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Person to Person in Japan

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Cody Jay Purchase
April 10, 2014
Kyoto, Japan

Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in Japan

I sat down with my kanrinin (apartment manager), Mayumi San, for a short conversation with tea that turned into a couple of hours of chatting. Wanting to keep it more a conversation than an interview, I was considering for quite some time what kinds of questions to ask to accomplish this. Certainly I knew what I was curious about but I worried that my questions were too serious and that they might not only fail to spark conversation but even possibly discourage it. First and foremost I was interested in seeing how Mayumi San viewed herself and her family within the larger idea of Japan and of being Japanese in the world, in order to get an idea of both the individual *within*, and the larger idea *of* Japan and its culture through that individual perspective. As I found out after, the experience answered my questions better than I could have hoped; not only did I take a step back to observe the perspective of Mayumi San, but in doing so I also saw my own perspective as well as some of the preconceptions held within.

Worldwide, I believe, Japan has somewhat of a reputation for being cohesive to its own elements, history, culture, and place in the world—almost to the point of exclusiveness—but in fact I found Mayumi San’s way of looking at the world open, largely objective, and critical of both Japan and the world. We freely spoke of problems with education, racism, national pride, political systems, and other similar ideas that tie into how Japanese people identify with being Japanese and how I perceive Japan as well. I enjoyed explaining why I thought it was good that laws differ state to state in the U.S. or what my opinion about the Japanese education system was. I enjoyed hearing how her perspective of an “American” changed from mostly just white people to people of all colors from all places, and about her appreciation of the collectively-calm nature of Japanese people (especially after disasters). To sum up what I found most surprising, and more than that actually encouraging, was that Mayumi San seemed to have chosen to relate to the good of both Japan and the world. She had a very positive outlook on both. The fact that I expected slightly different told me about how I viewed—without stopping to pick apart my thoughts—Japanese people. The fact that she had such an open way of looking at the world reinforced the opposite of the idea that Japan is a land of such strong national pride as I have often heard from asking people’s opinions.

Closing up and thinking back, I realized that indeed the same way Mayumi San’s perspective of other peoples changed with experiences, as did mine with this conversation. We had the same tendency to internalize what we’d heard about other peoples, which—although news or stories are many times all we have to go off of—is not by any means a complete picture. Of course this was only one person speaking to one other but perspectives of a family, a race, a nation and so on, are built from the individuals within. We both agreed at the end that it’s so important to slow down to ask these questions with those around you because awareness of how

aware you are is important to being one more voice against—to say it simply—not-so-peaceful things happening. And to think, it's as easy as an open conversation...

Interview: Kawata, Mayumi, dormitory caretaker