

After one year

“Accept that you are only a child of the world and you can be as happy as a child.”

Coming from the busy and noisy Jamaica where I was a constantly busy government employee, tasked with supervising 12 scientific officers, I have become one with my uneventful and peaceful little rice field town in quiet Japan. Some points I have embraced during my one year in Azuma-cho Unzen-shi.

Before coming to Japan, I had previously travelled to four countries where English was not the primary language. As such, I was mentally prepared to handle being alone in a crowd. In the first couple weeks, at my schools and in my town, I was honestly treated kindly, people tried to explain how things were done. I also have a very strong memory of ordering a “set” meal at a Japanese style restaurant and trying to adjust the dishes positions, only to be gently reprimanded by the waitress who put the plates back in their “correct” positions. Subsequent to that incident I did realize that it was important to have the rice on the left and the soup on the right. Why? Because that's how it's done. This is where knowing that you don't know anything is valuable. All the customs I have learned up to this point in my life was now moot.

Point 1. Accepting that you know nothing

However, while I knew I was a “child”, unable to speak or understand the language and customs, unfortunately I am in the body of a woman in her 30's. So, I put on my big girl panties and embraced the WH-questions: What? Why? Who? Where? and How?

Point 2. Letting others know you don't know

As school started people got used to me and my ways of doing things. However, I'm a successor, students and teachers alike kept referring to me by my predecessor's name or the equally annoying name “ALT-sensei”. On the other hand, even after being able to identify a student with their name I still couldn't identify their name in kanji. While I had the bigger task of learning hundreds of names, they had just spent 3-5 years with only my predecessor as “their only foreigner”. As such, I gently corrected them and decided not to `sweat the small stuff`.

Point 3. Don't sweat the small stuff

Even after one year I can't speak the language, in fact, I have still not perfected the pronunciation of some of the work greetings: otsukaresama desu? or is it otsukaresama deshita? I get by. by listening carefully, making and observing gestures, Google translate and pointing. Seem unbelievable? Nope, as of now my charades skills is A grade and my pointing skills should be listed on my resume.

Through the year I did my job as my schools wanted, sometimes I make whole lesson plans and control an entire class, other times I'm only speak when the teacher calls my name and then there are the rare cases where I stand in the corner asking “why am I in this class?” “why is the common letter `y` slant but not the capital letter `Y`?” and of course the real question “if the answer to the ultimate question of the universe is 42, what is the question?”

Point 4: Just do your job

The children are fun and we have the same taste in anime. Sometimes I play low stress indoor games with them, a few occasions they guilt me into dodgeball. I try with these kids but I can't be beautiful, smart and athletic! I'm not an anime character. The teachers are cool, I suspect that the staffroom would be more fun if I could understand what they were saying. However, it is quiet satisfying when they go out of their way to tell me something or ask me about my weekend plans. Which brings me to my next point...”everything I do is interesting”. My students always want to tell their friends and teachers if they saw me outside of school, where, when and with who. While anything that I need help with from my teachers become a full staffroom production as apparently helping me is a team effort. Or even the post office and the supermarket, it takes three grown men to help me mail one package to Jamaica and at the supermarket it took two people to order a Christmas cake. While I would want to say “don't sweat the small stuff” here the real thing I tell myself in these scenarios is “you are the centre of their universe”. I only have so many minutes per day to dedicate to senseless worrying anyways and trying to answer the question `why are they all up in my business?` is an exercise in futility.

Point 5: You are the centre of their universe

Lastly throughout this year I had to keep telling myself “just keep swimming”. It really isn't enough to let life happen to you, after taking such a big risk by coming to Japan there is just so much out there to do. Plan with others, join other people's plans and sometimes just do it yourself! I hiked Mount Fugen, I joined an ikebana and a cooking class, also went to a bunch of museums, cafés, restaurants and a Biopark. There were summer festivals, karaoke nights, a NOH play, a beach trip etc... And even though I complained every step on the hike, I actually don't even know how to

swim, even though I did not understand the performances and even though travelling to Hiroshima by shinkansen cost more than a plane ticket to South Korea, the regret I have after one year is `I should have went to the mochi festival`.

Point 6: Keep moving

With the end of my first year plagued by Covid 19, the bonds formed become stronger as planned events were cancelled and large gatherings disappeared. The people who wanted to see me, did. I am forever grateful for this year, here's to the next one!