

Global Perspectives Japan: An Odyssey of Self-Discovery

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Despite my bleary-eyed stupor, I felt a wave of excitement rush over me as I stepped off the twelve-hour flight to Tokyo, Japan. I can now safely say that I am not built for long-haul flights, but that realization quieted as soon as my eyes hit the beautiful skyline before us. In my mind, Raleigh is a sprawling metropolis, but as we hurried through the busy streets of Shinagawa, my life back on campus seemed quaint by comparison. Never in my life had I stepped foot in somewhere so teeming with life, it seemed as if there was a never-ending flood of people moving from one place to another. Especially in the south, we like to take our time in transit, but that instinct quickly dissipated in the sea of scurrying feet. For the sake of brevity, I'll distill the trip down to a handful of significant moments, and then wrap everything up with my ultimate takeaway from the trip.

In a way, I enjoyed melding into the crowd; it forced me to move with purpose. I typically find myself paralyzed for choice when faced with such a daunting, unfamiliar place. I had no such luxury in Japan. I either adapt to the flow or I will be left behind, and I knew for a fact that I did not subject myself to a full 24 hours of grueling travel just to spend the next two weeks sequestered away in my hotel room. I find myself increasingly grateful to my fellow Caldwells for helping me out of my comfort zone. The various cities we traveled to seemed far less daunting when I was with someone else.

No matter how overwhelmed I got, I could always rely on my fellow travelers to help me along the way.

Kyoto was perhaps the largest culture shock I had on the trip. I knew going into the trip that I would not have an “authentic” experience in Japan, whatever that may entail. However, the more touristy parts of Kyoto drilled that part deeply into my mind. By no means do I want to come off as dismissive of the practice of opening up cultural experiences for tourists, far from it, but wading through the crowds of people at the various shrines around Kyoto made me feel as if I was an outsider encroaching on this piece of culture that wasn’t meant for me.

This feeling changed when I visited the Senbon Torii, the thousand red gates. This place was not free from the aforementioned crowds of tourists, but I found myself able to wander away from the crowds. Everything clicked into place when I found a small shrine on a footpath near the side of the gates. In an instant, I understood that this was indeed not meant for me, but that is not a fact to shy away from. Spirituality such as this isn’t relegated just to photo opportunities or large, ornately decorated shrines. It was like this small, humble piece of stone; something deeply individual and yet drenched with so much personal meaning. This shrine likely only held value to the small set of people who regularly tended to it. It was not for me, and that was such a beautiful thing to behold. I paid my respects and quietly left.

Our penultimate stop, Hiroshima, was a somber one for me. I found myself more keenly aware of my surroundings while walking through the mostly calm streets. For some reason, I expected the remnants of the bombing to hang over the city like a thick fog. And yet, as we walked to the memorial park, I found quite the opposite. The gentle

chime of a bicycle's bell, the beeping of crosswalks, the soft chatter of people walking to work; it was nothing like I had envisioned.

As we explored the memorial park, the realization hit me. Life goes on. The tragedy that happened at Hiroshima at the hands of the United States seems like something unforgivable that would stain the mere ground I was walking on. But it wasn't. It was something to be remembered, yes, but it was not something to stew over. No matter how catastrophic the tragedy, the world will keep turning, and time will keep passing. Resentment is a luxury few can afford. Hatred and retaliation do not rebuild a city. As the signs in the park read, there can never be another Hiroshima, and it is on the shoulders of the current generations to make sure of it.

In a way, I find the World Expo to be a fitting finale for our trip in Japan. It brought to mind the ultimate purpose of this trip: to experience a culture that differs from my own and navigate it with humility and respect. By no means do I think two weeks abroad suddenly makes me an expert in other cultures, nor does it completely resolve any unintentional bias or pernicious ideas I may have had about other cultures. Instead, I view it more as an important step on a lifelong journey of discovery, both of myself and of the world around me. Never in a million years did I think I would leave my small hometown; certainly not to travel across the world for such a culturally enriching experience as this. However, I can safely say that this experience was far and away the best way I could have capped off my time with the Caldwell Fellows. I feel as if I have blossomed into a new person after these two short years, thanks to the encouragement of this fellowship. This experience (and my time in the Caldwell Fellows as a whole) has

led me down a path of self-discovery and excitement I never knew was possible, one that I don't think is stopping anytime soon.