

Upon re-entry back home after expat life, brace yourself for turbulence



There I was, standing at a baggage carousel in New York's LaGuardia Airport, thinking the world had gone mad. I'd spent the previous 16 months living in the city of Oita in northern Kyushu.

Compared to what was around me, Oita had been a cocoon of safety. Residents apologized for apologizing, and bowed their way out of giving directions. Once, a Lawson employee ran two blocks simply to hand me the rice ball I'd forgotten on the counter. Elementary school children, eager to practice their English, had walked behind me giggling, saying "Hello!" as I headed to work.

But New York? Well ...

As I stood there, I felt as if I was seeing my culture for the first time, as someone disconnected from my very own birthplace. Two children and a father sat on the cold,

dirty floor eating a gigantic cup of vanilla ice cream. Police officers stood at the corners, armed with guns, ready to snuff out any disturbances. And, of course, diversity: After almost a year and a half living in a city that was 99 percent Japanese, I'd forgotten how ethnically mixed New York had always been.

Right before New York, I'd been a teacher at an *eikaiwa* (English conversation school). I'd met the love of my life, married, learned a fair amount of Japanese and suffered through one of the largest bankruptcies in postwar Japanese history (Nova's 2007 collapse). By the time I re-entered American culture, I felt transformed — some called me brainwashed — and unable to reconnect with the country I'd lived in for 24 years. Not only had I lived abroad, I'd grown used to another culture whose priorities were vastly different to the ones I'd been familiar with.

Since I'm an American still living in America, I hoped to learn more about the feelings of Japanese citizens who had lived in the U.S. for a significant amount of time. What did they experience after returning to Japan? Was it difficult to reacclimatize to Japanese life? What new perspectives had they gained about their own culture?

I sent out a survey to 30 of my Japanese former students, as well as other respondents who had lived in America for three months or longer. Unofficially, I've always thought that to say you have *lived* abroad, you must have stayed in another country for a minimum of three months — a season — in which time the majestic status of being a tourist wears off, offering a deeper understanding of the day-to-day humdrum-ness of the culture.

Cycle A

Honeymoon

Japanese citizens who choose the United States as their first country abroad are exposed to massive portion sizes, greasy food and baked goods that are almost unbearably sweet. So, it should come as no surprise that when Japanese students return home, they enter a state of food-loving euphoria. Rice is consistently on the menu! Food is prepared with care and respect, and customer service is dependable and, importantly, conducted in their own language. Reuniting with family is often another highlight, as is hugging the dog you've missed for months. At least for a week or two, life has a brightness around its edges.

Back to normal

A consistent response from the survey revealed a frustration with the unspoken level of conformity that exists in Japan. In the U.S., people are told, time and again, to speak out, to have an opinion, to *not* push away discontent. Upon returning to Japan, however, students grew frustrated at how many people live according to the “same template.” At the same time, if a student continued to express their feelings in the same way as they had in the States, they often felt cast aside. “I realized the more I claim what I feel,” said one male respondent in his early 20s, “the more people around me label me as ‘Americanized’ and quit listening to me.”

An annoyance with established manners and obligations came up in the survey, too: “Knock exactly three times when entering the interviewing room,” said the same respondent, “don’t drink tea or coffee that an interviewer offers unless they encourage us to do so,” and so on.

Inevitably, a return to some semblance of “normal” occurs. Students returned to school, applied for jobs or went back to work, joining that ever-present progressive thrum of Japanese society — where hours move through your lifeline as you stand on a moving sidewalk or sit on a crammed railcar, or wedge yourself next to a sleepy bus passenger. “I feel it is easier to stop complaining and follow the others,” said another male respondent.

Newfound confidence

After initially resisting certain aspects of Japanese culture (“I couldn’t speak *keigo* — polite Japanese — for a long time,” said one female student in her early 20s), most of those surveyed hinted at feeling a newfound confidence from having lived overseas. Their perspectives had widened and they could now view their native culture through a wider lens than their peers.

Other respondents gained valuable insights into their own culture and hoped to start businesses integrating approaches from both Western and Asian societies. They were able to more sharply question notions such as what constitutes an appropriate working environment. (Is a 60-hour work week truly necessary?) Their insights were hard-earned, and they were proud to have gained a better understanding of their society. “I really started to like Japan, especially its culture,” said one 20-something male respondent. “I felt I wanted to spread Japanese culture more worldwide.”

Cycle B

Disruption

Unfortunately, not everyone can return to their culture and embrace its values. For many, like myself, that inability was linked to the intensity of the experience abroad. Although my company had gone bankrupt, the suffering I (and thousands of others) endured created an even stronger bond with the friends I'd made. There are moments from that period I can still remember with such clarity that just thinking about them causes my eyes to well up. And, of course, there's falling in love — a story that could never be adequately told.

Perhaps needless to say, when I returned to America, I did not look at New York City with glittering eyes. I did not drool over large thin slices of pepperoni pizza, or satisfyingly exhale at the sight of Lady Liberty. In truth, whatever relationship the USA and I had before Japan had ended. I could never view the country the same again — my cultural equilibrium had shifted.

A few of the answers from respondents echoed these difficulties. I sensed one young female respondent grappling with her new and confusing perspective: "I feel American people educate children, students and employees by mainly praising and encouraging. On the other hand, Japanese people educate them by scolding and warning."

Attempt back to normal

Armed with this broader outlook on the world, returnees attempt to adjust back to normalcy. As documented in cycle A, many can simply allow their past experience abroad to fade away, and the patterns of their home country return and swaddle them in familiar comfort. But for others, it is not that smooth.

One respondent in her 30s said, "I feel I am not being the 'real me' in Japan." This woman specifically mentioned complications at her job. "Some workers (including my boss) were bothered by me and said things such as that they are 'anti- U.S.' or that I don't have common sense because I am a returnee."

Those two words — common sense — stand at the heart of this issue. The fundamental idea of common sense becomes fluid after living abroad. Your mind now must consider numerous ways of dealing with a situation.

Let's take U.S. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump as an extreme example. Here is a man who is speaking to and enthusing millions of Americans with talk about deporting illegal immigrants and temporarily banning Muslims from entering the United States. What if Trump had lived abroad in a country where English was not the dominant language? What if he had been exposed to another culture for a long

period of time and learned how to solve an issue from a different cultural standpoint? Would he still be saying these things?

An even broader question is: How many of his supporters have even left the U.S. for a substantial amount of time? How many even have a passport?

In any event, those stuck in this "attempt back to normal" are forced to deal with people who have not had similar experiences. They create words for people with no passport or no international experience, such as "mono-national." Returnees struggle daily with the dangerous emotion of being "elite" simply because their global perspective is broader. In cycle A, a quiet confidence is kept aflame. In cycle B, their moods fluctuate: Forget common sense — what about "human sense"?

Torn between countries

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Suddenly, the last line from "The Great Gatsby," by F. Scott Fitzgerald, comes to mind. It is doubtful that Fitzgerald meant the sentence in the context I am presenting it in, but nevertheless, it is the state of many who live torn between the ideals of two countries.

As I wrote last September on these pages ("Tracing the emotional roller-coaster ride of life abroad," The Foreign Element, Sept. 3), it will never be a small thing to live overseas. In a way, you are attempting cultural suicide — exchanging the ways of your old self for a newer version. Nowadays, when I speak to my family, I often respond with "Japanese sounds," like the "unh" sound of reassurance that, when properly uttered, says, "Yes, I'm listening — and interested." I also cannot view any religion as "correct" since I have been personally moved by several.

Perhaps, as I enter old age, my definition of common sense will settle along the divide separating absolutes. In the grand scheme of things, living abroad is, after all, a bit of a cheat. For tens of thousands of years, human beings were unable to "play global hopscotch" and travel the world. Instead they grew comfortable with their local surroundings and did the best they could. Perhaps that, in the end, is the only kind of common sense out there.

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