in Japan. Actually, I think it helps both you and your interactions if you actively try to retain some of those uniquely “foreign” characteristics. It is more beneficial to educate by being different, than wasting time trying to get people to see you the same.

Thanks to a good friend of mine instilling in me the virtues of volunteering, I have been doing various volunteer activities ever since 2003. When I came to Japan, I was asked to join the local English Conversation Class and I jumped at the chance, as I knew it would be an invaluable way to meet people. So, every Thursday for the past 3 years, I have been volunteering to go to this two hour evening class to help the students with their English and they have become some of my closest friends. I get teased for hanging out with older people, but having lost both sets of my grandparents at a

time when I was just truly beginning to appreciate what they had to offer, I have loved the opportunity to be adopted by some Japanese replacements.

I regularly make an appearance at my best friend’s house for dinner. A lovely 70 year old lady who prefers it when I come to dinner, as she usually gets ignored by her son and husband, who sit and eat in front of the TV. When I come round, we gossip and cook the family meal together, something I feel she misses her daughters who have left home. This arrangement wasn’t always so intimate. At first, it started out as a weekly Japanese/English exchange in her front room, as I was informed that her husband was “scared of foreigners”. Slowly, over the years, I have become part of the furniture and am now welcome in the kitchen, and the once frightened old man now offers to drive me home by himself without the need for his wife for support.

A 50 year old housewife just started coming to class last year, she was forced to move to our town because of her husband’s job. She didn’t really like it, but has told me that since we have become good friends and aerobics buddies she is enjoying life more. This lady convinced me to enter my town’s festival karaoke contest.

# Finding a Rhythm

Along the Chikusagawa River in Western Hyogo Prefecture, there is a little town called Kamigori. The town’s slogan reads “a place where the past and the present come together.” Known as the birthplace of a minor historical figure, Akamatsu Enshin, it also hosts “SPring 8,” one of the world’s largest synchrotron radiation research institutions. Surrounded on all sides by mountains, this small town has also been my home for the past three years.

When I first joined the JET Programme I imagined that I wouldn’t mind at all having an entire ocean between me and my friends and family, that getting along day by day in Japanese would be easy, and that within a week I would be able to form vital connections with students and fellow teachers to promote grassroots internationalization. Unfortunately, I was wrong on three counts, and my time on the JET Programme began with some startling realizations. It was overcoming these difficulties and finding my own rhythm that has made my time on the JET Programme so valuable.

After the whirlwind of travel and orientations, I set my luggage down in a small three room house, said goodbye to my supervisor, and slowly looking around began to realize how far away from home I’d come. I was distant from everyone I knew, with no phone or

computer, and starting to feel a little bit hungry. Where would I go to buy food? I was feeling a bit down, and I hadn’t even met my first *mukade*, a large poisonous centipede.

There were two things that turned my experience on JET around from this first lonely scene to the amazing experience it’s become. The first was the unprompted, unexpected kindness from so many people I never thought to hear from. The second was finding, after many failed attempts, ways to interact with my students and fellow teachers and contribute to my school. The vital connections I had wanted to make didn’t materialize in a week, but by the end of my first year, I realized that slowly but surely I had made a place for myself in this small town.

First let’s rewind back to the day I met my first *mukade*. After one bite to the ankle that left me hopping around yelping in pain, the little monster soon scored another hit on my palm while I was sleeping, and I woke up to a rapidly swelling hand. I called my supervisor to ask the name of the medicine that would bring the swelling down, but instead he came in person straight to my house. He brought with him the medicine I was curious about, a large canister with a picture of a *mukade* in crosshairs, and a few Japanese snacks. I wasn’t expecting



## Natalie Bell

I challenged myself to learn and perform a song in Japanese and somehow I ended up winning. My prize? An electric bicycle. A great help up the massive hill to my nearest supermarket, post office and bank. What was even better than winning was how happy it seemed to make everybody else. Having someone tell you that something you did was the most exciting and enjoyable moment of their life. Well, words can't describe how that felt.

Other Japanese friends I have made on my journey on JET have turned to me in times of crisis, as discussing such sensitive matters within their own social networks might unduly bring shame on them or their family. I can provide a welcome ear and different perspective because of my "foreignness" hopefully being able to relieve some of the burden they must feel keeping such things to themselves.

Then, there was my parents' visit to Japan. After three years of not seeing their daughter and confronted with a huge spread of home cooked Japanese delicacies all in their honor, they were overwhelmed by the generosity and warmth displayed by my friends. I have rarely seen my father cry. However, when giving a small speech to the 15 or so expectant faces that had turned up especially to meet them, he stumbled over words with tears in his eyes. At the

end of their two-month stay, I looked on and smiled when the time came to say goodbye and everyone joined in embracing my Mum and Dad. Hugs all round. Nobody flinched.

And I could go on. Initially, there was definitely a perceptible barrier between me and my Japanese friends and coworkers, but, is it, as is so often widely reported, impenetrable? Fundamentally, no. Did it take work? Yes, but then most rewarding relationships do. Respect is something that is earned not something that should be arrogantly expected.

Wherever you go, it's difficult to overcome the prejudices of society. People are treated unfairly because of the way they look, usually with negative consequences. But in Japan, my experiences have shown, that being different seems to garner an unwarranted amount of positive attention, which wouldn't occur if you were an ordinary member of society. I can't see why anyone would want to give that up. Thankfully, within the community of people I have the pleasure of interacting with on a daily basis, I'm no longer merely seen as the "foreigner". I am now their friend; that just so happens to come from England. This suits me fine.

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## Joseph Schott

that, and his kindness caught me more off guard than the insect.

Still, I had trouble finding ways to pitch in at school. In class I spoke English for the students and showed them new activities and games, but there wasn't much chance to interact with them. There was no time or place to actually sit down and have a real conversation. Then, soon after I arrived, my school began practicing for sport's day. Aside from the marching and mechanical exercise, my school does something a little special every year. 200 students get together and form a pyramid ten people tall. At first I was shocked that something this dangerous was going on, but after some time passed, I began to see how the students really banded together to accomplish such an intimidating task, and as my relationship with them improved, I became able to encourage them and give them helpful tips and advice.

After helping out these students, either verbally or by actually catching them out of the air when they fell from the pyramid, I noticed that they were more relaxed in classes with me, and more willing to participate.

One of my favorite parts of teaching English in Japan has been my weekly visits to elementary schools. Elementary schools have a very relaxed atmosphere, and I was able to create many unique

lessons for the students there. The lesson that remains in my mind the most is a special class after school where I taught them how to play Ultimate Frisbee, a game I enjoyed in the US and now Japan. I took volunteers from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grade and after school grabbed one of the dirt fields outside of school. Then I had them practice throwing and catching, taught them the basic rules, and played a game with them for an hour or so before it was time for everyone to go home.

It has been opportunities like this that have made my time on JET important to me. I can come to Japan and see the sights as a tourist very easily, but a chance to actually help a class of students put together a human pyramid or play a game of Frisbee is something that I would never have experienced any other way. Things might have looked tough during my first few days in Japan, but after finding my rhythm and getting involved with this small town, I can't think of any better way I could have spent the last couple of years.

Hello, my name is Joseph Schott. I am 25 years old, and come from the state of Ohio in the USA. I became interested in Japan after a short study abroad and joined the JET Programme in 2006. I am now a 4<sup>th</sup> year ALT, and my hobbies include hiking, rock climbing, and ultimate Frisbee.

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