

Heart of Japan

**Collection of Essays from
the Annual Japan Center Essay Competition
(2005-2015)**

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The Japan Center at Stony Brook

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Contents

Forward	iv
Preface	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Key Personnel	viii
Selected Essays	1
Memorable Moments	105
People	117
Epilogue	140

Foreword



I extend my warmest congratulations and gratitude to the Japan Center at Stony Brook University for publishing this wonderful compilation of the selected essays from its 10 years of Essay Competitions. Through their participation, students had been given the opportunity to explore their interest in Japan, which can now be shared with readers far and wide. I hope many will find these essays a joy to read, as I have.

With sincere appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Takahashi".

Reiichiro Takahashi
Ambassador and Consul General of Japan in New York



I would like to offer my appreciation to the Japan Center at Stony Brook University and all of the students involved with this wonderful program. As a global company and proud sponsor of the essay competition, Canon has been delighted to engage with so many young people who have expressed how Japan has positively influenced their life in one way or another. We recognize the enormous importance of uniting cultures and opening the minds of those who are the future of our world.

Congratulations to all of the students!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe Adachi".

Joe Adachi
Chairman & CEO, Canon U.S.A., Inc.

Preface

The Japan Center at Stony Brook (JCSB) was established in 2003 to promote education and research in the study of Japan, Japanese culture and society, and the lives of both Japanese and Japanese-American people. JCSB Essay Competition is the first annual outreach program we conceptualized for high school and college students. Our objective was to offer them an opportunity to reflect themselves deeply, focus on some aspect of Japan, creatively connect it to their own lives, and write an original essay. The proposal was submitted to Canon U.S.A. in September 2004 and received renewable annual sponsorship starting in 2005, when the JCSB Essay Competition was officially launched.

The first honorary judges were Mr. Kinya Uchida and Dr. Shirley Kenny, who were the President & C.E.O. of Canon U.S.A. and the President of Stony Brook University, at that time, respectively. Their roles were succeeded by Mr. Joe Adachi, Chairman & C.E.O., Canon U.S.A., Dr. Mark Aronoff, Vice Provost, Stony Brook University, Ambassador Shinichi Nishimiya, Ambassador Shigeyuki Hiroki, Ambassador Sumio Kusaka, and Ambassador Reiichiro Takahashi, Consuls General of Japan in New York.

JCSB's essay competition is open to everyone regardless of their experience of learning Japanese or visiting Japan. The theme is also wide-open as long as there is a connection between the author and some aspect of Japan. We have received 1,992 essays from 169 schools over the ten years. Each year, we discovered new perspectives, new concepts, and new ways of expression through this competition.

This collection includes all award winning essays and selected Honorable Mention essays from the first ten competitions. It is JCSB's sincere hope that these essays can help many people widen their horizon, learn about different values and viewpoints, appreciate diversity, cultivate international friendship, and become global citizens who can make the world a better place to be.

The Japan Center at Stony Brook
June 17, 2016

Acknowledgments

No words can express our appreciation to Canon U.S.A. and the Consulate General of Japan in New York for their generous support and warm encouragement.

We are absolutely indebted to the late Mr. Kinya Uchida, who was the President and C.E.O. of Canon U.S.A. when we submitted our proposal back in 2004. Without his kindness, understanding, and trust in our capacity and mission, this essay competition would not have been a reality. This led us to institute the *Uchida Memorial Award* in 2013. This essay competition could not have continued until now without the support of Mr. Joe Adachi, Chairman and C.E.O. of Canon U.S.A. His willingness to encourage younger generations to broaden their horizons through this competition has been invaluable to us. Mr. Uchida and Mr. Adachi also served as an honorary judge for this competition. We also appreciate many senior administrators at Canon U.S.A., Mr. Dennis Amorosano, Mr. Richard Booth, Mr. Lee Farrell, Mr. Yukiaki Hashimoto, Mr. Mason Olds, Mr. William Reed, Mr. James Sharp, Mr. Toshio Tachibana, Ms. Ana Tavares, and Mr. Joe Warren, for presenting awards and for offering warm encouragement to the award winners. Kindest assistance offered by Ms. Debra Epstein, Ms. Elissa LiVecchi, Ms. Mindy Miller-Roesch, Ms. Emily Reynolds, Ms. Dawn Shields, and Mr. Mike Virgintino has been very valuable for us as well.

We appreciate Ambassador Shigeyuki Hiroki, Ambassador Sumio Kusaka, Ambassador Shinichiro Nishimiya, Ambassador Motoatsu Sakurai, and Ambassador Reiichiro Takahashi, for offering the *Consul General of Japan Special Award* for each and every annual competition. We also appreciate them for serving as Honorary Judges starting with the 2010-2011 competition and for recognizing our top winners at their official residence starting with the 2011-2012 competition. The special recognition at the Ambassador's residence with a formal luncheon created a once-in-a-lifetime precious memory for all invitees. Similarly, we are grateful to the Directors of Japan Information Center at the Consulate General of Japan, namely, Mr. Koichi Ai, Mr. Fumio Iwai, Mr. Yasuhisa Kawamura, Mr. Jiro Okuyama, and Mr. Akira Sugiyama, for presenting awards and for offering warm encouragement to the award winners. Thoughtful assistance provided by many consuls, including Ms. Noriko Iida, Mr. Toshihiro Kaneko, Ms. Kumi Matsumoto, Ms. Kanako Nozawa, and Mr. Hisashi Takashima, is very much appreciated as well.

This program received support from many people at Stony Brook University. Dr. Shirley Kenny, the former President of Stony Brook University, read all award-winning essays, as an Honorary Judge, and congratulated their authors in person at every award ceremony until she retired. This tradition was continued by top administrators of Stony Brook University, Dr. Mark Aronoff, Ambassador Harsh Bhasin, Dr. Nancy Goroff, and Dr. James Staros. Special appreciation goes to the members of the Professional Education Program (PEP), in particular Mr. Charles Backfish, Ms. Patricia Dixon, Dr. Dorit Kaufman, and Ms. Lauren Kaushansky for their encouragement, assistance, and promotion of the competition through their networks.

The contributions of the friends and members of the Japan Center at Stony Brook (JCSB) also deserve acknowledgement. The generous financial support from many people, in particular from Mrs. Toshiko Uchida, has been extremely helpful in enriching the program. Dr. Iwao Ojima and Ms. Yoko Ojima have been contributing to numerous crucial aspects of the operation and continuation of the program. Dr. Eriko Sato has been serving as the Organizing Committee Chair, overseeing all aspects of the operation. Dr. Sachiko Murata has been serving as the Chief Judge, guiding the two levels of screening. Our second-screening judges have been Stony Brook University's faculty members: Ambassador Harsh Bhasin, Dr. Mary Diaz, Dr. Clifford Huffman, Dr. Richard Larson, Dr. Janis Mimura, Ms. Eva Nagase, Dr. Sheldon Reaven, Dr. Gregory Ruff, and Dr. Eriko Sato. Among them, our special appreciation goes to Dr. Clifford Huffman, who served for this function in every single competition thus far. Our initial screening judges are current or former educators in relevant fields, former JET (Japan Exchange Teaching Program) participants, and/or selected members of the Japan Center: Ms. Carolyn Brooks, Dr. Marlene DuBois, Ms. Jessica Fareri, Ms. MaryAnn Hannon, Ms. Melissa Rose Kavanah, Dr. Chiyoko Lord, Ms. Patricia Marinaccio, Ms. Joan Miyazaki, Ms. Eva Nagase, Dr. Francesca Nakagawa, Ms. Chikako Nakamura, Mr.

Shingo Omori, Dr. Atsuko Oyama, Ms. Mitsuko Post, Mr. Gerard Senese, Dr. Eriko Sato, and Ms. H. Mae Sprouse. The evaluation and input provided by the judges in both groups have been most valuable. Furthermore, their warm interactions with each awardee in person during the post-ceremony reception has been truly meaningful for this program. The professional music performance and the raffle during the reception have been arranged by Ms. Yoko Ojima and Ms. Roxanne Brockner, respectively. The assistance provided by the intern students coordinated by Ms. Eva Nagase and Dr. Eriko Sato for the entire program is also acknowledged.

Last but not least, we appreciate the teachers and administrators who encouraged their students to participate in this competition. They have broadened their students' horizons greatly.

JCSB Key Personnel



Iwao Ojima
JCSB President



Yoko Ojima
Board Member in Charge



Eriko Sato
Organizing Committee Chair



Sachiko Murata
Chief Judge

**Selected Essays
from
First Competition
(2005-2006)**

My Japan

Nora Micheva (Ward Melville High School)

Imagine that amidst your normal life, you are teleported to a butterfly's world. You live in harmony with the butterflies and you forget you were different. Years after you have left, you doubt if you were a butterfly, or it was just a dream.

My two year butterfly dream started in the heart of the ancient city of Kyoto, Japan, where we moved from Bulgaria. As a mathematician my father obtained a research position in Kyoto University. Thus, not knowing the language or culture, I found myself in the fourth grade of a public Japanese elementary school. I could never imagine that in only two years Japan would become a part of me.

Pictures and sounds fill my mind when I think of my Japan. The bright red "torii" of Yoshida Jinja, and the emblematic entrance of Kyoto University "Kyodai seimon mae" surround our traditional Japanese house. I hear the cicadas' cry and the university students, practicing their musical instruments late in the summer nights. I see my school, and hear my classmates' voices calling every morning at our door "No-ora chan!" I feel their quick touches of my long hair, "Are you real?" I remember the cherry blossoms of the Philosopher's Path and the autumn leaves in the old Emperor Palace's garden. Reading and writing kanji and kana came hand in hand with learning to ride ichirinsha (unicycle), and taking calligraphy lessons that made me appreciate the hard work, persistence and humility needed to create anything beautiful.

Japan is also in the many friendships we remember fondly. There is one person, however, that made an indelible impression on me - Chie.

I first met her on a warm sunny day in Kyoto. My father's watch broke and we looked for a place to repair it. Skipping on the stone turtles in the sparkling waters of Kamogawa we crossed the river near Demachi Yanagi station and found a watch repair shop in a very old Kyoto house. There was a genuine enthusiasm and cheerfulness in the voice and body language of the girl behind the counter. Her smile lit the dark and narrow shop.

She wanted to improve her English, so my father invited her to take lessons with my mother, who is an English teacher. In the following two years we would see Chie every week, and not once did the smile leave her face. She was always happy and didn't look like she had a worry in the world.

Chie was an artist. For her paintings she used an ancient Kyoto tie dying technique called rozome. This is an extremely intricate and slow process of layering acid dyes and wax on silk which has been sized with a soybean ground. Although traditionally rozome was used to make kimonos, Chie used it for her contemporary compositions. I remember Chie's works in the Kyoto National Museum - enormous panels of cloth paintings hanging from the ceiling and situated at different depths of the exhibition space, creating a whole composition. It wasn't only its beauty that impressed me so much. I wondered how such a small woman could create such large (literally) works of art. I often listened to Chie explain to my mother that because her room at home was so small she used both the walls and the floor simultaneously to dye, wax and wash the fabric.

Soon after we met Chie, her father got sick of cancer and after a year passed away. Her mother took care of her bedridden younger sister who was born paralyzed, and never talked or moved on her own. I knew that, but was not even remotely prepared for what we saw visiting Chie's house. Her sister was lying surrounded by machines. Her whole body was twisted and small, but her face was beautiful with an angelic white skin. It was both the prettiest and scariest sight in my life. Suddenly Chie's sister reminded me of the roses Chie painted in her compositions - transparent flowers in full bloom that dazzled you with their beauty, but reminded you of the transience of life.

Chie's grace and strength in the face of tragedy symbolize the Japanese woman in my eyes. She set an example for me and made me want to be a better person. I often long for my butterfly world and hope to return some day. As for the future, I'd like to share my Japan with other people and help them see the beauty of Japanese culture.

Cycling to Satori

Michael Cohen (The Fieldston High School)

In an attempt to discover America, I discovered Japan.

Last summer, I embarked on a cross-country bicycle trip from Savannah, Georgia to the Santa Monica Pier. Although I had been captivated by a class I had recently taken about Japan, Japanese culture was just about the last thing I expected to find in the 3100 miles from sea to shining sea. But this bicycle trip was truly a life-changing experience, teaching me volumes about the connection between body and mind; the fruits of discipline and sustained effort; the cleansing effect of an ascetic monastic lifestyle; the truth that exists just below everyday fixations; the broad view of a fluid mind and the profound capabilities of mental detachment. Thus, I discovered Zen Buddhism.

As the school year wound down and my trip approached, I bought a durable touring bike and started to prepare. The training regimen that I received in the mail was as specific as it was intense: a minimum of four 50-mile rides loaded with 35 pounds of gear. This proved to be an impossible task. On the Sunday afternoons that I had designated for training, I set out determined, only to return feeling unsuccessful and frustrated. The truth is that I drove myself crazy on the bike. My cadence was inconsistent, my restless mind wandered anywhere from my last math test to my upcoming dinner. My eyes were glued to my odometer, and I quickly grew tired and preoccupied. Thirty miles seemed daunting. My dad warned that if I did not improve, he would need to pick me up somewhere in Alabama. He was probably right. Excuses mounted, time flew, and the trip began.

After dipping our rear wheels in the Atlantic, we headed west through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and found ourselves on the seemingly endless plains of Oklahoma. It was 4:30 a.m., not yet light, and we were gliding through the monotony of the Oklahoma Panhandle. Then it hit me. I awoke from a sort of meditative state that had become second nature to me, a profound rhythm in which my legs seemed to move by themselves and my fluid mind floated through complete emptiness. I looked at the biker in front of me, his wheel only six inches from mine; and the biker in front of him, equally close and compact. I vividly recalled how the Zen monks walked around the Nanzenji Temple in Kyoto: marching in a tight line to show discipline and concentration.

The similarities to Zen Buddhism did not end there. My biking rhythm lasted nearly all day; the *zazen* (seated meditation) and *kinhin* (walking meditation) of practicing Zen monks occupy much of their waking hours. When I first learned about *zazen* and *kinhin*, they seemed painfully pointless and abstract. Suddenly I understood. When committed to a task so great that it requires complete focus and dedication, there is simply no room for everyday concerns. Mundane thoughts pollute the mind and undermine one's discipline. Only after achieving an empty mind can one devote one's complete self to a given task. In the Zen Buddhists' case, that task is reaching *satori* (enlightenment); in my case that task was reaching the Pacific Ocean.

I realized why I had been unsuccessful on my training rides. Like the *zazen* and *kinhin* of Zen monks, the profound rhythm and detachment that propelled me across the country is not a state that is easily accessible. It takes enormous discipline and practice to free the mind and approach one's true potential. Attempting to become a cyclist on Sunday afternoons is just as ludicrous as a Zen Buddhist trying to achieve *satori* over the weekend. It simply cannot be done.

While cycling across the country, I awoke at four a.m. every day, peddled 80 to 100 miles (eight to ten hours), climbed off the bicycle, ate, (and ached) and fell asleep. I reaped the benefits of drastic discipline and deprivation. I experienced the power in the simple, almost ascetic existence of the Zen monks and warriors. Through extreme bicycling, I exalted in the beauty and truth of Zen. According to legend, when Ikkyu (distinguished Japanese Zen monk) reached *satori*, his teacher awarded him a certificate. Ikkyu burned the certificate, claiming that the value was not in reaching enlightenment, but in what he will do with his enlightenment. I echo that sentiment. Reaching the Pacific was a triumph, but it was only a momentary triumph. Finding power in the discipline and mental fluidity of Zen is a lifelong gift.

Japan and Me

Amita Jain (Syosset High School)

I was contentedly crunching away on my fourth piece of chocolate Pocky when suddenly the taste in my mouth wasn't so yummy anymore. It was all but nauseating. I had just entered the first exhibit in the Nagasaki Peace Museum to be greeted with videos and pictures lining the walls of grotesque mutilated bodies, each limb out struck at odd angles, each face twisted with agony.

After four hours of stomach-twisting and heart-wrenching episodes like those, I told my Okaasan that I needed to leave. She understood and let me find the way out. While my stomach was settling, I sat in the museum lobby and watched paper cranes flutter overhead. It was a Japanese belief that making a thousand paper cranes would grant a wish. And what was above me, were not a thousand paper cranes, but tens and tens of thousands of them.

It struck me then how absurd the whole idea was. Honestly, folding paper was going to grant peace in the world? It was going to bring happiness to the wretched and miserable? I scoffed at the ridiculousness naiveté of it all. My Okaasan softly sat down next to me and took my hand. It wasn't really the act of origami or the wish itself, she said. It was the hope that each wish was carried by.

It is appalling that a misfortune of any magnitude be ignored in the face of another. For me, and really for everybody, no tragedy, no matter how small, should go unnoticed, whether it is one child going hungry, or an entire country dying of AIDS. The only difference is the availability of people willing to help. That void is where I want to step in. I want to be a person who can put a smile back on a tear-streaked face. I want to be a person who can feel somebody else's pain and make it go away. I want to be a person who can make somebody else's life a little more bearable. I want to be a person who cares.

Ideally, I would like to use my language skills, my science abilities, and my commitment to participating in positive change as a physician. More importantly, however, I believe that exhibiting compassion and simply being available to help can make the necessary difference in people's lives. While I may not change the world, and can't reverse the horrors of Nagasaki, each patient that I effectively treat, every conversation that allows a patient to feel respected, and every opportunity to give back to our global community is, for me, a lovingly executed fold in my own peace crane. In that, I think I can hear a soft flutter of hope.

Rebuilding a Nation, Rebuilding a Life: An Inspirational story of Japanese Language, History and Culture

Robert Donnelly (Stony Brook University)

“The most glorious moments in your life are not the so-called days of success, but rather those days when out of dejection and despair, you feel rise in you a challenge to life, and the promise of future accomplishments.” Gustave Flaubert

Ever since my childhood, I always remember having an image of beauty come to mind whenever I heard the word Japan. It may be that when I was in grade school studying the various countries and cultures of the world the first pictures that were introduced to me were not of the busy, crowded filled streets of downtown Tokyo or Osaka, but of a serene, meticulously sculpted garden, or a beautifully sewn field of tea. These were the pictures that appeared in my books as a child, and the images that I took with me as we quickly moved on to the next chapter and area of the globe. So without ever really having noticed at the time, I had been introduced to one of the most profound aspects of this country in such a way so that it had stayed with me through my young adult years where I was finally able to realize what I had learned.

I made the decision to pursue a career in the field of classical music when I was coming closer to graduating high school, however, that seed had been planted in me since I received my first recording of Beethoven from my father when I was only ten. Of course I had no conception of what I was listening to at the time, I only knew that it was beautiful and it made me feel something every time I heard it. Thinking about it today, the experience of hearing that music was similar to that of seeing my first images of Japan. Being only a small child, I was unable to reflect on what I was hearing or seeing, but I remember it being powerful enough to grab my interest and hold a place somewhere inside of me, where it was going to be used and more importantly needed some years later in my life. My study of music continued on, where I used the talent that was given to me and was able to have great success as a classical trumpet player. I had enjoyed accomplishments in the field that I could not have realized were possible when I was that ten-year old boy with his first horn and recording. I entered college and began my study with wonderful professionals who immediately began to shape my talent and ability for me into a form that would be ready to be used in the professional orchestras, where my dreams could truly be realized.

With an encouraging introduction to the path that I had waited to be on for years, I had hope that I could actually succeed, until one day in late spring when news was given to me that had changed my life from then on. As a young twenty-year old I was diagnosed with cancer of the thyroid and was told that I would have to have a major operation to prevent what had been found from worsening and possibly threatening my life. I received a serious operation to my neck; a vital part of the support system needed for professional trumpet playing, and as a result was unable to play again for years after my ordeal. Sadly, I slowly found myself falling away from music. The loss of something that I had worked years to achieve brought me to a reality that was just unacceptable for me and so coming to terms with it was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. However, eventually I was able to begin examining ways within myself and with others about how I would be able to continue on a path in which I knew I could be happy, and through this found an unexpected interest in linguistics that I had not known was there before. I began studying languages and continued with Japanese. The study of the language eventually lead me to study the country, its people, culture and values. I began to rediscover the beauty that had made such an impression on me as a child along with an aspect of its people that I found to be my greatest motivation. The Japanese conception of professionalism and perfectionism is I believe on a different scale than the rest of the world. Japan's people have not only proven this set of values culturally and historically, they have applied it to a level that enables them to succeed in every aspect of their endeavor. The constant strive for this perfection has seen Japan become a leader in various pursuits ranging all the way from the arts to technology, and seeing how deeply the commitment to this idea is so ingrained in the people, it is hard not to draw inspiration from listening to their stories. In particular I was introduced to a program called *Project X: The Challengers*, which is a popular documentary-style program shown in Japan. Each episode is a story of a single person or a group of people who are faced with seemingly insurmountable difficulty, yet through

their will, desire, and passion, along with this ingrained conception of perfection are able to achieve some of the greatest goals ever seen, not only in Japan's history but the entire world's. As my knowledge of the language grew, I was able to understand more deeply the stories of these people and began to see how I could bring these stories into my own life and use them as tools in achieving what I had lost. In one particular episode, I remember watching a man who was struck with a terrible sickness. I watched as he went through experiences similar to my own, but throughout his ordeal had somehow been able to keep site of his goals, which were to regain his health and status thus making his focus, and resolve even stronger. I began to realize that it was in this, where a special characteristic of the people of Japan existed. For a long period in my life I was not able to do what not only this man, but the groups of men and women I was watching each week were able to do. Regardless of the amount of hardships or setbacks they had, they used what life had given them to propel them forward, not hold them down. This side of the culture I feel is also related to the history of the country itself. After Japan's defeat in World War II, the country which had once been on the verge of complete supremacy and domination had been diminished to a mere trace of its former form. It had seen a tremendous rise to power and fame and then a sudden loss of everything it had accomplished all within a relatively short span of time. The impact that Japan had felt, as a nation was undoubtedly a tremendous one, and maybe on a smaller scale within my own life resembled my own feelings of devastation. However, through my relationship with the history of Japan and the perspective from which I was experiencing it, there came something that had not come along before, a desire and hope to continue in my life and finally on some level become free of what had been holding me back. I had imagined that Japan, its people, and the people that were given the responsibility of rebuilding it might have felt this way also.

Just as Japan had done, I found the strength to bury what had happened to me in the past and once again continue on a course toward my goals as a musician. As I began the impossible climb, paths appeared before me that were once covered in complete darkness and doubt. I began to remake myself with a new outlook, and have been fortunate enough to be accepted into a professional trumpet studio once again, sit and play in orchestras being surrounded with the beauty of the music I once loved, and graduate with my degree in music. I hope that we all will be able to see these aspects of Japan, and if ever need be apply them to our own lives on whatever level necessary. They are indeed beautiful, and I am ever grateful for my relationship with them.

Japan: A Granddaughter's Perspective

Kaitlyn Ferris (Mount Sinai High School)

One might wonder how topics as different as Japan and Katie Ferris are related. I am an Irish American high school student who has never been close to the country of Japan in my life; however, just because I have never set foot on the island nation doesn't mean that Japan has not influenced my life.

During the cold snowy days of November, 1954, my Grandfather, Richard Sherwood Hackett, witnessed the birth of his first daughter, my mother Lee Ferris, at the Great Lakes Naval Hospital near Waukegan, Illinois. Shortly after experiencing this overwhelming joy with his wife, Richard boarded a naval ship that brought him half way around the world to the island nation of Japan.

My Grandfather joined the Navy soon after he had graduated from high school. He was stationed in Japan as a medic during the Korean Conflict. Japan was his "stepping stone" to the gruesome war that was raging in Korea. Thankfully for my family's sake my Grandfather never made it to the front lines; for that matter he never even made it to Korea!! The armistice was signed before his unit was transported to Korea. Even though he did not play an active role in the Korean Conflict, my Grandfather has told me that his military duty in Japan changed his outlook on his own life and how he valued human life in general.

My Grandfather arrived in Japan after the treaty ending World War II had been signed in 1952. It was a time of rebuilding for the country. He was stationed in a small village called Gotemba. His camp, North Camp, was one of three camps located near Mount Fuji. As a medic his primary duty was to hold sick call every morning. All military personnel who needed medical attention reported to sick call for treatment. Once sick call was complete, that left quite a bit of free time for my Grandfather and his buddies to explore the country. There my Grandfather and his buddies came upon a couple of orphanages. Children who had been left alone after the war were being cared for in these institutions. The orphanages were always low on supplies; my Grandfather and his buddies gathered the leftover food from the mess hall and brought it to the orphanages. They collected staples like cereal, powdered milk and canned goods.

My Grandfather is by no means a war hero. He freely talks about how he hated his cold weather training in the California Mountains. He even admits that he was sea sick on the long trip from California to Japan. However, he was a hero to those orphans who depended on his generosity for food. I have also learned that there are life lessons hidden within his "war stories." My Grandfather said that taking care of those orphans he barely knew, while he left his wife and baby daughter behind, made him realize how truly lucky he was. He told me that I am blessed with a good home and a loving family for support. I understand that people all over the world would envy my situation. His example also has shown me that it is the duty of the strong to help the weak even if our cultural differences are deep. I hope that I can live up to his example.

The most important thing that my Grandfather learned in Japan was hope. He found it incredible that the orphans who had lost so much were so hopeful and happy. Like most children, they played games, laughed and sang songs. They welcomed the sailors and marines with unconditional acceptance. My Grandfather witnessed the aftermath of World War II in the eyes of those orphans. And what he saw was hope for a brighter future. He has tried to live his life that way—in a hopeful, optimistic manner. By association I have learned to do the same.

My Grandfather has no medals or citations to commemorate his duty in Japan. He has only the marks on his soul that have helped to make him the person he is today. His positive influence on the lives of his children and grandchildren is his reward. The history books may recount events differently, but the country of Japan has influenced me because it was the place where many of my Grandfather's personal qualities were strengthened. I am the person I am today because of his influence.

Search for the Essential Japan

Jerry Blackman (The Cooper Union School of Art)

I had many preconceptions about Japan before actually going there. My ideas were derived from the pop-culture images, and the general stereotyping that circulates around all cultures. I was looking forward to seeing such Japan standards as the overly polite and awkward businessman who takes off his shoes to eat, or the crazy hair-do, space-outfit wearing freak of Harajuku. Surely I would encounter slews of Manga comic books, video games, and even robots walking the streets. Next to the traditional tea shop would be the futuristic teleportation device of some sort. I was expecting Japan to be a land of excess, of spirituality, and of the future: the singular anomaly that stood apart from the rest of the world.

Naturally my expectations were not met. They couldn't have been just by their nature of being idealized. Yes, I saw businessmen without shoes and kids with green hair, but these cultural signifiers were never able to become fully transcendent and exist as essentially as their archetypal, American imposed counter parts. Somehow, the images of my imagination exoticised and projected Japan to a state more interesting than the real Sumo wrestler on the train, or lonely crane in the river could describe.

I had not given up completely on the realizing of my fantasies for Japan though, so I embarked on a search mission. If archetypes and essentialist ideas function in the realm of images, I'd create as best I could the Japan I was looking for. With a digital camera always holstered to my hip, I was hyper aware and fanatic. Literally minutes were spent in framing shots and finding the perfect composition between the rectangle of the viewfinder and the pink leaves of the *Sakura* tree beyond it. Not once looking up from the LCD screen, I would wait for that clear a line of sight amongst the crowds of people so I could possess the lie of the quiet temple garden. I would climb, crawl, jump, and even balance to take advantage of, what I thought was, the most beautiful shot to date. Sometimes getting the perfect picture involved maneuvering into painful positions over bridges or fences, and I even believed that of my waving finger in the water could beckon at least one *Coi* fish next to the patch of blossoming Lotus flowers. By the end of my stay, I had been to over forty gardens and even developed a reflex where the sound of running water would trigger my arm to jerk downwards, and my fingers to grab at the Velcro of my camera case. I was trying to recreate every Japanese postcard and calendar I had ever seen, investing almost religiously to the archetypal sentiment of that perfect blossom, hanging in all its solemn Japanese glory, over the pond.

In an obsessive-compulsive manner I went down the list of everything I thought to be Japanese, and made a foreign culture into my own personal scavenger hunt. Nothing was sacred: praying monks on bridges: *snap*, schoolgirls on the train: *snap*, little old woman holding an umbrella: *snap*, Sumo wrestlers, Geisha, Businessmen: *snap*, *snap*, *snap*. It carried on like this for more time than I care to remember.

I found that the more essentially I could capture a situation, and the more I could remove it from its reality and make it a commonality, something I had seen before, the better I thought the shot. I was indeed attempting to dissolve the reality around me, and redefine it in terms to match my preconceptions. But these idealizations proved in fact impossible to meet. Though a photo might look perfect, there was always something that irked me. My *Geisha-by-the-Water* shot, for example, has a sky that is a little bit too overcast to transcend itself, apart from the fact that she actually just a tourist in costume. My *Osaka-Nightlife* picture appears chaotic and exciting at first, but after a moment of inspection, the rather rudimentary geography of the street is exposed, and the streetlights all fall back into their simple geometrical orientation. I thought I had found the essential *Temple Garden* shot, but the otherwise perfect harmony of the tea house, bridge, and waterfall was interrupted by the electric grate buried in the sand, and the six spotlights surrounding the pond, undoubtedly connected to it. I wasn't frustrated though: I think I had some awareness that I was engaging with artifice, and couldn't let my heart mistake the photograph of an experience for a real one. Collecting the archetypes in this clinical manner became an experience in itself, and part of my genuine understanding of Japan.

My failure to capture the archetypes indicated that perhaps they didn't really exist, and this was further confirmed when my Japanese acquaintances would laugh about me being more Japanese than they, and taking interest in cultural rites which they were indifferent to. I'd ask people if they would like to check out this or that temple, this festival or that festival, but the Japanese kids I spoke to weren't interested. I equated this with my own New York indifference to the Statue of Liberty, or Empire State Building for example, and realized that perhaps they and I weren't all that dissimilar.

I started doing Zazen meditation, not as an engagement with another cliché, but because I thought that it would be a genuine eye-opening experience, and too good to pass up. It also occurred to me that while in Japan I should attempt to learn as much about the things that were surrounding me as I could, so I picked up several of D. T. Suzuki's books on Zen Buddhism, plus some others on Japanese gardens. Zen, as far as I could understand, promoted dissolution of the self which was really the antithesis to American thinking, and an extremely foreign and dangerous concept for me to consider. I noticed its prevalence within Japanese daily life. The people did seem extremely similar to one another, but not in a bad way, just less egocentric. Even the arts of Japan are not a testimony to personal achievement, but to nature, and the subtle beauties of the world without. After reading these books, I learned a new way to appreciate the Zen garden, the *Ikibana* display, or even the *Haiku*. I came to realize Japan as a place whose people are historically and culturally concentrated on their Island, and who define reality through it. Indeed, all the Japanese involvements with nature are in some ways more involved with the nature of Japan specifically. I had never seen a place whose language, culture, people, and land were so intertwined and involved with each other. Though not Japanese, I could still understand the benefit of selflessness, and the beauty of such a concept. To truthfully invest in it would mean the shattering of all my previous ideas of structure in my life, and making a valiant and honest effort to not find happiness per-se, but the non-duality between happiness and suffering, and the non-duality between myself and the world. Zen doctrine states that everything is one and nothing simultaneously.

In practicing Zen, and reading its literature, my eyes became wide open. I began to remember the inconsistencies between different people, and through that, was liberated of stereotypical thinking. I remember having previously thought that being an American would automatically make me a romantic with Japanese women. The three girls that I remember from Japan actually gave testimony to a dynamic much less general than that. Firstly there was Midori who called me "*kiza*" or "pompous" when I tried to kiss her on our first date, but later became my friend after I apologized. Then there was that passionate stranger I met one night at a club within Kyoto's city center who I fell deeply in love for a second before I lost her to the night. Thirdly there was the charming Moeko, who I met at school, and actually still speak to. Not a "girlfriend" per-se, but a companion at times, and very pleasant company, though all too familiar with the same cat and mouse game I was used to from back home. How can I qualify any of these girls as signifying a Japanese cultural consistency, and not specifically a "Midori", "Kyoto Stranger", or "Moeko" one? Everyone I met was different in their own way.

The deeper I investigated the Japanese cultural idea that I had had in America, the more that idea became realized as generality that harbors much nuance. Surely some sweeping ideas can be made about Japan, and I have some photos or memories of people to prove them, but within those front-running labels, more elusive truths are revealed, and "Japan" really becomes a place of diversity, not unlike America, and perhaps even like every other place in this world. Stereotypes are derived from vague truths, but in reality, as Moeko succinctly put it in her very last words to me, "life is unexpected, desyoo!"

**Selected Essays
from
Second Competition
(2006-2007)**

Japan and Me

Molly Baum (Longwood High School)

When examining the numerous Japanese philosophies, one particular principle bares greater significance than the rest. The Japanese people believe in Gaman- a value system that praises self-sacrifice, selflessness, and especially, forbearance. The idea of forbearance resonates strongly with me because of the relationship between forbearance, courage, and emotional endurance. Throughout my life, I have encountered numerous obstacles and seemingly impassable challenges. I have overcome such hurdles only after discovering an indomitable sense of hope within myself and among my parents.

I was born with arms that end slightly below my elbows, and a spinal cord that lacks certain lower nerves. Most doctors told my parents that due to my spinal condition, I would not be able to walk. Despite the immediate devastation they felt due to my lack of hands, they focused on the prevalent issue- ensuring the functionality of my legs. After numerous grim prognoses, my parents found a doctor with a more promising prediction. Before I was a year old, the doctor fitted my legs with braces spanning from the bottoms of my feet to just below my kneecaps. As time progressed, my parents' perseverance in finding a solution proved worthwhile. Gradually, I began to walk with the leg braces. During my first two years of walking, I encountered issues with maintaining balance, but my parents persisted in finding an occupational therapist that helped me to correct this problem. When I reached an age of comprehension, my parents recounted to me this first of many struggles. At that point, I realized that my parents never had and never would stop believing in my abilities. This thought surfaces whenever I want to give up on myself. My mother and father taught me the forbearance and determination that I use whenever life seems impossible.

I had adjusted to my lack of hands within the first two years of my life, but the less visible medical issues that followed became increasingly difficult to confront. From the age of three years old, I encountered a barrage of invasive medical tests, medications, and painful surgeries. From the frightening days that approached an operation to the following month of recovery, I unknowingly committed myself to the Gaman philosophy of forbearance. I despised every minute of the fear and the pain, but I knew that my experiences would increase my emotional endurance and contribute to my character. Due to the support of my parents and the courage I have acquired, I can triumph over every new obstacle with greater strength and the wisdom that accompanies experience.

In August of 2007, I will begin my freshman year of college. Although the prospect of independence and liberation is exciting, I acknowledge that the new environment and lifestyle will be the greatest trial of my character. College will be frightening and challenging, and its stress combined with the stress of my physical obstacles will be overwhelming and will sometimes seem insurmountable. However, my parents' reassurance, their ceaseless faith in my capabilities, and my own perseverance will enable me to adjust to the changes. Eventually, I will thrive on what was once an obstacle.

While many philosophic ideals seem esoteric and irrelevant to the modern world, the beliefs included in Gaman are more than relevant to my life. Gaman's principles of forbearance and character-building have become essential components of my values. They have enabled me to overcome countless difficulties and setbacks. Each day may bring a more menacing obstacle, but with Gaman as the foundation of my ideals, I know that there is no limit to what I can accomplish through determination.

A Gamble in Japan

Joan Kim (Syosset High School)

When I was younger I used to despise Japan. I thought it was Japan who taken away my grandfather, leaving my dad without a father and my grandmother without a husband. In 1948, the war had separated my grandfather while he was on a business trip in Japan, forcing him to settle there temporarily and then permanently. During those years, my grandfather, thinking his wife and child had died, married a Japanese woman and had another son. He began a few businesses and was very successful. Eventually he came to understand that his wife and child in Korea were still alive and living in America. He began to send money to help support my grandmother and father. One day, my parents and I went to visit him in Japan. Forty years had passed since my father had met his father.

I remember my dad lifting me out of a car, whispering in my ear, “Joan, don’t forget what I told you. Remember to bow politely.” My parents, luggage in one hand and my hands in the other, walked towards the building with whimsical designs on the windows. Rolling the front door to the right, my jaw dropped at the sight of hundreds of strange machines. I had never seen anything like it, except it reminded me of a room in Las Vegas that I was not allowed to enter. My mother, fluent in Japanese, called out someone’s name and flipping back to Korean, said: “We’re here!” After a moment, we heard the sound of creaking wood and a clatter of pots; then an elderly couple appeared at the bottom of the stairs. These strangers were my grandparents.

Starting from scratch, my grandfather had started a casino business and at one point in time, owned over three buildings in Japan’s most industrious cities. “Pachinko,” said my grandfather, as he beckoned me to come and sit in front of one of the machines. Ignoring my parents’ protests that I was too young to gamble, my grandfather took out a coin for me to insert into an opening. As soon as the coin hit the bottom, the machine sprang to life and began to show images of a singing mermaid. After a minute or two, the machine spit out two silver marbles, and that was my first introduction to Japan’s most popular pinball machine.

Tired of the crowded and polluted cities, my grandfather had moved to the countryside of Nagano. Customers interested in pachinko were scarce, but strangely, my grandfather continued to open his doors every morning to his small business. The building was surrounded by rice patties and somewhere, there must have been a bean field because my step grandmother always brought in a basketful of cooked string beans. To this day, I cannot forget the way these furry pods popped out sweet beans into my mouth.

These memories are vague, yet they stay with me. As I got older and began to learn about the culture and history of Japan, I realized that it was the war, not the country or the people that I disliked. I realized that, in a way, Japan had saved my grandfather and provided him with great success, even allowing my family to be financially supported after immigrating to America from Korea.

Many things have changed since I left Japan in 1995. My grandfather’s buildings had become bankrupt and were sold for very cheap prices. Recently, he passed away, leaving his Japanese wife and son in Japan, and another elderly Korean wife in America who still remembered what he wore on their first date. Seeing that generation fade away, I dearly wished that I were older and more successful. I wanted to help my step-grandmother and my sick uncle, but I did not know how... That is, until I learned about a Japanese language course at my high school. Dropping four years of honors Spanish courses, I enrolled in Japanese Level 1 as a senior at Syosset High school. Sad that I did not find out about this course any sooner, I am faithfully studying my hiragana, katakana and ru, and u-verbs and plan to continue in college. I only hope for the day that I am able to meet my Japanese family again and tell them how much I waited for this day to come in fluent Japanese.

Foggy Homestay

Melida Maldonado (Marble Hill School for International Studies)

While walking out of the Hokkaido subway, lugging my oversized suitcase, I was unaware of what I would see around the next corner. Being in a new country, Japan, gave me the motivation to try as many new things as possible. However, I was hesitant about the host family stay. After hearing home stay horror stories from past students, not only was I apprehensive, but I was dreading the next ten days of my Japanese home stay.

As I stood with my luggage staring in awe at the anxious crowd of host families, I eventually located the family holding up the sign that read “Melida.” When I approached them, I was so overwhelmed that I tried to greet my host mother with a hug. Unfortunately, my unannounced hug startled her, because in Japanese culture, touching strangers is not customary. Considering that I was in a foreign country, I was aware that I would make mistakes. However, the awkward and embarrassing moment of my host mother backing away from my hug only increased my pessimism about the home stay. My biggest fear, other than committing any further mistakes, was enduring awkward silences between me and the family. I knew the language well enough to get by, but I was limited to the things I knew how to say. This caused us to resort to sign language for things we did not know how to express. The language barrier seemed like it was going to be an issue for the rest of my stay.

It was not until the day my host father took me to JR Tower, the tallest building in Sapporo, that I started to appreciate my host family. As I was looking at the foggy mountains in the distance, I asked my host father for the Japanese word for “fog,” just out of curiosity. He replied, “kiri” and then asked for the English word. After listening to the English word, he stood thinking and then it was as if a light bulb clicked on in his mind. He realized the meaning of the English words in his car, “fog light.” Soon after, he excitedly told his wife and some friends about his discovery.

At the time, I could not believe the enthusiasm he had for learning such a small word. However, throughout my days in Japan, we both demonstrated this same level of excitement when we had conversations where neither of us knew what the other was saying, but we learned a new word or phrase. Finding different ways to communicate and get our message across helped clear up the fog I had endured at the beginning of my experience. I realized that as much as I love learning the mechanics of languages, that was not the only way I was going to convey an emotional connection. There is so much more to learning languages than just memorization of words and grammar patterns. It is how one uses their skills to clarify misunderstandings between different cultures in order to help others. Knowing that I helped my host father understand English words expanded my love for languages. My will to teach and learn in Japan, even though I made mistakes along the way, granted us both a cross-cultural education.

When the end of my home stay grew near, I realized how much I had underestimated my experience. Even though I was raised bi-lingual, I had been afraid of living in a home where communication would be a challenge. However, in those ten days, I became determined to incorporate my affinity for the Japanese language into my future career and think before I throw myself into any other person’s arms as a greeting.

Holding back tears, I packed my bags on the last day, reluctant to say goodbye to the family I had been so hesitant to meet. As I made my way to the train station, my host mother slipped her hand into mine for support. Before I boarded my train, she embraced me with the biggest hug— surprising for a person who originally stepped away from my hug. Right there and then, I knew that being part of this family was a risk worth taking.

Make Believe: Finding Fantasy in Reality in Old Japan

Heather Highfield (Stony Brook University)

Often, when I was a child, I would finish reading some fantasy-fiction novel and lament that this world was a terribly boring place. Everything was ruled by logic and science; phenomena which once were considered supernatural were now known to have set formulae and reasonable explanations. It always seemed as if everything that could be invented or discovered had already been. Nothing was left to the imagination. Even mysterious creatures like those living on the bottom of the ocean had been found and made into documentaries. Raised with this very practical mindset, I found that I could never really be astounded by anything; even as I felt silly wishing for some fantasy world like the kind I had read about, I wanted to be able to wonder at something, to honestly feel that perhaps magic was possible.

Even as I grew up and went to college, that small childish part of me never really changed. I had a casual academic interest in fairy tales; It wasn't that I found them believable, but I enjoyed the way logic and reason took a back seat to novelty, and anything could happen. The world in those stories was wild and uncharted; to live there must be frightening and exhilarating.

When I began taking Japanese language and history classes, I inevitably became curious about what sort of monster and fairy stories such an ancient country had produced. What I found was an incredibly rich lore full of fantastical creatures and dark forests, of warriors trained by mysterious mountain goblins, of spirit gods and demons who became beautiful women by night. I also found many wonderful examples in the animated movies of Hayao Miyazaki, which I quickly came to love. His movies, though mostly created for children, depicted precisely the world I wished I could believe in. One features a shadowy, bustling Japanese bath-house town full of mysterious Japanese deities like radish and river spirits. Another, "My Neighbor Totoro," features a giant, furry forest-god-type creature called Totoro who protects the woods and whom only children can see. This one, by far my favorite, depicts a world which is not dangerous, but which is dark and wild and exciting; the forest is deep, untouched and infinitely explorable; a sense of real childlike wonder is possible. In such an environment, even those who cannot see Totoro can nonetheless truly believe he exists. As I learned more about bright, fast-paced modern Japan, my imagination also grew, and I wondered whether these tales still had any place in the national psyche or if that dark and mysterious world still existed within the popular gleaming, technology-saturated vision of Japan.

I kept this in my mind when I applied to study as an exchange student in Japan. I chose a program in Kyoto over one in Tokyo or Chiba, passing up the urban life for a more traditional experience. At first, I took every opportunity to visit temples, go for long walks and explore countryside as well as city. But after a few months, having seen a little of everything, I had regressed to my usual state of sitting in the computer room all afternoon when I should be using my time more wisely. As time passed, I did of course travel to many places and see a lot of Japan, but my experience was also becoming more and more like everyday life: that small sense of wonder and newness that everything held when I first arrived was disappearing. I had seen a great deal of Japan, but there was still one side of it I had not found. I desperately wanted to see the side of Japan that inspired those fairy tales, but I began to doubt whether that world still existed at all.

One night in the middle of July, just a month before I was scheduled to come home, my boyfriend, Hiroshi, suddenly announced over dinner that he knew the perfect place to go see fireflies, and that we should go there at once. Ever practical, I pointed out that we should probably go another day, as it was already almost 9 and the train up to the mountains would stop running soon. Also, I observed, it might be a good idea to finish our meal first in any case. But he would not be deterred by logic nor reason. And so, fifteen minutes later, still hungry, I found myself standing outside the tiny, remote Kibune train station, staring out into the unbroken darkness of what I came to realize was the road we would be taking.

I turned to the solitary vending machine and bought some milk tea in a heavy steel can, not so much for drinking as for defense against wayward bears. Or monkeys. Or radish spirits. I had taken this road during the daytime, and it was not remotely threatening; but now, it seemed as though anything could happen. Out of bravery or carelessness, we resolved not to turn back and set out down the deserted, winding road toward the next street lamp, far in the distance.

We stumbled along through the night arm in arm, neither sure of who was clinging to whom. The bluish, flickering streetlights were separated by intimidating stretches of total blackness; the next light was always just out of sight. The road wound gently uphill through hills that towered high overhead on both sides; somewhere to the right was a river, though we knew that only by the sound of water running over the rocks somewhere below. At length the hills and trees gave way to a string of weathered, ancient Japanese houses and inns lit by low, rust-colored streetlights. Even at this relatively early hour, all of the windows were dark; the houses seemed to lean sleepily against each other. I briefly considered what I would do if one were to suddenly stir; I tried to walk more quietly.

As the houses grew more sparse and we plunged once more into darkness, I asked Hiroshi how soon we would get where we were going.

“We’re there,” he said. “Look up.”

I looked up. For a long moment, there was nothing to see - just blackness and the soft rush of an invisible river. But then, suddenly, they were there: first one, then four, then seven, then fifty; the lazy, floating green lights seemed to pour in from nowhere as my eyes found something on which to focus. First one, then sixty, then two hundred, drifting up in wide, sweeping arcs down along the river, then up to the trees, then up over the barely-visible hills. First one, then, suddenly, a thousand. We watched the fireflies glide silently over the river and rise into the sky, wordlessly, as though they would flee at the slightest disturbance. I don’t know how long we stood there, frozen. If I stared just a little bit longer, I was sure I’d see some ancient, mythical creature rise out of the forest with them and into the moonless sky.

“Oh no.” Hiroshi flipped open his cell phone. I looked into the light for an instant and recoiled, blind. “We have to hurry. Is it okay if we leave now?”

But there was no point in asking. I looked up over the river, but the hills, the water, the fireflies were gone. They had fled after all; the spell was broken. We set off running down the way we had come, pounding footsteps swallowed in the streetlights’ wake. The houses did not stir; there were no assailing bears; the mountain goblins let us pass.

We reached the lonely train platform with just enough time to turn and look back down the road we had taken. We stepped onto the train; the doors closed. There was a second; we breathed. It was when I finally sat down, exhausted, that I realized I had found exactly what it was I had come here to experience. At that moment, I could believe that if there were a bus stop along that road, I had only to wait and I’d meet Totoro there.

Feeling not at all silly, I drank my tea.

**Selected Essays
from
Third Competition
(2007-2008)**

His Greatest Wish

Samantha Dupler (South Side High School)

The colors and sounds were everywhere, vermilion archways stretching over speckled pavement, the foreign shouts of vendors over the music of street performers, paper lanterns hanging from above merchants' huts. This, in a nutshell, was the street of Nakamise-dori on a certain spring day.

It was my fourth day in Tokyo of a two week trip to Japan, and so far, I had found the entire country's culture juxtaposed within itself, a fascinating and sometimes dizzying blend of old meets new, a mix of kimono-clad women and gelled-hair business men, both types different, yet the same, in the sense that they could all call Japan their home.

With these heavy thoughts resting on my mind, I made my way through the crowded shopping street, past the doll shops and fan stalls, through the crowds of bargain hungry shoppers. At last, I found myself at the end of the street, standing before a statue of Buddha, smooth and glowing bronze from where thousands of hands had rubbed it for luck. The air here was quiet, the people possessed a serene disposition, and the loudest sound was that of the rustling of paper scraps, each scrawled with a wish tied to a small tree, in hopes that they may come true.

I stood before the statue, taking it all in, when I noticed a small table nearby, where an old Japanese man sat folding paper. I wandered over to the table. It looked like a type of cultural station, designed for visitors to indulge in the Japanese art of origami. On the table, there were stacks and strips of brightly colored paper, and laminated, yet battered, instruction sheets in both English and Japanese on how to create paper cranes. So I sat down at the table and tried to make one of my own.

The cranes were much harder to make than they appeared, and in a matter of minutes, I had accidentally decimated at least six sheets of paper. The old man at the table noticed my arduous attempts, and came over to me with a smile. "No, no," he said gently in English. "Like this." He picked up the paper and folded it with ease, and soon held a small red crane in his wrinkled hands. The old man set the crane on the table and looked proudly at it. "Thank you," I said with a smile.

His smile stretched farther when he heard my voice, and he gathered up more paper. "Ah, American?" he asked excitedly. "Yes," I said. "I'm from New York." I studied the crane on the table as the old man continued to fold more. Picking the bird off the table, I turned it over in my hands, admiring the delicate folds. "Like this," said the old man, taking the crane back. He pulled the tail gently, and the wings elongated gracefully, the crane's paper neck extending just so. He then set the crane back down on the table, waiting for my reaction.

I leaned over across the table, to where a rainbow of paper strips lay stacked. I then smoothed the strip out and began folding it over and around itself, forming a little pentagon. The old man watching with amazement, I pinched the corners of the shape, puffing out its sides to form a tiny star. "For you," I said, and placed the star on the table.

The old man's smile became so large, it almost seemed to split his face in two. "A star!" he exclaimed. "An American star!" He got up and began showing my star to each and every person at the table. In the distance, the wish trees whispered. I smiled at the old man, and began to get up from the table, but he came back to my seat with a few parting words. "Tell your American friends; visit Japan, visit here," he said, hope etched into the lines on his face and buried deep in the soul of his voice. "Spread my culture," he said, holding my crumpled star. "For I fear it is fading fast."

I nodded, and picked up the crane off the table, cradling it in my fingers. He nodded back to me quickly, and then walked back over to the other side of the table, to help others with their cranes.

I turned away from the table, and made my way back to Nakamise-dori, the paper wish trees swishing like a thousand matches striking, each lighting a fire of hope and passion.

Initiation with a Washcloth

Mari Iwahara (The Dalton School)

“*Ittekimasu!*” I called back to my mother as I hurried out the doors and into the small streets. I readjusted my white button-up blouse, navy pleated skirt, white socks and Nike sneakers, specifically picked out to imitate the basic Japanese middle school uniforms. This was the first day of my fifth grade *taiken-nyuugaku*, a two-week school experience at a middle school in Kanazawa, Japan.

The inside of my matching navy backpack consisted of a notebook, pencil case, tissues, handkerchief, and washcloth. My mother had hand-sewn the washcloth, telling me that I would need it for *souji no jikan*, “clean-up time”, during school. “Clean-up time” sounded like a preschool activity and I wasn’t sure what to make of it, but since the cloth was clearly listed on the supplies list, I didn’t bother questioning it. The handkerchief and tissues were to be with me at all times for sanitary means. I was also given a pair of brand-new shoes that I was supposed to change into once I got to school. “You need two pairs of shoes,” instructed my mother the night before. “One for indoors and one for outdoors. That keeps the dirt from getting inside the school.”

Once I got to school and changed into my indoor pair, I saw exactly what she meant. There wasn’t a single piece of trash on the floor or a single spot on the wall, and every child was changing into his or her clean pair of shoes, making sure not to dirty the wooden floors. The whole environment was unbelievably clean, a complete shift from the careless, chaotic school hallways back in New York City. As I walked down the hallways to find my classroom, there were posters on the walls that reminded the students to “keep the school clean”, “clean up after your own mess”, and “respect the environment”. No wonder this place was so clean. There was no graffiti smeared on the posters. Even as I sat through classes and moved from classroom to classroom, the neatness of the school was impressive. “The janitors must be excellent here,” I casually thought.

The surprising truth was that there weren’t any janitors taking care of the place. I learned this the period after lunch, when suddenly, lively music started playing from the intercoms. All at once, as if on cue, the children got up and scattered. Confused at first, it quickly occurred to me that this was *souji no jikan*. Numerous brooms and mops emerged from the closets, children carried water-filled buckets, desks and chairs were moved around, and trash was taken out with factory-like efficiency. Some girls invited me to clean the hallway with them. “Mari-chan, come help us wipe the floors clean,” they said. “You do have a washcloth with you, right?” I saw that all students had their own washcloths, each hand-sewn by their mothers from old clothes or towels. I had never used a broom, mopped bathroom floors, taken out school trash, or raced down a hallway on all fours while pushing a washcloth with my hands to scrub the floor. I managed to accomplish all of that during these two weeks at school. “Clean-up time” was more like chore-time, but I noticed how nobody objected and everyone did their part. There were set rules, reminders, and jobs, and everybody cooperated.

Six years later, I realize that this applies not only to schools but to Japanese society in general. Even the busiest city streets, train stations, and parks are spotless because of the country’s successful waste management and recycling systems, enabling the nation to rank as one of the top “green” nations in the world. Sanitation is an important priority in the lives of the Japanese, deriving from the old Japanese ideal of respecting and being a part of nature, preserving it for the people’s enjoyment during all seasons of the year. Another component that creates this success is the cooperation and full commitment of the people who are educated early as students to develop a sense of social responsibility. Those two weeks were the only times that I went to a school in Japan and I have not used a washcloth since, but the importance of *souji no jikan* still leaves a profound impression on me. Their tradition of cleanliness, sense of cooperation, and respect for nature are exemplary of the spirit of Japan.

Hidemi-san

Elizabeth Morgan (Bronx High School of Science)

My connection to Japan is direct. It is visceral and practically umbilical. Once a week since I was five years old, I have sat hip to hip with my piano teacher, Hidemi Kitajima. Hidemi is a mentor to me, and my personal ambassador of Japanese culture. As Commodore Perry exposed Japan to Western Culture, Hidemi has enlightened me with Eastern thought and culture. I have been raised exposed to her Eastern ideals, which value perfection through hard work and practice.

Hidemi describes herself as upholding old fashion Japanese values. These ideas stem from an ancient tradition of living with a highly structured society that emphasizes respect, honor, and discipline. The code of the samurai, the bushido, stresses the following virtues: rectitude, courage, benevolence, respect, honor, loyalty, honesty, filial piety, and wisdom. Hidemi is aware of how she behaves in society, and prefers to deal formally with those that she feels deserve respect either because of age, social standing, or accomplishments. Though she has adopted contemporary American fashion, she rejects more informal manners of young Japanese as well as American youths who have no respect for tradition.

Hidemi's teaching techniques incorporate the Japanese belief in a resilient mental strength. When I played my first recital at the age of five, Hidemi made a list of things to do to prepare me for the performance. The list included no sugar for one week before the performance, eat plenty of fish, get sufficient sleep, and remain focused from first strike until the last note is played. Steeped in these principles, her Japanese rigor demands focused practice. This technique is similar to the principles of martial arts. This Japanese practice of fitness and self-defense encompasses meditation, mental discipline and character development. It also encourages self-confidence. By applying Japanese elements of martial arts to my music, I am able to master the complexities of Schubert.

In middle school, Hidemi wanted to share her culture with me; she took me to lunch at a Japanese restaurant that offers the highest example of Japanese cuisine. The restaurant was decorated with traditional Japanese art and artifacts. She pointed out the rice parchment lamps (washi), and lacquered (urushi) plates, and described the process of how these items are made. Though simple shapes and patterns, these adornments impressed me by their beautiful subtleties and perfect constructs. The fineness and beauty of these crafts are the part of the Japanese culture embodied in Hidemi. She is not of the high-tech Japan which produces complex equipment and leads the world in technological production for cutting edge audio-video equipment, cameras, automobiles, and robotics.

While discussing Japanese architecture, Hidemi related how she brings tourists to the flashy Golden Temple (Kinkaku-ji). Visitors are immediately impressed by the top two stories of this pavilion which are covered in pure gold leaf. But in contrast, Hidemi describes that the spiritual beauty of the Silver Pavilion (Ginkaku-ji) is often lost to Western visitors. This Zen Buddhist sanctuary is not constructed of silver, but the elements blend to make a peaceful and harmonious whole, it is a place for rest and solitude, far removed from the hustle and bustle of New York City life. Behind the temple is a magnificent two part garden made of rocks and sand. The temple stresses the importance the Japanese put on peace and harmony. I think Hidemi's nature is similar in beauty to that of the Silver Pavilion; it is a bit like a Japanese secret. But someday I would like to experience both pavilions in person.

Embodied in Hidemi is the ideal of total health in body, spirit and mind. She is well versed in traditional Japanese exercise and massage. Hidemi has helped my mother with her arthritis by teaching her Tai Kyoku Ken. Her exercises stress slow movements executed in a harmonious way to maintain joint flexibility. If my fingers are cold, she will rub them to increase circulation, focusing on specific pressure points. She has learned these healing techniques from her grandmother and shares them with me.

Hidemi is an international concert pianist. Her piano playing reveals aspects of her Japanese culture as well as what she has adopted of American culture. Japan reminds me of my petite, talented and wonderful piano teacher. Her Japanese spirit fills our home whenever she comes. She is a true blend of traditional Japanese virtues as well as contemporary style. I am fortunate to have had the benefit of her instruction and this special cultural exposure.

Becoming the Universe: Zen in Japanese Culture

Lauren Phillips (Stony Brook University)

Japan is a country often characterized in two distinct ways: mythical and steeped with tradition or a high-speed technological powerhouse. It is therefore difficult sometimes to see a common feature between Japan of old and modern day Japan; however, the spirit of Japan is still alive and thriving. This spirit is found within the philosophy of Zen from the Zen Buddhism religion of Japan. While not all the citizens identify themselves as Zen Buddhists, this philosophy is still present throughout their lives.

The spirit of Japan is actually one from a surprising origin. It was not originally from Japan, but was rather introduced to Japan by Chinese Zen Buddhist monks. Even though the philosophy is not purely Japanese bred, the people of Japan have taken the concept and formed it into their own, uniquely Japanese philosophy. Zen is the practice which gives one the discipline to destroy self, or more simply put, to destroy any desires, in order to create empty self. Once a person has reached empty self, he or she is enlightened and becomes a Buddha. In order to reach this state, one must practice *sabi* and *wabi*. *Sabi* essentially means loneliness, though not in the sense of how westerners interpret the word. In this case, loneliness is time by oneself wherein one reflects upon oneself and anything that individual can think of is not the person and therefore must be destroyed in order to reach enlightenment. This refers to thoughts such as fame and the desire for fame must be destroyed; otherwise, the attachment to this goal would prevent one from achieving empty self. *Wabi* deals with an appreciation of poverty. In this ideal one is not dependent on worldly things and wants for nothing, for anything one could want, one already has. This concept of Zen Buddhism instructs one to appreciate what is around oneself. The concept of Zen may sound a little intangible, and may initially seem that to have no application outside of someone studiously practicing Zen Buddhism; however, this is not at all true. Within Japan, the concept of Zen has infiltrated every part of the culture.

The presence of Zen is most obvious in the arts of Japan. While growing up I would wonder about the Japanese style of art. Since I was thinking in a European influenced mind set, I was unable to truly grasp what the art of Japan was expressing. I knew it was beautiful, but the truth it conveyed always eluded me, and instead settled on the corners of my mind, just out of reach of understanding. When other countries, particularly those of the west, create a piece of pottery they glorify it if it is perfect. The piece must be perfectly glazed, and perfectly crafted with no change in thickness and possessing a uniform shape. In opposition, the great artisans of Japan often will purposely make an imperfection in the pottery, such as inconsistent thickness or a deliberate mistake in shape, for when a piece has rustic unpretentiousness or antiquated imperfections it is said to contain *sabi* and is therefore a true piece of artwork.

The concept of art also differs with paintings between western countries and Japan. Unlike the paintings of western countries, which cover the entire canvas in paint, the Japanese employ a one corner style of painting. Only one corner of the canvas actually has paint on it while the rest remains clean. If one discards this empty space when viewing the painting, one misses the entire point of the painting itself. The blank void in this case represents the abyss which encompasses the universe. Though a bird on a branch may be painted in the corner and nothing else is painted, the world still exists beyond that bird. This world beyond the single subject of the painting is the universe itself, making the blank area of canvas just as important as the painted subject. This minimalist style to art is also present in the traditional Japanese poetry of haiku. Many westerners are incapable of understanding the significance of haikus when they are initially introduced to them, and I must admit that I, too, was confused by the style. With only seventeen syllables used, it would seem as though nothing of great importance could possibly be expressed. However, haikus are not saturated with description in order to leave room for the unknown, for without the unknown no art exists, just as with the one corner paintings. In truth, the haikus in their short meter express something of the utmost importance; it is an expression of temporary enlightenment wherein one sees into the life of things.

While studying haiku this past fall, I was struck with a shocking realization. The moment of temporary enlightenment, the Zen utterance, I had experienced once before. When I was fifteen, my mother would still drive me occasionally to my high school. One day as I walked from the parking lot towards the building, something shimmering caught my attention. It was spring then and as it often does it had rained

lightly the night before. As I glanced up to see what was glistening I spotted a spider's web masterfully created, nestled delicately against the pink new petals of the crab apple tree. As the morning sun shined down on the tree, it made the rain droplets that hung to the spider's web and that laid on the petals sparkle in an almost ethereal way. In that moment, everything in the world became beautiful to me because the glistening spider's web was everything. I felt as though nothing outside that single damp spider's web mattered and nothing existed outside of it, not even myself, because everything that existed was already within that one spider's web.

The moment was achingly brief, but it was real and even the memory of it, though I am sure the scene I recall is faded in comparison, still has the power to make my heart clench at how insignificant humans are when a common spider's web can humble us. It was not until years later I understood what had happened in that moment. Without knowledge of it or any training in Buddhism, I had somehow experienced the Zen Buddhism mystery of becoming-being and being-becoming. This mystery exemplifies the Zen Buddhism philosophy that all is one and one is all, wherein the universe is the all and a single entity is the one, and whether that one was the sparkling spider's web or whether it was me, does not matter at all, for the spider's web was me and I was the spider's web in that one moment. This mystery is implied in several places within haikus as well as other Japanese art forms. I don't know if I will ever feel that sort of sincere peace again, I can only hope that one day something seemingly insignificant will catch my attention once more and become the universe in my eye.

The Coexistence of Order and Spontaneity

Lisa Kawamoto (Columbia University)

For as long as I can remember, I have reveled in the beauty in the small details that often go unnoticed. From the insects scurrying beneath the rocks in my back yard with their flawlessly shiny backs to a well-chosen word in poetry, the quiet splendor in details has irresistibly attracted me. The hyphen in “Japanese-American,” the adjective that describes me most fundamentally, is the smallest element in this phrase—yet because it binds my two halves together, it is crucial. This hyphen has been the source of both difficulty and satisfaction in coming to terms with myself.

When I entered Kenkō’s world through his Essays in Idleness, I felt the yearnings of a man who struggled with seemingly contradictory sentiments. Idealizing a life spent in isolated introspection in “A Person Who Complains of Having Nothing to Do” while decrying the behavior of “rustic boors” in “Are We to Look at Cherry Blossoms Only in Full Bloom?”, at times, Kenkō seemed to vacillate from valuing individuality to clinging to conventional attitudes about propriety (835, 838). Perhaps my attention to detail was what made me uneasy when Kenkō’s arguments seemed to be at odds with each other across his essays. Yet after multiple readings, Kenkō began to provide me with an organized framework within which he allowed his thoughts and my thoughts alike to wander. Rebelling against the conventionally negative association with *tsurezure*, or idleness, Kenkō defended idleness (Shirane 820). For Kenkō, idleness was an opportunity for one to muse without the delusions of society and without becoming “captured by the filth of the outside world” (835).

I began to appreciate what had seemed like contradictions in Essays in Idleness as the reflections of a thinker who embraced imperfection. In “A Proper Dwelling,” Kenkō argues that “A house which multitudes of workmen have polished with every care...and even the grasses and trees of the garden have been trained unnaturally, is ugly to look at and most depressing” (825). Kenkō is repulsed by the artificial air that results when one devotes too much energy to “perfecting” a house. Instead, Kenkō’s ideal home is one in which things are allowed to scatter and looks as though it is “lived in” (825). In my mind, Kenkō’s essays start to become these ideal homes of their own—single essays are devoted to one broad topic, but within this framework, Kenkō allows his thoughts to meander. As with writers before him, the anxiety surrounding the impermanence of life can be glimpsed, but Kenkō also expresses his enjoyment of everyday life.

Though it is a medieval work, Essays in Idleness was surprisingly fresh and spoke deeply to me. To me, Kenkō struggled to reconcile his conflicting desires to be accepted as a member of society and to be true to his true desires, ultimately abandoning this human impulse to reconcile and organize. “In the U.S., I feel Japanese. In Japan, I feel American,” I remember saying in my elementary and middle school years. Every two or three years, I would spend the summer at my grandparents’ home in Iwate Prefecture and eye-opening as the experience was, I would inevitably long for the “American freedom for individuality.” Once I was back in my mostly white town, I was frustrated that no one understood how alienating it was to immediately be viewed not as merely a girl but an Asian girl.

Quite simplistically, I grew to characterize the Japanese mindset as stiflingly focused on conformity. Individuals were put into the Japanese education system and test-takers were churned out; for good measure, the work atmosphere would stamp out the remaining traces of creative thought, I believed. In my mind, the American mindset—parading the triumph of the individual—was no better alternative. How was I supposed to trumpet my attributes in a crowd of everyone doing exactly the same?

Now, I define myself as an intermediary. I struggle to make sense of the world around me while granting myself the room to unleash the world within me. I believe that there are fundamental human characteristics that transcend nationality and other obvious descriptions such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and creed. I also believe that in each individual lives a world of ideas that—try as he or she might—cannot all be accepted or even transmitted to another. I believe in this struggle of truths, and I imagine that I can act as an intermediary between my own desires to belong and to be individual.

I am an intermediary in the more literal sense as well. I began to translate texts in Japanese to English as an intern at an information services company this summer, and my fascination with translation has only grown. Translation seems at the same time to be an abstruse process and a transmittance of content. The

reality lies between, in the poetic quality that can lie in prose about logistics, in the spark of a mental connection bridging two cultures, in the immaculate conveyance of meaning and nuance. I hope to continue to see the value hidden in hyphens and the beauty of gaining truths, like Kenkō, from struggle.

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**Selected Essays
from
Fourth Competition
(2008-2009)**

Close My Eyes and Count to Ten

Juliet deButts (Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School)

The first time I ever heard the word “Japan,” I was six. I was in first grade, and along with the planetary system and basic grammar, we were being taught to count in foreign languages.

Ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi, hachi, kyu, ju.

I didn’t think much more about Japan—about the country, about the language. I knew there was Japanese food, I knew there *was* a Japan, but I was nonchalant about the entire business. My mother did tell me stories about it, but she told me stories about other places too—about Thailand, and Hawaii, and London and Paris—so I never attached particular importance to the stories of the Japanese doctors that came to study with my grandfather and who wouldn’t let anyone else pay for dinner, of their daughters who visited but spoke very little English and were married in my grandmother’s wedding dress, of an aunt who worked as a Japanese aerobics teacher for an entire summer without learning to say more than “inhale, exhale,” and how to count to ten.

Ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi, hachi, kyu, ju.

As I grew older, my limited store of knowledge expanded to children’s books set in Tokigawa-era Japan, to “kimono” and “katana,” “karate” and “karaoke,” and the fact that I *loved* Japanese food.

In seventh grade I walked into my first Japanese class, interested but nervous. It was the first day of school, a new classroom, a new building, a new teacher and a new language, but the first thing we learned was to count to ten—and I recognized the numbers.

Ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi, hachi, kyu, ju.

I was fascinated by the way the characters curved and fell apart and came together again, by hiragana and katakana and kanji and calligraphy. I devoured words that I’d never heard before, held them up and weighed them by the scale of words I already knew. I rarely found them wanting—all the words and patterns I learned, simple and basic, somehow matched the numbers I’d been carrying around in my head for years: the smooth sounds and the slanted black lines in my notes and my textbook.

Ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi, hachi, kyu, ju.

Japanese was fascinating and endlessly new—I was enthralled by every tidbit I learned. Manga, anime, chopsticks, radicals, Chinese influences, rice farming, mountains, hot-springs, snow monkeys, octopus muffins, obon festivals: I couldn’t get enough of it. So I stuck with Japanese, even after the sounds stopped making quite so much sense, even after I needed to study harder and longer. Though the words I learned and the characters I drew (over and over and over again on tracing paper, desperate to get them *just right*) and the sounds I shaped with a reluctant tongue grew more and more complicated, farther and farther away from the simple basics that had enchanted me as a child, I kept going, and I could hear an echo of counting to ten.

Ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi, hachi, kyu, ju.

It seemed that the more Japanese I learned, the less I knew. There are female samurai, of a kind—the *ama*, who dive for pearls in icy waters, and follow a different code of honor from the men who lived and died by the sword—and there’s a shortage of men to work modern Japanese farms, and the newest publishing sensation in Japan is the cell-phone novel. Everything I learned only reinforced my earlier impressions of a country and a culture that had *grace* bred into its very bones; a place that effortlessly and elegantly mingled the old and the new, the traditional and the innovative. It was a country of contradictions—in everything from its geography to its history to its politics. The more I learned, the less I knew; the less I knew, the more I wanted to discover.

I watched Miyazaki movies, and loved them—always in Japanese, with English subtitles, because the dubbed versions didn’t sound right—and I struggled through a few manga in Japanese before surrendering and reading them in English. I still study, I still listen and read and ask innumerable questions, and I still count, when I’m bored or tired or angry, and the numbers are still as soothing as they ever have been, and they are still, for me, the essence of Japan.

Ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi, hachi, kyu, ju.

Respect for the Pigeons

Jessica Joseph (Bronx High School of Science)

My next door neighbor was afraid for the pigeons. He had heard the stories we exchanged and the plans we made as my friends and I lazed around on my porch on a dull summer day. Someone had mentioned the luck of a pigeon feather, someone else had complained about the birds themselves, and I had brought both thoughts together in an idea that promised to be fun; ambushing the birds on my roof for a few laughs and luck.

Mr. Ikeda had been close by, listening to our sleepy voices and hazy musings. He was always outside with his faithful straw broom, keeping his slice of cement spotless. My younger brother and I secretly mocked him. A modest Asian man thinking that he would be able to keep his area free from the debris that plagued the rest of the Bronx was laughable. He however, did not find it as absurd and was perpetually shuffling around with his broom.

On that muggy day he overheard our plan. I remember Mr. Ikeda walking the few feet over to my house, politely pardoning himself as he navigated the mesh of teenage limbs to get to the front door. He rang the doorbell and left the broom outside when my father invited him in. I was puzzled, thinking that he had never spoken to us before, so what would make him do so now?

A few minutes later, my father told my friends to go back home and ordered me to come in. In the living room was Mr. Ikeda, sipping tea. My father began to explain that Mr. Ikeda was concerned. It seemed that the neighborhood kids were bent on terrorizing the pigeons. Mr. Ikeda was afraid for them, worried that we would hurt them if we went to their territory on the roof. I explained that he was overreacting. After all, they were only pigeons, and we only wanted their feathers. As long as we didn't hurt them, what was the problem?

Mr. Ikeda shook his head and explained that we should respect the birds, their feathers, and everything around us. He explained his belief that we do not own the world around us, that we are not above it in any way, that we do not control it whatsoever. We are merely a part of it. We are participants and observers but never, ever owners of nature. He believed in the Golden Rule of treating others as we wish to be treated. He applied it not only to the people around him, but also to the things he interacted with. I can distinctly hear him telling me that "everything has a soul." Mr. Ikeda saw my raising my eyebrows and repeated himself. "Everything has a soul, even this pot of sugar." He was motioning to the sugar on the table. My father nodded and said that he would keep me from harming the pigeons, and then gently let Mr. Ikeda out of our house. I sat still on my couch, thinking about the idea that everything has a soul.

Mr. Ikeda left and my dad went back to his laptop. I went to the kitchen to make myself some tea, keeping this idea in my mind all the while. I pretended that everything I touched, from the teacup to the teabag, to the sugar and the milk, had a soul. I was slow in my preparations, taking time and care with every step of the simple recipe.

My tea was ready and I began to drink it slowly. Something about this cup of tea was different, something about it was better. The change was dim and elusive, but it was there. In my hands I held physical proof of the benefits of reverence.

The concept of respect that saturates Japanese culture was delivered to me through Mr. Ikeda. With his concern for birds and meticulous care for his property, he exemplified the respect that our world needs to survive. This extensive application of the Golden Rule by the Japanese inspires me to be a better person. Beginning with that cup of tea, I started to have greater respect for the things and people around me. I began to communicate Mr. Ikeda's beliefs through my daily actions. Though small, my actions with the inanimate souls around me may affect the actions of the human souls around me, as Mr. Ikeda affected me.

Sakura

Christina Rombola (Longwood High School)

Ever since I was twelve years old I was mesmerized by music. When I was in seventh grade, I started attending voice lessons. My teacher's name was Mrs. Beckers. She was a six foot tall German opera singer with stocky shoulders, a soft smile and an angelic soprano voice. We typically studied music by classical composers and explored literature in the romantic languages. However last May, Mrs. Beckers introduced me to something radically different than I was accustomed to. She handed me a copy of a Japanese folksong titled "Sakura." Surprisingly, my native-born German teacher properly taught me the pronunciation and meaning of every word. Together we sang the folksong even though I was unaware of the symbolism it entailed.

Mrs. Beckers was incredibly inspired by this artistic representation of eastern culture. It was strange to see a German woman be so knowledgeable of and fascinated by a culture completely opposite of her own. She explained that the title of the song, "Sakura", meant cherry blossom in Japanese. The song was about the celebration of blooming Japanese cherry blossoms. She continued to tell me that the Japanese people believe the flower is a symbol of the transience of life because the delicate petals fall only days after they bloom. Japanese people are not afraid of death. Instead, they value life and live every day by the morals they were raised upon. The cherry blossom is also a symbol of the samurai. The samurai were a group of fierce warriors who lived by the Bushido code. This code of conduct encompassed the importance of duty and loyalty, justice and morality, sincerity, courtesy, compassion, heroic courage and honor. They also lived by the value of gaman, or the belief in forbearance and self-sacrifice. Although they may not have wanted to go to battle, they did because they were committed to serving their people. Even though the samurai class diminished in Japan, the people still live by a similar conduct. As time passed, I realized why Mrs. Beckers was so enthralled by Japanese culture. It was because she encompassed everything that the cherry blossom, gaman and the Bushido Code stood for.

After four years of study with Mrs. Becker, she informed me that she was diagnosed with cancer. I was devastated that my longtime friend was struck by a disorder that crippled her by the minute. However, when she relayed the news, she said it with a smile and told me not to worry. She explained she was not afraid of the road ahead of her and that our lessons were to continue as usual. Although I was distraught, Mrs. Beckers seemed completely comfortable with her tragic fate. I did not understand why this terrible thing happened to such a wonderful person. She had compassion for every person that crossed her path, and went out of her way to help others. Mrs. Beckers believed in her students' capabilities and pushed them to achieve their highest dreams. She spoke with a sincere voice, and was never disloyal to anybody. Mrs. Beckers epitomized the Bushido Code. She loved her life, her students and music so much, that she was okay with the startling news. This woman was not afraid of death, but mesmerized by life. She enjoyed her life so much that her sickness was inconsequential. Mrs. Beckers continued to teach music until she could no longer play the piano. Although she was weak and feeble, Mrs. Becker believed in gaman and put her suffering aside to teach young people beautiful music.

The cherry blossom symbolizes the evanescent nature of life. Japanese people never walk by a cherry blossom tree without stopping because they know that the flowers may be gone the next day. Both Mrs. Beckers and the Japanese people believe in valuing everything, even if it only exists momentarily. Life, like the cherry blossom, is not eternal. Every individual follows the course of life until their inevitable fall. Therefore, we must pass time with something that we love unconditionally. Mrs. Beckers found her passion of teaching music. However, like Mrs. Beckers, the Japanese believe more in the whole rather than the individual. Although it is important to live life to personal standards, it is also important to have a positive effect on surrounding others. I admire Mrs. Beckers for her love of life, her altruistic nature and her remarkable impact on young people. Although my friend was a product of the western world, she conveyed everything Japanese culture stood for.

The Precious Crane

Alessandra Faith Ansbach (Lynbrook High School)

In the year it seemed a life would come crashing to an end, I was acquainted with the ancient Japanese art of origami. My sister, Nina, was in the hospital, suffering from seizures that medicine wasn't adequately controlling. New medicines were being tried. Mom had to be with her through this painful process. I was at home, 29.3 miles away yearning for both of them. I remember being so scared it was all I could do to show that I was strong for my Dad and Nana.

Knowing that I would either burst into screams or sobs I had to find something to ease my mind. I took out an old origami book my mom had presented to me as a surprise one day. I never really considered origami, because I couldn't fold the special papers correctly at the time. I began to separate all the paper that came inside the book; along with the paper mom had bought me. My bed was covered in different size papers. The papers surrounded me on my bed, some folded and some not. I cautiously chose one of the multicolored sheets and began to fold. I ended up with a very uneven crane. I looked down at it, disgusted and threw it at the door. I folded again and again until finally I came up with a beautiful bird perched in my hands. Delighted with what I had accomplished, I started to create more and more until I had a whole chain of cranes. I looked through the rest of the book and made almost all of the designs that were depicted. I was delighted with my work.

My father appeared then and told me it was time to visit my sister and mom. I gathered up all of my creations and put them in a bag. When we arrived at my sister's room I walked slowly inside, afraid of what I would see. My sister was sitting up in bed watching television and mom was sitting in the chair eating lunch. My mom burst into tears when she spotted me. I ran over and gave her a huge hug. I said not to cry and that I had presents. I emptied the entire contents of my sack onto Nina's bed. Each of them picked up a crane and asked what it was. I demonstrated by picking one up and teaching them how to move its wings.

Mom could barely form words she was so astonished. She asked me if I had made them all and I could only nod. She hugged me and said that I was amazing. All of a sudden the waterfalls broke free and I hid my face in her shirt. "Please mommy, come home tonight."

"I would if I could, Sweetheart; but I have to stay here and make sure Nina's okay. I promise you, I will sleep with a crane next to me every night and think of you every day." As I pulled away from her embrace I saw there were tears streaking her face too. I gave her a final squeeze and gave my sister one too. Then, dad took my hand and led me out of the room. I stole a final glance back and saw Nina admiring the baby blue crane I had made especially for her. I left the hospital with a smile on my face knowing I had made her happy.

A month later my sister came home happy and lively again. The first thing she said when she walked in the room was "Look! I still have my crane!" She opened her hand and handed me the precious blue crane. It was a little worn from all the times she had made it fly. She also handed me a bunch of cards from the kids at the hospital thanking me for the gifts of cranes and animals.

The crane is truly a sacred bird in Japan and in my eyes. The Japanese believe by folding a thousand cranes a wish will be granted.

My wish came true without folding a thousand. Sharing my love of origami with my sister and the hospitalized children made many wishes come true, for a lot of those children went home shortly after receiving the crane.

I continue to this day in sharing my love of origami with the people around me. I give the gift of a crane and the tale of its legend knowing that wishes do come true.

The essence of life through Japanese culture

Sandy Hernandez (Stony Brook University)

The essence and beauty of life are two elements that are exceptionally difficult to grasp. For my entire young adult life, I have been seeking a way of life, or a set of values, that would provide me with the insight and perseverance necessary for success and peace of mind. I believe that the Japanese people have been able to capture this elusive essence of life through their well-structured culture. Japanese culture is founded on the three main religions of Japan; Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, which work together in harmony to provide the skeleton that holds up Japanese society together.

Before going into the impact Japanese culture has had on me, I would like to speak about the aspect of Japan that first caught my attention; its language. The Japanese language has held my interest captive since my high school years when I was introduced to it by watching Japanese animation (anime). I was originally attracted by its simple and elegant rhythmic style, and by its beautifully structured writing styles; Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. Upon entering college, I immediately enrolled in a Japanese language course, from which my appreciation for Japanese grew even more. Although I acknowledge that I lack the proficiency of a native speaker, I am able to see clear fundamental differences between the Japanese language and Western languages such as English and Spanish. These fundamental differences stem from the difference between Western and Eastern cultures and beliefs. More specifically, the Japanese culture values the simplicity and the concepts of intuitive thinking (as opposed to logical thinking). These two ideals can be seen in Japanese colloquial dialogue and in the sentence syntax that provides the reader with the information necessary to deliver the intended message, while simultaneously using as few words as possible to avoid redundancy. These attributes in the Japanese language cannot be attributed to pure coincidence because they can be explained by the cultural beliefs and ideals held in Japan.

Zen Buddhism is a school of Buddhism that is centered on the idea of achieving satori (enlightenment) through zazen (quiet meditation). Buddhism provides a way of life that detaches us from our egos and from the rest of the world, thus, allowing us to carry on with daily activities without over-analyzing our actions. This notion of the intuitive mind ties in with the concept of Mushin no Shin (“mind of no mind”), which advises us not to think about our actions in an analytical way, but rather to act intuitively in order to lose the duality between us and the rest of the world. The idea of Mushin no Shin has been critical in my pursuit of knowledge wherever I seek it, whether it be in the sciences or life itself, because it allows me to reach the underlying truth of things, no matter how painful the truth may be.

Although I acknowledge that I have not mastered the skill of detachment, I feel that adopting that sort of mentality has allowed me to attain the insight and intuition necessary to excel in my engineering courses. Practicing these ideals has allowed me to avoid stressing over minor details in tasks delegated to me in school and at work, thus, allowing me to focus on the fundamentals of the task at hand. Essentially, one has to become one with the task to avoid duality, clear one’s mind, and to react naturally to one’s surroundings. This concept of detachment and loss of duality can be seen with the samurai, who have to go beyond the level of skillfulness to truly master the art of the samurai. Avoiding duality and becoming one with his opponent allows the samurai to clear his mind and to act only on instinct. This “intuitive mind” approach has helped me improve several areas of my life, including my academic success, my physical fitness, and relationship with others.

Another element of Zen Buddhism that has provided me with crucial insight into how view life is the idea that only by humbling ourselves can we continue to grow in any type of discipline. Humbling ourselves is an important step in gaining more knowledge, insight, and experience because we need to empty our tea cup in order to allow our teachers to pour more tea into it. I am able to apply this principle in my practice of Shotokan Karate because no matter how strong and skillful I become, I know that I can still learn much more from my Sensei. Alternatively, by holding on to our egos and our accomplishments, we limit ourselves from growing further because our tea cup is essentially filled to the top and our teachers cannot provide us with more tea. The concept of reverence to our superiors has helped me acknowledge the fact that humbling myself can help me improve in any area of my life. Once we let go of our egos, we also lose the fear of failure, in effect, allowing us to knock down the barriers that often impede us from achieving our maximum potential. This way of thinking connects to the way the samurai viewed their lives;

they needed to be ready to die at any moment (i.e. accept that death might come), and at the same time they needed continue fighting to protect others. The resolve to continue to hone my skills, no matter how skillful I become and without the fear of failing, is the source of my academic success and my peace of mind.

Another aspect of Japanese culture that has made a great impression in my view of life is the importance of *kokoro* (heart and soul). After having read the influential Japanese novel *Kokoro*, by Natsume Soseki, I have learned that no one can see within the true heart of another person. Therefore, one should follow the feelings and intentions that lie deep within one's heart regardless of the opinions of others. Confucianism teaches us that a big person follows their heart. In the past, I was reluctant to try out new and foreign activities because people around me discouraged me from initiating them, claiming that they were too difficult and impractical. However, in my heart, I felt that practicing these activities would build my character and would bring enjoyment to me. Such activities included studying Japanese, and practicing Shotokan Karate, among others. However, it was not until I was introduced to the fundamentals of Japanese culture and way of viewing life that I realized that I needed to follow my heart, and that my actions and ideals should not be mandated by the opinions of others, but instead by what I consider important.

I have gained great inspiration from the way the Japanese people appreciate nature and all things that are beautiful and simple. The ideas of *wabi* (poverty) and *sabi* (loneliness) come together with the Japanese respect toward nature because one must learn to humble oneself in order to become one with nature. Things in nature are much more beautiful than manmade materials because things in nature possess the element of simplicity. Simplicity in art and in nature is seen as beautiful in Japanese culture because it allows for a more intimate and intuitive connection as compared to intricate art pieces that tend to remove the sense of wonder and awe that goes hand in hand with simplicity. Simplicity is also seen in Japanese literature through the elegant and powerful messages written in haikus.

The tea ceremony is a way in which Japanese people practice harmony with nature because this ceremony exemplifies four key elements; harmony, reverence, purity, and tranquility. Harmony with nature and others plays a crucial role in providing us with the peace of mind that helps us detach from ourselves and others and become one with nature. As mentioned before, reverence and mindfulness are essential for maintaining our motivation high in order to propel us to achieve greater levels of skill and intuition. The purity and tranquility of the mind and soul is essential for the mastering of *Mushin no Shin* and harmony with nature because only through quiet meditation can we achieve detachment from our egos. I am able to use these principles of the tea ceremony when performing in many areas of my life, such as when playing the ancient board game of Go. When playing Go, one must be able to clear one's mind to think critically in crucial moments. Tranquility and patience also play significant roles in playing Go because one must build insight into subsequent moves by the opponent. This insight only comes through practice and discipline.

I believe that learning about Japanese culture has helped me become a more disciplined and focused person in all aspects of my life. Regardless of my current success, I acknowledge that I need to continue improving and humbling myself with the same resolve and zeal in order to attain higher levels of achievement. These higher levels of achievement include becoming a successful professional engineer, and continuing to improve my proficiency in the Japanese language.

Stillness of the Lake: Embracing Bushido and Finding Clarity

Stephen Lanuto Jr. (City University of New York/City College of New York)

“In any case, as human beings, it is essential for each of us to cultivate and polish our individual path.” – Musashi Miyamoto¹

There are so many things any person could be drawn to when they think of Japan: the beauty of the cherry blossoms in full bloom, the Shinto and Buddhist temples that permeate across the spanning landscapes, even the neon lights and intense rush of Tokyo night life. For me, it was the image of the samurai that made Japan the focus of my passion; the Samurai were great warriors who lived by the code of Bushido, principles that guided them on the battlefield and nourished their minds, bodies and spirits. The Samurai image provided me with a beacon to help me find my way toward a regained sense of clarity and the burning spirit to work diligently as I pursue my goals.

In my youth, I endured several hardships, including a battle with Leukemia; as I grew into my teens, I found coping with the pain of those events too much to do on my own and felt hopelessly lost; emotionally as well as spiritually. For a time, I trudged through a state of perpetual blindness; my heart weighed down with sorrow, frustration, resentment and a deep seeded longing to find a piece of serenity, however small, to call my own. It was when I began to read of the Way of the Samurai and read Yoshikawa Eiji’s *Musashi* that I became more interested in the legendary samurai warrior and the code of Bushido. Even in the face of adversity, battling against one opponent or one hundred opponents, knowing that their death could be one breath away; Samurai faced death with stillness, like the untouched surface of a lake. Musashi Miyamoto was famous for fighting over sixty duels in his lifetime and after retiring from dueling, he became a poet, painter, calligrapher, writer, and even a gardener and carpenter. Here was a man who faced death on numerous occasions and was still able to create great and beautiful things.

Studying Bushido further, there were principles and ideals that resonated, giving me a renewed sense of strength and hope. It was not enough that a samurai become one with his sword but he also must view all things with clarity and honesty “You cannot judge whether one is good or evil by noting whether he is prosperous or not. Rise and fall is a matter of the Way of Heaven. Good and evil is the Way of Man.”² To see a person beyond how much wealth they possess, is a skill that can steer one from making ill-conceived misapprehensions and can even protect one from danger.

In the *Hagakure*, or *The Book of the Samurai*, there is an adage that states “The essentials of speaking are in not speaking at all. If you think that you can finish something without speaking, finish it without saying a single word.”³ Each of us have had personal experiences such as this in form or another; how often do we meet people in our lives who do nothing but talk about the things they will do yet end up doing nothing? Whatever the task may be, simply doing the task is what gains results.

In the same vein of propriety of speech, the *Ideals of the Samurai* states “One should not tell a lie, no matter to whom he is speaking or how little is said...If one tells a lie, it will become a habit, and in the end he will be forsaken by others.”⁴ This is a well-conceived example of the Samurai’s mind; to focus on the task at hand and to be aware of the possible end result, both negative and positive.

“Although there are a hundred kinds of stances, they all exist for the same purpose: to defeat the opponent.”⁵ These words are attributed to Munenori Yagyu, a supposed rival of Musashi Miyamoto; while written in a martial context, it has a beauty that comes from the ability to transcend its original intention. Just as there are one hundred stances to defeat an opponent, there are one hundred ways to complete any given task, the point is to complete the task. One could also find that while only one way is needed to defeat an opponent, whose to say that one cannot choose a stance that is best suited to claim victory. Furthermore, using the same stance or method continuously leads to predictability and laziness.

Throughout my life, I have encountered a consistent stream of inconsistency when it comes to how a person interacts with their family, friends, co-workers and even lovers; each individual has their own ideas of what constitutes friendship and honesty. Within the Samurai code I found ethics that remain uncompromising and at times they did not sit well with people who were once close to me, but my

conscience remains clear. One such principle comes from the samurai Ryoshun Imagawa “It is forbidden to have contempt for wise retainers and prefer flatters, and to have one’s actions be influenced by these conditions.”⁶ Those who are true to you will tell you what needs to be heard, not what makes you happy at the moment; when any person can tell you what you want to hear, you are in compromised position. Such an ideal is not meant for the faint-hearted, one must be disciplined enough to accept the assessment given, whether in favor or not in favor of what we want to hear; this must also extend to every person we come across, not just master and retainer. Honesty and sincerity are hallmarks not only of the Samurai, but of other Asian cultures as well, to speak honestly and sincerely is a sign that one cares. Honesty, perseverance, discipline, and loyalty are intertwined virtues that the Samurai embrace and yet are dismissed by the popularized image of the Tate and the act of Seppuku.

Now, one could argue that these texts and my vision of the Samurai are highly idealized and for all intents and purposes that could be true but why should it matter? The fact is, is that all works that deal with human interaction, from both the east and the west, is highly idealized, no treatise ever created can deal with every personality on an individual basis. When it comes to Bushido, however, it demands the very best of the person: physically, spiritually, mentally and socially, and it will not except anything less; we live in a age and society where any kind of decision is made on a whim: judging a person on their appearance, getting married, having an affair, fathering children irresponsibly, neglecting the duties we are responsible for, even making friendships and getting involved in romances for immediate gratification.

It would be great if people could take such principles into their heart and make better decisions, to not cheat on a spouse because things are not rosy, to not bring a child into the world and leave it uncared for, and to not let “I don’t feel like it” be the response to every request, a cyclical mantra. However, I do recognize that not everyone is built with strong constitutions and are either unable or unwilling to remove their egos from any given situation; but such a code of ethics can also strengthen the areas where a person is deficient. For the Samurai, this clarity is often attributed to the incorporation of Zen Buddhism into their lives, taking Buddhism into one’s heart is not a requirement, any strong instillment of faith can produce the same effect; the essential foundation of Bushido is a careful fusing of martial training and spiritual development.

There are no Samurai in this world as we know them, they do not fight for their Daimyo and die in the name of their lords. All we have are films, pictures and books of how the Samurai supposedly lived. But I believe the Samurai spirit is eternal, though it changes and goes by different names in different languages and yet its essence remains unaltered; like the ripples on the surface of a lake, each ripple is different but beneath the ripples, the still waters are the same.

If a person could do these things in one lifetime: show loyalty and devotion to their friends and loved ones, endure hardship and pain with perseverance and courage, perform their duties well, pursue self-improvement through honest critique and serve others with care; then when they come to the end of their lives, they would have lived closest to the way of the Samurai and are worthy of remembrance and honor. That is the life I aspire to achieve and when my time in this world is at its end, I will have no shame when I leave.

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5. Yagyū, Munenori, *The Life-Giving Sword: Secret Teachings from the House of the Shogun*, New York, Kodansha International, 2003, p.97
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The Star Festival

Shelby Lin (Ward Melville High School)

My mother lived only the first years of her life in Japan before her parents moved to Hawaii, and she and her brothers spent their childhood in the United States. Years later, when their children had children of their own, my grandparents moved back to the same wooden house in Tokyo that they had built decades before. They had gone to sell that house but months became years, and they never left.

We visited them there two summers ago. It was my first time in Japan and the breath of culture and heritage we encountered shocked me. We arrived the week of Tanabata, the Japanese star festival, and the sidewalks of their Sugamo neighborhood were adorned with colored strips of paper and folded cranes. My grandmother met us at Tokyo International Airport and as we walked along crowded sidewalks she explained the meaning behind the tanzaku that hung from bamboo stalks.

“You write wishes on the backs of the paper, then hang them on the trees,” she said, laughing a little as I stopped to read one before realizing it was written in beautiful little characters I could not understand. My grandmother had always been healthy for her age, but it had been a couple of years since I had last seen her and I’d not noticed before how slowly we had to walk for her to keep up. I was taller than her now as well, by a combination of my growth and her rounded back.

“Wishes?” I asked, fingering them and wishing I could know what these people hoped for. We passed modern apartments and tiny white houses set along straight narrow streets in precise lines. The feeling was so orderly that when we came upon their house it was a shock. The lawn was an overgrown mess of grass and bushes, adding a wild feeling to the beautiful wooden house.

My grandfather, eighty years old at the time, was sitting outside on a wooden stool when we arrived. I could barely remember the last time I had seen him, which was about a decade before. He leaned over a cane when he walked, and spent much of his time gazing off in silence. My mother treated him like a fragile object and we followed his example. I wasn’t sure what to say to him then, though I wish now that I had asked him what his Tanabata wish was.

We spent ten days in Japan, during which I spent each day with my grandparents and saw more of the half of my heritage that I had been missing. I felt regret in my chest each time I heard Japanese being spoken, but most especially when it came from my mother’s mouth. She’d never tried to teach it to us and after that visit I wished she had. Japan was so different, so exciting and beautiful, that I decided that I would return in the future.

That day in Tokyo, I looked at those tanzaku slips and wished that I could read them and write my own in those beautiful little characters. I began taking Japanese lessons the month after we came home. The next year, my grandfather passed away in his house with my grandmother seated beside him. She moved to California to live with one of her sons, and their house in Tokyo eventually burned down, but I have the feeling that a part of her still lives there.

I still plan to live in Japan one day, hopefully for a year after college to teach English or work as an interpreter. Japan, the homeland of my mother and my ancestors, represents an unknown part of who I am, a part that I will one day explore.

**Selected Essays
from
Fifth Competition
(2009-2010)**

A World Apart

Gen Ishikawa (Syosset High School)

I can clearly remember before every trip that my family and I have made to Japan, that I would always dread the 15 hour plane ride from New York to Narita International Airport that awaited me. Ever since my grandparents had become too elderly to travel to the States, my family and I had decided to travel to Japan instead. My parents believed that a trip to Japan would be beneficial in that it would make my grandparents lives a bit easier, and I would also be able to “catch up” on my Japanese heritage. This was because; my parents are strict about preserving my identity as a Japanese individual. Although I did consider myself American, I believed without doubt that I knew about Japanese culture equally as well. I reassured my parents, “Mom, dad, I know enough about Japanese culture, I mean come on, I am Japanese! What could I possibly not know?” But, when they began to question me about simple Japanese values, beliefs, and culture, I had not a single clue. This put me on the same level as the kids that I despised who believed that Japan was nothing more than sushi and Sony electronics. I was disappointed in my hypocritical self, and at that point, I began to develop a desire to learn more about Japanese culture. I viewed going to Japan as an opportunity. An opportunity that allowed me to realize the “culture shock” between my life in America, and a life in Japan.

The second I set foot in Japan, I realized that I was in a place world apart from America. We lived in Kami-Itabashi, Tokyo, a town right outside of Ikebukuro, Tokyo. The most noticeable difference that stood out most to me at first was the environment. There was no grass to be seen for miles, vending machines that dispensed cigarettes, and game centers on nearly every single block. I soon realized that I was getting strange looks from people, as if they were ostracizing me from Japan, and placing me as a “gaijin” or an outsider. My parents then explained to me that what you wear in public is a very important aspect of life in Japan. I asked, “What’s wrong about shorts and a t-shirt?” but as I looked around, despite the fact that it was nearly 100 degrees outside, there was not a single person wearing shorts. Rather, everyone was well over dressed in jeans and suits. I could not get myself to comprehend this as in America; it is socially acceptable to do so. I could not believe that this was the case in Japan, and I finally began to acquire a taste of how different the culture in Japan was from what I knew.

However, the culture shocks that impacted me the most were the ones that dealt with human relations. An experience that I will never forget was when I was walking the streets of Shinjuku, and I realized that there was not a single piece of litter to be seen on the streets. When I accidentally dropped a hi-chew wrapper, someone around me picked it up for me! I was truly astonished as this was something that would never happen in New York, something unimaginable. However, what allowed this to happen was the Japanese belief in respecting the individuals around you. I further realized the extent of this virtue when my parents explained to me that you couldn’t cause a raucous within your household as your neighbor’s house is within a few feet. A loud disturbance within your household would be likely cause a disturbance for your neighbor as well, which would be a selfish act. Japanese people live their day-to-day lives thinking not only about themselves, but for others as well. A virtue that does not exist as strongly in America as it does in Japan. Thinking about others, or placing them before you is an important virtue that should be embraced not only in Japan but throughout the entire world as well. With this in mind, I was able to bring it back to America where I began a new life. A life that is “a world apart”, different from my previous, where all that used to matter to me was myself. Not only have my trips to Japan allowed me to gain a better understanding of my culture, but the virtues that I did not realize before have helped me to become better as a person.

Journey to a Japanese Family

Ethan Hamilton (Horace Mann High School)

I may not remember any other “firsts,” those landmark accomplishments parents keep track of. But I do remember one – my first favorite book. It was “Grandfather’s Journey” by Allen Say. Maybe it was the beautiful illustrations, or maybe it was that my own beloved Grandpa always added in some personal anecdotes, but this autobiographical story was the beginning of my own parallel journey to Japan.

Almost everything in my room has relevance to Japan. From the reproductions of Ukiyoe prints or the Japanese style Buddha to the Domo-kun piggybank, I’ve assembled artifacts of Japanese culture through careful purchases. Suddenly I sip my Oi-Ocha and snap back to the present. I was lost in my own little Japan again. While other kids dream of becoming rock or sports stars, my own fantasies center on connecting with a culture that I believe epitomizes both aesthetic and spiritual beauty. In addition to reading that first story about Japan to me, my Grandfather introduced me to his own Japanese treasures. Grandpa shared his books about Hokusai and Hiroshige and later read to me about the Showa, Edo and Meiji periods. Perhaps my favorite among his treasures was his teapot collection, which somehow survived my enthusiastic handling.

My Grandfather, however, couldn’t have grown up further from Japan. A first generation Jewish kid from the Bronx, he enlisted in the army as soon as he was old enough after WWII broke out. Never having been out of New York, he was shipped overseas once his training was complete. By the time he arrived in Japan, the war was finally over. Grandpa was astonished not only by the hideous devastation resulting from the war but also, by complete culture shock. He explained how being in Japan changed the way he looked at everything. So much so in fact, that he came to feel more at home abroad than he had back in NY. He illustrated his stories with gifts – a ceramic Buddha he’d fallen in love with and bought with his soldier’s salary. A cinnabar box upon which my fingers have traced and retraced the carved cherry blossoms. I came to understand why Grandpa had selected “Grandfather’s Journey” for me. It was striking how it was almost the inverse of Grandpa’s own journey.

We continued to explore Japan as much as possible from home. This bond between us never felt complete without an actual trip to our spiritual homeland. I’d been studying Japanese in school and had completed my Bar-Mitzvah into adulthood. Grandpa began to plan meticulously and we debated our itinerary passionately. Should we focus on Tokyo and be thorough or spread our precious days across the country thereby having only a brief visit in each place? Because Grandpa and I both had medical problems – and because neither of us ever did anything lightly – we settled on an intensive visit to Tokyo. From our first lunch at a noisy noodle shop (soba for me, udon for Grandpa) to the shrine of the 47 Ronin, there was nothing that appealed to only one of us. Together we drew fortunes at Asakusa and Grandpa, remembering a long-ago visit, showed me how to light an incense offering. It was certainly the trip of a lifetime and perhaps you can tell by now that it ended very sadly. Despite great effort, Grandpa’s heart, always brimming with love, could last no longer. I made the trip home alone.

Thus it was with mixed emotion that I signed up for a homestay in suburban Tokyo last summer. Once the Nakahamas picked me up, it was easy to fall in with the rhythms of their lives. At last I had two brothers and between visiting Hiroaki’s school, playing PS2 for hours, or just joining in with the family’s Sunday barbecue, I had much to distract me from my bittersweet memories. One weekend, the Nakahamas planned a journey to Kamakura and along the way, we enjoyed eating at a decades-old family-run noodle house. Unlike the lunchtime restaurant Grandpa had taken me to in Tokyo, it was a quiet place where we sat at tables instead of at a counter. In a way, I now feel as though I have my own family in Japan. Still, however, I dream of making another journey when my Japanese is fluent and my brothers and I can laugh at my awkwardness when we first met. Above all, as I strive to accomplish this goal, I will always try to make Grandpa proud.

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What Japan means to me

Sarah Lam (Bronx High School of Science)

Japan. This is the one word that would ring like a bell in my head. At a very young age, I had admired Japanese artwork – mainly animation and manga. The artwork was beyond what I had ever seen in my life. The drawings differed for different animation and manga. The eyes, hairstyle, and clothing- the style of each artwork varied. At this moment, my life revolved around Japan.

I remembered the first time I saw Japanese artwork was during my 2nd year in grade school. At this time, I had no friends, no companions; all I had were bullies, people who disliked me just from my very presence. I remembered how no one would help me, how the teachers believed that these “bullies” would never do such a thing, and how many people who saw my suffering stood idle, done nothing but watched. I could not dare tell my family of such a situation, did not want them to worry, did not want them to be sad, and most importantly, I did not want to see their disappointed faces. It was here and then that I was introduced to animation and manga by my one and only brother. While watching these animations and reading these manga, it shocked me to read and watch of such a plot. I laughed, cried, rejoiced, and even had bitter resentment towards different scenes that were portrayed. I thought, “How very amusing. I wish I can draw like that. Even if I can’t draw, I want to try to write a story similar to this”. During the time I faced harassment and felt that maybe it would have been better if I wasn’t here, if I wasn’t alive, then maybe everyone else would be happy, it was Japan that rejuvenated me. It made me realize that life was harsh and that nothing can always be the way you want it to be. Just like Koyama Mitsuki, a character in “Full moon o sagashiteru”, although her lover and both her parents deceased, and although she had a tumor, she struggled to the very last minute to continue living. It told me that life is very precious and that you can’t give up so easily. It told me to “Live. Strive for the people who love you and don’t you ever give up”. Japanese artwork acted as remedy to my suffering by allowing me to be “me”. It gave me courage to face my problems head on. It told me “ganbatte” which means “do your best” in Japanese.

Soon after, I learned about Japanese food, the language, and their history. The more I studied, the more in love I was in with Japan. It fascinated me when I learned that the very drawings I fell in love with was based off of Western aspects. It thrilled me to know that Japan was such a flexible country. They bend to various religions, and countries. I had a teacher who once told me that Japan was a great country. They adapted to different situations that allowed the Japanese to prosper. During the world war, Japan faced a terrible crisis which was the possibility of being overrun. The Japanese prevented this from occurring by taking in other countries beneficial aspects. They took Britain’s navy skills, and took Germany’s military system which allowed the Germans to have a superior military. What surprised me even more was the Japanese language. Hiragana, katakana, and kanji – many characters were based off of Chinese letters. I tried not to get confused between Chinese and Japanese but it acted like a tongue-twister. The more I thought, the more confused I got but I couldn’t get enough of it. I wanted to know more, learn more about Japan and how it became the way it is today.

Studying Japanese history encouraged me to try visiting Japan at least once. Recently I found a scholarship program that allowed high school students to travel to Japan and live with a host family during the summer to experience Japan firsthand. I was thrilled to go however all my efforts were put aside and labeled void by my parents. However I haven’t given up hope yet. I still study Japanese language, and continue learning about their religion and history. If I get a little tired, a little angry, or a little upset, I listen to Japanese music, watch Japanese animation or read manga to sooth myself. If I feel like I giving up, I tell myself the magic word – ganbatte.

Shotokan: A Way of Life

Elizabeth D Kaufman (Stony Brook University)

“What, are you too afraid to look at me or something?” That was the question she posed as the others once again ganged up to watch. I never knew why I couldn’t. It was just a fact. I couldn’t look people in the eye.

Then, she hit me. Every day of elementary school was the same.

I never knew for sure, until recently, why I just couldn’t fit in as a child. The other kids dubbed me the class freak. I played alone. I couldn’t make friends. I didn’t understand jokes and I just didn’t “get” what other people were talking about. I could hear things the other kids couldn’t. Not voices- things like light bulbs and television sets buzzing, along with high pitched tones. That drove me nuts. More than anything else, it drove me crazy how I couldn’t look most people in the eye.

The school, during my early years in the education system, thought I might be a little “slow.” After getting past the second grade, however, they changed their mind and decided I was very intelligent. No matter how smart they felt I was and no matter how many awards I received or what talents I had, the other children wanted nothing to do with me.

Years inevitably passed and, while my peers opinions of me weren’t as big an issue, I still felt misplaced and bullied. Pokémon became a means of escape from the world I seemed to be bound to. Arriving in America, in 1998, Pokémon, a Japanese cartoon, card gaming and video gaming series, took the country by storm. Cards, toys, a television show and a plethora of accessories stocked toy stores. Drawn to the animation, distinct from American cartoons, I was curious about the mannerisms of the characters, but most of all by bowing.

I saved money from working around the neighborhood and earned enough to buy the cards, a game boy and a Pokémon game. The main character, Ash, didn’t fit in with the others, but had the same goals. It just took him longer to reach them. This was a prominent theme in many other anime (Japanese Animation) shows that I have come to watch. The more I watched anime, the more I felt connected with characters that were just as clumsy and out of place as I was. More than that, however, anime I watched sparked my curiosity about other aspects of Japanese culture.

Everything from food to manners intrigued me. How the Japanese could live in such tiny apartments in order to share space with others was difficult for me to grasp, looking around me in America. It baffled me (and still does) that Americans complain if they touch other people on public transportation or if they cannot sit, and how we bump into others upon exit, not apologizing, while the Japanese shout “sumimasen (sorry!)!” and bow as they wiggle their way out of an over packed train car. I couldn’t get enough information.

I suppose that my thirst for knowledge inspired me to take up the martial arts. Partly because of the desire to defend myself against the bullies I faced and partly because of its mystery. Movies like The Karate Kid promoted martial arts as a means of turning one’s life around. Also, the moves were “cool.” But above all, bowing still intrigued me. I couldn’t figure out why people bowed to one another or what the true history of it was. I decided I wanted to learn for myself.

It was a hot Las Vegas afternoon when I stepped foot into what would become my dojo. The windows facing west, I was blinded by the setting desert sun. When my vision was restored, I found myself in a very simple, open setting. Immediate to the entrance were chairs, couches, a coffee table with some Shotokan magazines and pamphlets written in the mysterious characters I knew to be of the Japanese language. Bamboo plants were nestled between the L-shaped couches. Black furniture made of wood and white surroundings set the tone. Traditional Japanese lantern-shaped light fixtures enveloped the area as the sun sunk lower. It was peaceful.

For a moment, I lost myself. It was refreshing listening to the trickling of the small fountain next to the tall bamboo plant that I missed upon entering. The door jingled as it was opened and the students began to arrive. Sensei appeared from the back and introduced himself with a bow. Clumsily, I bowed back.

“Do you know what a bow is?” I stared at him. “A proper bow,” he continued, “is showing respect. It is also showing the other person that you trust them. You look down when bowing, back straight. You look the person in the eye during Kumite (sparring). Respect must be shown at all times. Do you understand?” His voice grew louder upon reaching those last words. Suddenly, out of nowhere, all the students yelled “Osu!” and bowed perfectly, looking down.

It became clear to me why the characters bowed in anime. Unlike the characters in the anime, though, while I could learn to bow, I didn’t progress as quickly in karate. Sensei asked me to come before class and stay until after class. We didn’t practice kicking bags or punching. Without knowing it, sensei gave me tools to control the things that hindered me outside the dojo.

Meditation was one of those tools. Something as simple as breathing, he taught me, could be the foundation for everything else one did. In and out. No thoughts. In and out. Clear head. I learned to use this skill before kumite, before performing kata (forms), while getting frustrated in school and when I felt I was about to lose my cool anywhere outside the dojo. Over time, I was impressed- meditation, done both in the morning and evening, really did help get my thoughts under control. I felt better.

I was soon looking at karate as more than just an Olympic sport. It was true that I did enjoy being a national competitor after a few years of practice, but I couldn’t have become that if I didn’t live karate as a lifestyle. Sensei taught us about Japan and the people who lived there. We would go as a group to Japanese restaurants and learned about Japanese food. We would live treating all people as beings that were equal to ourselves. I came to learn some of his teachings as elements of Buddhism, which I later studied in college. I began to live life in this manner; helping others became important. So did reducing the complications in my life. Feeling inspired, I began to participate in helping my community and “being the bigger person” as they say in America.

Slowly, but surely, I was beginning to gain confidence. I became stronger not only physically, but mentally. For someone who was a complete outcast, this was greatly beneficial. Most importantly, my sensei taught me the skill that truly changed my life forever- sensei taught me how to look people in the eye.

Why this is such a big deal to me can be hard for others to understand. Until recently, I had no way to describe my difficulties. I felt uncomfortable looking people in the eye and being around them. I panicked when things got slightly tense. I had no hand eye coordination and did not enjoy daily life. I hid from the world. The word I was looking for was “Asperger’s.” While I was diagnosed with everything else under the sun, Asperger’s Syndrome, a form of autism, is now something that a doctor says we should explore. They don’t have a cure, but they have a name.

My sensei made me look at people in the eye for periods of time. He had told me he “just knew” I needed the help. Doing those drills while taking hits made me more uncomfortable than anything I had ever done, including getting knocked out, but I couldn’t be more grateful.

I have chosen to study psychology and Asian American Studies, along with Japanese these past four years. Though I’m not sure where I’m headed, I’ve enjoyed taking psychology courses, learning about myself, and studying Japanese culture, which I fell in love with. Since karate and studying ways of Japanese life has helped me so greatly, I intend on giving back to my community. I would love very much to found a karate program for autistic children.

Regardless of what I do, the skills I have gained have made me who I am today. I can meditate when my senses are overwhelmed, have self-control and have the confidence that I can learn to overcome anything. I believe this to be the result of my training and the confidence I developed by living that life. I truly love Japanese aesthetics. I am confident karate and the Japanese spirit within it changed who I am for good. So confident, I can look you in the eye and say so.

**Selected Essays
from
Sixth Competition
(2010-2011)**

Imagine All the People

Jessica Goldman (North Shore Hebrew Academy)

It doesn't look like a tree, I thought as I stared through the thick museum glass at the black ashy figure. Once upon a time, this tree stood tall and dignified; it withstood wind and storms. But this tree became a symbol of unspeakable violence. The war destroyed the innocent tree, along with the rest of the city of Nagasaki.

I walked down the hallway of the Atomic Bomb Museum in Nagasaki, Japan to find a room full of televisions. I sat down and watched a woman share her first-hand testimony of August 9th, 1945.

"We couldn't just leave all the bodies there," the woman spoke. "It was a pile of corpses down the street, so my mother and I piled them up to cremate them. Just as we were about to light the match," terror brimmed in her pupils, "one man in the pile started yelling as hard as he could: don't burn me! I'm still alive."¹

I trembled in my 16 year-old spoiled American body.

I learned about the atomic bomb in ninth grade. I learned that the United States invented it. I learned that Truman dropped it. I even learned about the political motives; however, I never learned about the personal stories of ruined lives or extent of human suffering. "A few days after the bombing," the survivor continued, "my mother found something on the floor in the kitchen." Streams of tears ran down her cheeks as well as my own, "It was my brother's skull, just sitting there in the kitchen."² While listening to her harrowing story, it paralleled in my mind to the other mass killing that I've been taught about throughout my life—the Holocaust. Raised in a Jewish home, my grandparents have constantly told me about the pain of growing up in Eastern Europe in the 1940s.

A couple of weeks after my trip to Japan, I met a man named Makoto Otsuka. Just the sight of him was unusual: a Japanese man wearing a yarmulke and speaking fluent Hebrew. He told me about his trip to Amsterdam many years ago where he coincidentally met Anne Frank's father, Otto Frank, who opened his eyes to the tragic genocide. Before that moment Otsuka knew virtually nothing of the Holocaust or the six million Jewish people who had perished. From that day on, Otsuka dedicated his existence to the commemoration of the Holocaust. He opened the first and only Holocaust Education Center in Japan. While speaking with him, I realized the sensitivity he had for the Holocaust as a result of his own difficult life growing up in Japan during World War II. Each of these catastrophes was a result of unconscionable hatred. Mr. Otsuka passionately challenges this attitude with his philosophy of tolerance, "Just as you can hate for no reason, you can love for no reason."³

While it is my responsibility to remember the atrocities of the Holocaust and uphold the legacy of my people, it is equally important for me to educate myself and connect to the histories and suffering of those people around the world with whom I do not share an ancestral connection. As a global citizen, there is no bond stronger than the *human* connection.

I remember walking outside of the museum in Nagasaki. I was incredibly moved by a display of thousands of paper cranes, a symbol of longevity and peace in Japanese culture inspired by a twelve year-old girl named Sadako Sasaki. Sadako developed leukemia as a result of the radiation from the atomic bombing. While sick, her goal was to create 1000 paper cranes because there is a Japanese saying that one who folds 1000 cranes is granted a wish. Sadako only lived to fold 644 paper cranes.⁴ However, Sadako's legacy lives on through displays of paper cranes throughout Japan. There is even a peace park with a statue of Sadako in Seattle, Washington. Paper cranes threaded on long strings are draped over the memorial.⁵

Outside the museum, ground zero was surrounded with beautiful, vibrant trees. They stood tall in the face of combat. *The trees grew back after the devastation*, I thought, *but the lives that were taken by the hands of war will be tragically lost forever*. I continued walking only to discover a plaque etched with the lyrics of a John Lennon song, "Imagine all the people, living life in peace."

I can imagine it.

John Lennon imagined it.

Sadako Sasaki imagined it.
Makoto Otsuka imagines it.
And it is a beautiful wish.

Notes:

1. "Narratives of A-bomb Experience." Video Room. Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. 20 Sep 2010.
2. Ibid.
3. Otsuka, Makato. Personal Interview. 8 Nov 2010.
4. "United Nations: On the wings of paper cranes, UN staffers aim to spread message of peace." M2 Presswire 9 August 2010 ProQuest Newsstand, ProQuest. Web. 30 Dec. 2010.
5. "Peace Park." Seattle Park and Recreation Web. 30 Dec 2010.
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Japan--An Own World of Peace

Spencer Kirsch (Lynbrook Senior High School)

After crawling into the teahouse with the twenty-five other students from my introductory Japanese class, I was respectfully asked to sit on the ground, with my knees on the floor, hands on my thighs, and to wait for the grandmaster to serve me the *usucha*, or Japanese tea. With a bow, I was first in line to receive the rather bland-looking liquid served in a ceramic bowl. As soon as I took my first gulp, I had the urge to push the bowl away and say “no thank you.” However, as the grandmaster of the ceremony treated me with the upmost respect, I felt obligated to act in the same manner and drank it willingly. An enlightening smile took life on the grandmaster’s face when he saw me accept his gift. The *chado*, or tea ceremony, is just one way the Japanese people emphasize their way of life, often characterized by four general principles; *kei* (respect), *wa* (harmony), *sei* (purity) and *jaku* (tranquility). Although I do not carry any Japanese descent, I, like the people of Japan, have been taught to incorporate these same ideas while communicating with others.

The grandmaster’s smile that resulted from everyone finishing his or her tea revealed the importance of respect in the Japanese culture. *Kei* (respect) relies on the notion that it is achieved through sincere thoughts and gentle words. Though all are equal in the tearoom (represented by every person, no matter rank or wealth, crawling through the doorway), the practice of bowing and the ritual of turning the utensils help to foster respect and minimize potential for conflict. The hospitality of the grandmaster and the caring of the guests for one another aids in promoting this principle. *Wa* (harmony) corresponds to the harmony between people and also refers to the relationship people have with nature. Greeted with a beautiful garden directly after crawling into the teahouse, one is expected to feel a special connection with and appreciation for all nature that exists in the world. *Sei* (purity) represents orderliness and cleanliness, both spiritually and physically. The host of the ceremony cleans all utensils and the tearoom itself before they are used, also cleaning his spirit. Through calm insight, it is thought that the true reality and purity is only perceived in a life where everything is “clean” and “in order.” Lastly, *jaku* (tranquility) is identifiable with one’s enlightenment, bliss, innocence, and a state of total calmness. These four characteristics that I experienced in the tearoom are ones that I constantly try to display to others through my daily actions.

In today’s world, violence and crime is undeniably present, and continues to exist. Through events as small as robberies or as large as world wars, people often choose to promote characteristics that are directly opposed to the four characteristics included in the Japanese way of tea. In only a dream can one imagine a world in which respect, harmony, purity and tranquility exist in all people and take precedent over the will to do evil. Personally, I live by the four principles of the Japanese people by doing my part to put a smile on others’ faces. I am the co-founder of Pink Ribbon Teens, a charitable initiative that provides free in-home babysitting/tutoring services to families experiencing illness. By providing safe and compassionate care for their children, parents who are ill have an opportunity to rest or recuperate. For those parents who have children with special needs, my initiative allows them to focus their attention on that child while their other children are being cared for. Through this service, I am able to bring harmony to children whose lives are otherwise disrupted. Stress for these families is replaced by a new sense of calmness.

To most of us, the rituals the Japanese people practice to show their beliefs may actually be thought of as “out of the box.” For instance, believing that the way they set their utensils on a table contains a respectful meaning in spirit may seem unusual to those of us from different cultures. However, it is perhaps that very sense of ritual and belief that if followed by others, would lead to a world that is less violent. Perhaps we should ask this question to ourselves; Would one rather live in a world with people whose thoughts are out of the ordinary or would one prefer a world filled with chaos and a lack of respect?

R.E.S.P.E.C.T-- Find out What It Means to Me

Aya Terki (East Meadow High School)

“*Ki wo tsukenasai!*”, my mother warned, as I ran out of my grandparents’ apartment to the bookstore down the block. I heard a clerk welcome me from the back of the store: “*Irashaimase!*”. I grabbed my favorite Japanese book that I waited for months to get my hands on and dashed to the cash register. “That will be 700 yen please”, said the cashier with a smile. I quickly pulled out seven 100-yen coins from my jacket pocket and went to drop them into the cashier’s hand. Her smile faded and her eyes widened as she gasped. Out of nowhere, she pulled out a small, rectangular tray and held it under my hand, apologizing profusely. I remembered watching my mother place her money in a similar tray, so I assumed I was to do the same thing. The cashier counted the money, gave me the receipt with my book and bowed multiple times, embarrassed. I bowed back, and rushed back to the apartment. A bit confused, I told my *okaasan* what happened in the bookstore and asked her why the cashier was so apologetic. She explained to me that when purchasing an item in a Japanese store, the money or credit card should be placed in the tray that is provided. It is a sign of respect, and it symbolizes that the item is worthy of being handled with care. Being raised in America, such a way of handling money seemed silly to me. I was used to seeing crumpled up dollar bills with mustaches drawn on President Washington’s face. I was accustomed to seeing pennies on supermarket floors, or dimes glued on to subway seats. Such disrespect towards one’s surroundings is frowned upon in the Japanese culture.

Respect for the environment is another quality that is emphasized in Japanese culture. Streets, subway cars, train stations and even public toilets are clean and garbage cans are easily accessible in busy areas. During a recent trip to Japan, I went to Tokyo Disneyland with my family. A young child in front of me was eating a piece of candy and dropped her wrapper. Immediately, another guest at the park picked up the wrapper, and threw it away into a nearby garbage can. Witnessing that took me back to my studies in a Japanese elementary school. Every day, we had “*osouji no jikan,*” or clean up time, and we rotated shifts to clean the floors of the classroom, wipe desks and clean the bathroom. By doing so at a young age, we learned to take responsibility not only for our own actions, but for others’ as well. It was an important lesson for me to learn because back at home, I selfishly depended on custodians or sanitation workers to pick up my garbage later. Being put into their shoes helped me realize that I should at least be accountable for my own things, and I think many Japanese students also realize that and apply it in their daily lives. For example, many public bathrooms do not provide paper towels because it has become customary to carry around a handkerchief. Also, a popular movement called “My Hashi” makes it trendy to carry around your personal pair of chopsticks. This is in place of using disposable wooden chopsticks called *waribashi*. These trends encourage all kinds of people to participate in a team effort to be more eco-friendly in order to help out and give back to the environment.

Though respect is a universal concept, why is it applied differently in other cultures? It seems as if in American culture, respect is something we only give to people. In Japanese tradition, respecting others is something that is *shizen*, or natural, but in addition to another form of respect: Respect with their surroundings. Right now, the entire globe is facing an environmental crisis due to overuse of our natural resources and the tremendous amount of pollution. We use things and then throw them away mindlessly, without thinking of the consequences. Through my experiences in Japan, I’ve made a conscious effort to be more eco-friendly myself. I use a reusable bag for grocery shopping, and I use a handkerchief instead of paper towels. If we all learn to respect and appreciate our surroundings like the Japanese, I believe it will be easier to help preserve our planet and keep it healthy to sustain future generations.

Doumo Arigatou Mr. Roboto

Eric Andrew Engoron (Stony Brook University)

It isn't easy living independently when you have a physical disability rendering you unable to walk. Tasks as easy as making your bed become impossibly difficult. You are unable to reach things in high places, or even change light bulbs. It is unfeasible to take showers without the proper equipment at your disposal, and even to use the bathroom if the proper facilities aren't available to you. Taking these unworkable tasks into consideration, I had always wondered how I could manage life independently. I would lay awake at night, thinking of ways I could manage my daily routine without the help of my family, and the problem was, I could not come up with anything. I began to think I was destined to live at home forever; I could never live independently. However, that thought could not be further from the truth.

A few months after my realization, I was still feeling down in the dumps; the world never seemed less handicapped friendly than it did to me then. Around that same time, I made a new friend in school. His name was Taisei Chiba, and he was an exchange student from Tokyo, Japan that had just moved to the United States because his dad's job was relocated. He understood written English very well, but his listening comprehension was less than serviceable. Every day afterschool, I would sit with him and help him with his listening and speaking, while I conversely learned a plethora of Japanese. Culturally, he was very different than most of the people I had to deal with in my school. He was respectful, kind, and most of all, he did not think of me as "that disabled kid," as everyone else did. He chalked it up to the fact that I was not different from anyone else, but I chalked it up to the respectful aspect of the Japanese culture that is not stressed in America. Along with restoring my faith in my peers, and the people around me, Taisei also helped me more than he could ever realize, he helped restore my hope in becoming independent.

One snowy winter Monday, when Taisei and I met afterschool, he asked me to help him understand an article that used complex English that he never learned while in Japan. Upon reading the introduction, I could tell that the article was about a bipedal robot that was being developed in Japan named ASIMO. However, as I read more and more of the article, I started to fall in love with the driving force behind ASIMO's development, artificial intelligence. The article that Taisei gave to me talked about the possibilities of integrating ASIMO in the home to help families go throughout their daily lives without having to do quite as many chores. After I helped Taisei comprehend the article, and we went our separate ways, I spent hours and hours in my room on my computer researching artificial intelligence and robotics; particularly robots that originate in Japan.

That night, I stumbled upon an article that changed my life's goal forever. The article, by Dennis Normile spoke of Japan's former Prime Minister Abe's Innovation 25 plan, which stated that by 2025, robotics would be integrated into many Japanese households to make life easier for humans (Normile 186). As Abe stated in his speech, "...such an innovation will set the Japanese society ahead for years to come," (Abe). Prime Minister Abe's innovation made my hopes of living independently rise exponentially. If Abe's innovation succeeds, I would be able to live on my own with the help of the robots that would be integrated into my household. These robots would be able to make my bed, change light bulbs for me, reach things in high places, and even do my laundry, if I was lucky enough! Life would be ideal for me to be independent. During that night, and many nights to come, I sat on my computer and researched robots being developed that would one day make me self-ruling. The robot with the most articles written about it was ASIMO, the robot that Taisei introduced to me during that afterschool session. ASIMO is Honda's brainchild; it is the most advanced bipedal robot developed thus far. According to ASIMO's chief engineer Masato Hirose, ASIMO is designed "to improve living in human society without modifying the human living space," (Hirose and Ogawa 11). Such a robot sounded ideal to me. ASIMO would be able to operate in an unmodified house, and would help me with my daily routine.

Day in and day out I would bring Taisei Japanese articles about robotics to translate for me, and the help I was giving him soon became mutual, as I learned from him as well. While ASIMO sounded like the perfect robot for me to have in my household, there was another robot that I researched that truly made my jaw drop. Its name was the Hyper Assistive Limb-5 (HAL-5). The HAL-5, developed by Japanese company Cyberdyne, is designed to help the disabled and the elderly walk. It is an exoskeleton robot that you wear to amplify the strength in your muscles by five allowing you to be more stable while walking (Cyberdyne

Mission Statement). The first thought in my mind after reading about the HAL-5 was, “If I wear this, I could walk and be just as able-bodied as everyone else. My weak muscles would no longer be a problem, and I would finally be stable enough to walk. My life would be perfect.” However, as of now, the HAL-5 is still in the testing stages, and is not yet safe for commercial use.

The more and more I began to research these robots and the companies making them, I noticed one common thread between all of them. I noticed that all of the chief engineers designing, building, and coding these robots were not disabled. While it is important that these robots are being developed in Japan, I would have thought it would be common sense to have a disabled person’s input on the technology being built to assist them. This common thread is what started me down my current path, the path that will allow me to live my life to the fullest. I know what it is like to have your life changed by a disability, to not be able to do most simple tasks on your own, and most of all what the physically disabled need help with the most in order to be independent. I want to be part of the team that produces these robots; I want to create the robots that will allow millions of disabled people live successful and independent lives without being hindered by their disability. I want to help disabled people level the playing field.

At first, even my dad was unsure if I could live independently, he thought I depended on him too much to be successful. We often got into heated debates as to whether or not it would be plausible. It used to be the case that I would be defeated in these debates, and not know how to answer his questions, but now armed with my new knowledge of Japanese robots, I could finally fight back. “Well son, how would do simple things such as clean, make your bed or even change light bulbs?” I responded, “Dad that’s ASIMO’s job.” He then proceeded to ask me about cooking to which I responded with the Motoman SDA10, a robot that is designed to be a personal chef (Daly). With robots by my side, I could finally convince my dad it will be plausible for me to live alone.

The language barrier was the only problem standing in my way of reaching my newfound goal. All the robots that would help me live an unhindered life are being developed by Japanese companies. I needed to learn Japanese in order to be truly successful. Thus, I began asking Taisei for help, and while I was helping him with English, he was helping me more and more with my Japanese, and gradually I began to fall in love with the beauty of the language and the complexity of the Kanji. Now, I am a Computer Science major and Japanese minor at Stony Brook University ready to program robots in Japan that will help the disabled live normal lives. If it weren’t for Taisei and the Japanese companies developing things such as the SDA10, ASIMO, and the HAL-5, I would be destined to feed off my family. However, now the world is my oyster, and it is only appropriate that I quote the band the Styx and say, “Doumo Arigatou Mr. Robotto,” Thank you Mr. Robot, for allowing me to live freely.

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Finding Japan on an Island

Manami Ogami (Stony Brook University)

“No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive”- Mahatma Gandhi. Those words proved to be true when looking back at my transition from Kyoto, Japan to Honolulu, Hawaii. Looking back at my childhood, my memories are filled with what most would consider typical memories. However, there is a distinct difference between most children and myself because at the age of four I was forced to leave my home in Japan and embark upon a new life in Hawaii.

As my seat vibrated from the roaring engine, my mother fumbled with the clasp of my seat belt, the belt clenching tightly into my stomach. Gazing out the window, my home became smaller and smaller as the plane gained height, leaving behind my friends, family, home, pets, and quite essentially my life.

Landing in Honolulu, Hawaii, tourists clamored to baggage claim excitedly chattering about the beauty of the islands. In a matter of hours, I had lost everything I had known. I was forced to reside in a place where Japan was identified with three things; Hello Kitty, Sony, and chicken teriyaki. When most imagine residing in Hawaii they envision pristine beaches that line the land of Hula dancers and surfers. However, there is a distinct difference between starting a life in Hawaii and a vacation to Hawaii- and this was no vacation.

My dad had to remain in Japan due to his work, so it was only my mom, my cat and myself who moved to Hawaii. So there we were, with no job, no car, hiding away my cat in a no-pets one-bedroom apartment. Not an ideal situation compared to my home in Japan that held my toys, books, and of course my father.

Fortunately, my mother found a job and I was soon placed in pre-school. Aside from dance classes, this was the first time I ever attended any type of school. Unfortunately, I felt unrelatable to my peers, unable to communicate any of my interests or feelings. The other children whispered about me in hush tones, fearing the unknown. After all, what do you do with a girl that seemed to be mute? My teachers faced much difficulty, trying to communicate through elaborate gestures and hand movements. I felt frustrated at the fact that I was unable to communicate even the simplest of tasks such as “Can I go to the bathroom?” It worsened as we delved deeper into the curriculum. While other children began to read, I was learning to speak. How could I be expected to read a language that I didn’t even understand? When I was given assignments, I was more than capable of doing the work; I just simply could not understand the directions. My instructors recommended ELS classes, but as we were already bombarded with pre-school fees, we were unable to afford any other activities. As a child I envied those who could keep up with school effortlessly. I felt as though I was cheated by being moved to a foreign land where everything was more difficult for me.

Something I didn’t initially realize when I first moved to Hawaii was that I wasn’t just leaving my friends/family behind but also the mundane everyday things such as television, books, games, and conversations that most of us take for granted. Hello Kitty was now replaced on the screen with a purple dinosaur that spoke in a foreign tongue. Books were written in strange scriptures that seemed to represent stories I have never heard before. Where were the tales of *Momotaro* (the peach boy) or *Urashima taro*? Everything I had grown accustomed to disappear within a single plane ride, and I felt very lost in such an unfamiliar land.

One day as my mother was reading the *Hawaii Hochi*, a local Japanese newspaper, she noticed an ad for an upcoming Bon dance. Bon Dance, a Buddhist festival that commemorates the deceased, is a cherished Japanese tradition. Thinking it would be fun, we decided to go. Dawning my *yukata* (a summer kimono), I arrived and was shocked. Japanese stores lined the street, with almost everyone speaking Japanese, as the aroma of yakitori filled the air. As I tried to scoop goldfish, eat yakisoba, and danced around the *yagura*, I momentarily felt as though I was back home. I found kids who spoke Japanese and shared similar interests of Japanese anime and played games such as *Shogi*. It was as if I found a little part of Japan on this island.

Soon after I found other Japanese activities I could partake in right here on the island. Both my great-grandmother and grandmother were both tea masters in Japan; therefore I started to take tea ceremony

lessons in Hawaii. I learned how to sit on my knees, bow after receiving the drink, turn the cup clock-wise twice, and the delicate stirring motion of the kabuki brush when making the tea. I was trained in the mannerism of drinking tea and all that goes along with it. My teacher taught five others and myself how to respect the tea and the tearoom. Respect is crucial in Japan (often shown in the form of a curt bow) and it was stressed that we must show respect to our sensei, the tatami room, and all those who attended the ceremony. Although I did not reach the mastery level, I still learned many skills that I find vital for children of that age, such as respect, discipline, and mindfulness.

Despite not being in Japan, when I was seven I still celebrated my *shichi-go-san*. Originating from the Heian period, Shichi-go-san, is viewed as the rite of passage for children in Japan. As the *obi* held up my traditional kimono, I visited a nearby Japanese shrine in Hawaii. After, we ate at a Japanese restaurant where we indulged in some appetizing Japanese cuisine. I found comfort in the fact that I had the opportunity to engage in Japanese traditions in my new home.

Soon after, I befriended Maria, a girl at my pre-school who spoke not only English but Japanese and Spanish as well. She became a friend, translator, and the ultimate confidant. Maria had the best of both worlds, knowing both Japanese and American culture. She introduced me to many American phenomena, ranging from Doritos to Clifford the Big Red Dog. I became more open-minded towards new cultural aspects, and started to educate my family on the “American Way”. I began to merge both cultures and started to experiment with various social phenomena. I had always prided myself with my Japanese heritage but I didn’t want my pride to become ignorance towards other cultures.

One of those “American” customs I had to be accustomed to sitting cross-legged at school. My teachers taught us to “crisscross applesauce” our legs and sit still. One day I was sitting in this position when my visiting grandmother from Japan walked in. Appalled at the sight of seeing her granddaughter sitting in such a distasteful manner; she said I was bringing “shame” if I were to sit like this in front of company. Calling it “agura (o) kaku”, she explained it was something that only men do, and that ladies must sit properly on their knees. It was interesting that my grandmother reprimanded me for something that my teachers taught. Something that in Japanese culture was considered a disgrace was encouraged to American children. However, what I came to realize was that it was more comfortable to sit cross-legged. After all, if you are relaxing in your own home, why must you force yourself to sit in an uncomfortable position? I found a fault within my own culture and realized that another is more practical. As important as it is to cherish your own culture, exploring other cultures is also crucial if you want to be educated and open-minded.

Today, I have incorporated a nice blend of both American and Japanese culture into my lifestyle. For example, on New Year’s, we always spend New Year’s Eve the traditional American way, by going to the count down and playing with sparklers. However, on New Year’s Day we celebrate in traditional Japanese fashion with my grandmother cooking the traditional *osechi* cuisine alongside the *ozouni* soup. Afterwards we go to the shrine, purify our hands, ring the bell twice, clap our hands, and pray for another good year. Even on daily activities, I have found a nice balance of both cultures. I speak Japanese at home but speak English when I am at school. I eat Japanese food when I’m home, but when I eat out with my friends I typically dine at an American diner. In the dining room we have a dining room table but in the living room we have the *kotatsu* table. I have found that regardless of where I reside, I can still keep my heritage alive if I continue to partake and cherish my Japanese culture.

**Selected Essays
from
Seventh Competition
(2011-2012)**

Obaachan's Sword

Yumiko Siev (Valley Stream Central High School)

When I was younger I was convinced that my grandmother was a samurai. Imagine a five year-old little girl exploring her grandmother's house, discovering a sword in a small closet no one really used. It was inside a smooth case with Japanese calligraphy etched into it, and beautiful pink cherry blossoms on the handle. I remember seriously thinking about opening it, but then my grandmother called my name and a current of panic flowed through me. The sound of my grandmother's voice sparked an epiphany, and everything I knew about my grandmother came together in my mind. She was undeniably a samurai. How could I not have seen this before? It suddenly made sense: all the mail that came to Obaachan's house was addressed to Yasuko, when I heard everyone call her June; this was the reason that she needed a double identity. And the reason she woke up before the sun rose was because a curtain of darkness was necessary to practice her samurai sword techniques. On a later date, when I tried to show the sword to my sister, it was gone.

It wasn't until years later that I asked my grandmother about the sword I found. It turned out that it wasn't a samurai's sword, but a soldier's sword. That soldier was a Japanese lieutenant during World War Two. After the war was over and the Japanese surrendered, many of the soldiers had gone into a cave on a small island to take their own lives to preserve their honor. From the time of the samurai, soldiers believed that they should die before they surrendered, or bring shame to their country. Before they could commit suicide an American General gave a speech on the importance and value of life, where he convinced them to continue living. These men returned to Japan, leaving their weapons behind in the cave as one of the conditions of the surrender.

An American soldier had found the sword among other weapons in that cave, and brought it back with him to America. Years passed and that American soldier's son became best friends with my father. After getting to know my grandmother, who frequently visits her family in Japan, he asked her if she could return the sword to the soldier. He proceeded to explain that he tried to return it in the past, but the people he entrusted with the sword never followed through with their promises. He also knew something about how the Japanese soldiers revered their swords, and had always intended to give it back someday. My grandmother agreed to return the sword the next time she went to Japan. The Japanese soldier had his name and address written on a piece of wood attached to the sword. My grandmother wrote to him explaining the story of how his sword was with her, in America, and would return it on her next visit to Japan.

When my Grandmother arrived at Narita Air Port in Chiba, the Japanese soldier, now an old man, and some police officers were there. She handed him the box with the sword in it, "As soon as he touched the sword tears began to come from his eyes," Obaachan told me. He tried to give her money for the return of this prized possession, but Obaachan refused. After they talked for a while she did agree to accept a locally made Kokeshi doll as a token of their meeting.

Back in America Obaachan told the American soldier about its delivery of the sword and the owner's reaction, this soldier too, felt a peace in his mind he had been waiting years to feel. "In Japan, when someone has a sword, it is their spirit; they live with their sword and they die with their sword," she explained. She had returned to the Japanese soldier, a part of his life.

Now that I'm older I found out that Obaachan isn't a samurai, but something even better.

I Am Mizuho

Mizuho Yoshimune (Bronx High School of Science)

When I was four I wished that my name was Michelle. When I was five I wished that my name was Amanda. I still recall sitting in my kindergarten class, drawing stick figures of my family and me. I vividly remember labeling the drawings with childish scrawls of “Mom” and “Dad,” but I would rarely write “Mizuho” underneath the drawing of myself in green crayon. In each drawing, I would be someone else, such as Lisa or Hannah. As a child, I did not understand why I was not given a “normal” name, even though I was born in the U.S. Oh, how I wished I could be more American!

In elementary school, I would listen with veiled jealousy as my classmates went around in a circle saying their names. Inwardly, I would cringe when I heard the teacher say, “Oh, this is a hard one...Mee-zoo...ho?” Though I didn’t blame him, I would sit rigidly until the five seconds passed at a painfully slow pace. Interestingly, it never occurred to me to ask my parents why they named me Mizuho, or what it meant. Looking back today, I will always be grateful to my sixth grade English teacher, who assigned a project on how we got our name.

In my quest to unravel the mystery behind my name, my twelve-year-old self ran into the kitchen with a notebook and a pen, shouting, “Mom! Mom! MOM! What does “Mizuho” mean?” My mom, who was preparing dinner, gave a light laugh at my semi-frenzied state and began the tale...

“So, for starters, ‘Mizuho’ originates from Japan’s oldest chronicle, *Kojiki*. Do you know what *Kojiki* is?” I shook my head.

“Well, it is similar to Greek mythology; it’s a collection of myths about the Japanese *Kami*, or gods. In the *Kojiki* it calls Japan, ‘*Mizuho no kuni*.’ ‘Mizuho’ means “rich rice crops,” and ‘*kuni*’ means “land” or “country,” so ‘*Mizuho no kuni*’ represents a land blessed with prosperous rice. Do you remember how I told you many times to never leave behind a valuable grain of rice in your bowl?” She mildly scolded me, but soon returned to her jovial persona.

“It’s all because of the amount of hard work needed to harvest the rice crop. It has to be tended to all year round and harvested carefully. Because of this, rice is the national symbol of hard work, perseverance, and success...”

What was meant to be a simple creative project turned into an epiphany. Instead of sounding like six random letters thrown together, it was now a three-syllable name that carried so much cultural and personal significance for my parents and the people of their homeland. I began to truly love my name, and how the syllables would naturally roll off of my tongue. My confidence grew, as did my silent pride in that my parents did not simply browse through a book of common baby names. It has served as a reminder that I do not have to be like everyone else in order to feel confident and that I belong somewhere, since being named ‘Mizuho’ has brought me one step closer to the culture that exists an ocean away.

This all happened six years ago, in 2006. Today, in my last year in high school, I have found that I have changed in many aspects, such as my perspectives on certain issues, my interests, and especially, my future plans and goals. However, despite all the changes I am just as eager as I was in sixth grade, to gain more insight and to experience more of the beautiful Japanese culture. At school, I often help students who are taking Japanese with reading, writing, and speaking, while teaching them about some of the exciting cultural events (*Oshoogatsu* is my favorite). At home, my parents have regularly incorporated Japanese traditions and values to our daily lives, which have taught me the importance of balancing two cultures at once without letting go of either one.

In September, I will be going to college, where I look forward to further learning about the Japanese language and culture by studying abroad in Japan. As a Japanese-American born and raised in the U.S., and never having attended a Saturday Japanese school, studying Japanese in Japan while experiencing the culture first-hand will be an invaluable opportunity. Since taking the first big step of discovering the meaning of ‘Mizuho,’ it has opened many doors of curiosity and possibilities for me to further explore the unique culture of Japan.

A Sacrifice That Should Not Be Forgotten

Duke Atalay (Ward Melville High School)

I awoke to the familiar sounds of radio hosts as my alarm clock went off at 6:30 AM. A leading song on the Billboard Top 100 began to play as I slowly opened my eyes, wearily turned off the alarm, and stumbled out of bed. My daily routine in preparation for school ensued as follows; I ate my breakfast, brushed my teeth, got dressed, and took the bus to school. March 11th, 2011 began just like any other day.

As the bell rang, I entered my biology classroom and took my seat. The teacher stood up from her desk and spoke with anticipation. "Did anyone hear about the earthquake in Japan?" A few students responded and the teacher continued. "I heard it was an 8.9! Can you imagine?!" The class uniformly thought in silence as we tried to imagine such a natural disaster striking New York, and immediately returned back to work.

The school day ended and I returned home where I discovered my dad watching CNN stories about the disaster in Japan. I saw headlines of a tsunami striking the north east of Japan. I stood there astonished by the footage of the colossal wave peeling buildings into the ocean's abyss, as if they were leaves being carried off by a faint wind. Japanese civilians were huddled above the enveloping sea, stoically watching despite the omnipresent quality of their grief.

Headlines that a meltdown had occurred at a nuclear power plant in Fukushima due to the tsunami began to emerge. There were reports about nuclear plant workers who stayed behind at the plant in order to prevent a broader nuclear catastrophe. Pictures of men breathing through respirators in full body white suits walking into the reactors started to appear on the screen. The men, in the middle of a radioactive zone where death seemed imminent, were pumping seawater on exposed nuclear fuel in order to prevent a full meltdown that would spread radiation to the whole nation. These men were heroes, risking their own lives in order to ensure the wellbeing of their family members and loved ones. I could not help but compare these brave individuals to the firefighters that sacrificed their lives by entering the World Trade Center on 9/11. All of these men were able to muster up the courage that few men are able to do, to boldly overcome fear's perpetual grasp and venture out into the most dangerous of circumstances.

When taught about Japan during the times of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the valiant samurai and their deep devotion to the Bushido were integral parts of the lesson. We learned that the Bushido was the moral template composed of seven virtues that the samurai lived by. The one that is most cogent, according to the author Inazo Nitobe, is Rectitude (46). It is described by him as follows: "*Rectitude is one's power to decide upon a course of conduct in accordance with reason, without wavering; to die when to die is right, to strike when to strike is right*" (Nitobe 46). These words were the inspiration and essence of the bravest of samurai, who fought for their masters no matter how bleak the battles may have seemed. They knew that if there was any moment to leave this world, it would be on the battlefield, the most glorified testament of their sacrifice and devotion.

As I watched these brave, unnamed heroes enter the nuclear power plant, the virtue of Rectitude echoed in my head. These heroes knew that this was the right thing to do, to put the welfare of their nation above their own health and safety. I have always prided myself on my values of choosing the path of virtue because I believe that the emotional satisfaction you receive in the end is paramount. These Japanese workers were able to confront the most crippling of fears because they knew that this would be their moment of Rectitude, their moment to light their eternal shine. We often look to famous names of valiant war heroes or prominent political heroes for inspiration, but we often forget about the men and women who do what is right for the advancement of the world around them instead of for self-pride. The Japanese workers at Fukushima remind us what chivalry really means in a world constantly obsessed with making a legacy, and should inspire even the most weary of people to take the path of sanctity despite the demons that stand in their way.

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To Biwa Lake

Daniel Xu (Princeton University)

Summer was nearing the end of its stay in Kyoto, and so was I. From where I sat at a table in the second-floor kitchen of the Kyoto Sangyo University International House I could see the verdant willow branches through the glass balcony door that somebody had forgotten to close, allowing the cacophonous chirping of the cicadas resting on those branches to waft in on the simmering August air: *tsuku-tsuku-boshi, tsuku-tsuku-boshi!* I smiled as I remembered my disbelief when my co-worker at the lab had described to me the sound made by the cicadas that emerged after the end of the rainy season. “You’ll see,” she had told me, “You’ll see! They sound just like that.” And she had been right.

I finished my morning tea and washed the mug out in the sink, placing it underneath the sign that brightly reminded all residents to respect the health and well-being of the dorm community by cleaning up after themselves. I had grown used to the communal sort of lifestyle in the International House, and it gave me an odd sort of feeling to think that in a week’s time I would be gone from there forever.

In the stairwell, on the way back to my room, I ran into two other residents of the I-House, Henri the German and Pae the Korean. They had knapsacks on their backs and full bottles of water stuffed into the pockets of their shorts, and looked to all the world as if they were about to embark on some sort of expedition.

“Daniel,” Henri said, grabbing me by the shoulders. “Want to come with us on a fantastic adventure? We are going to Biwa Lake in Shiga prefecture, maybe forty kilos away. Only a three-hour bike ride—both ways!” I guess it was a testament to how little thought goes into my decision-making process that I agreed to come along. And so I hurried downstairs to the overpriced vending machine in the lobby and purchased two chilled bottles of water for the equivalent of five American dollars. Within moments they were jostling around in the wicker basket between my handlebars as I pedaled alongside Henri and Pae north toward Shiga prefecture. The tires on my bicycle were slightly flat, so I had to pedal just a little bit harder than my companions to ride at the same pace.

As a child, my introduction to the land of the rising sun had not been through the conventional cultural vehicles of Hello Kitty or Dragon Ball but rather through weekends spent with my father and brother watching patriotic Chinese World War II dramas in which the portrayal of the Japanese were resigned almost universally to the role of the relentless enemy. And so as an eight-year old I harbored a slightly irrational and misguided dislike for anything Japanese, and naively equated the entire nation of Japan with the one-dimensional villains I observed on television locked in gory combat with Chinese resistance. I look ahead at Pae, who is pedaling a few feet in front of me, joking with Henri about something, and wonder if his childhood experience with Japan had been of a similar nature—after all, Korea had also been an enemy of Japan during the war. I wondered what had brought him later in life to choose to study in Japan.

For me it was a number of things. Even as an eight-year-old, my initial impressions of Japan evaporated almost immediately when I was introduced arguably the cleverest diplomatic tool ever conceived, the Nintendo Gameboy Color. How could the nation that had put Pokemon into my pocket be anything but a benevolent presence on the Earth? And as I got older, experiences like learning to play the game of *I-go*, reading introspective Japanese haiku in school, and the afternoons spent quietly folding origami with the Japanese lady whose son took his piano lessons before mine further taught me to appreciate the subtlety and beauty of Japanese culture. I was interested enough to study a year of introductory Japanese during my freshman year at university, and I fell in love with that small sampling of the Japanese world, and decided I must spend a summer in Japan to see the rest of it for myself.

Part of it also had to do with my parents. Having completed their graduate school studies in Japan during the 80’s, they often told me about their experiences, and in fact it was actually one of their former professors who had offered me an internship working under him during the summer. Before I left my parents gave me some parting advice. “Especially observe the Japanese work ethic,” my mother had said. “Everyone gives their absolute best effort to any job they do, no matter how large or small. It’s a philosophy of hard work shared by everyone in Japan. And it wouldn’t hurt to have you learn some of those

Japanese manners, either,” she added as an afterthought. “They have wonderful manners in Japan!”

And indeed I had found this to be true everywhere I had been in Kyoto that summer. As we pulled in to a Family Mart to buy fresh bottles of water, I noticed the way the young shopkeepers scurried to restock shelves, mind the cash register, and re-arrange inventory, all while bowing politely and calling out greetings and farewells to customers in clear, bright voices. It definitely wasn’t something I saw very much of back home, if at all.

Pae checked his map and informed us that for the next hour or so we’d be winding our way up a mountain. “After round the top, we’ll be able to see the lake!” he said cheerfully. After two hours of pedaling my legs felt like something like jelly. The oppressive Kansai sun hung lower in the sky than it had when we set out, but still beat mercilessly down on the exposed parts of our flesh.

The quaint Japanese architecture of the surrounding villages whizzed by sometimes swiftly, sometimes ploddingly as we followed the ups and downs of the curving mountain road. Somewhere nearby I knew the historic Buddhist temples of Hiei Mountain hid in the deep recesses of the forest, but if we were to make it to the lake in time I knew we would not be able to spare the effort to go visit, at least this time. I remember finally being able to see the clear, crystal blue of the lake through over the top of a hill and excitedly pointing it out to my companions, who whooped and laughed as we followed the road down the mountain, our three-hour journey culminating in a triumphant arrival on the shores of the massive freshwater lake.

It seemed we’d only set our bikes down on the rocks and laid down on the shore for a brief moment before Henri noted that the sun was setting and we’d better get going soon if we were to make it back to the city before dark. I couldn’t believe it—we’d just gotten here!—but sure enough, the sun had continued its inexorable daily march across the sky, and it was precariously advanced in its journey.

I sat up, gazing out over the expansive blue water, listening to the sloshing waves and the cawing crows high above. And of course there were the omnipresent cicadas in the brush all around, *tsuku-tsuku-boshi*, *tsuku-tsuku-boshi*. It was utterly tranquil in its own unique way. To leave so soon seemed a tragedy—and to leave Japan, I mused, an even greater one.

I sighed, retrieving my bicycle and preparing to set off with the others back home—first to my dorm room at the I-House, and in a week’s time on a flight back to America. Before I went I cast one more glance over the rapidly darkening waters, resplendent in the way the setting sun was reflected upon the rippling surface.

I promised myself that someday I’d be back to Japan, this magical land where an incredibly deep and multi-faceted culture had arisen amidst scenes of such absolute beauty and tranquility. Until I have the opportunity to go back, I will remember forever what I saw as a young man staying in Kyoto—the incredible, genuine politeness of the Japanese people, the gorgeous scenery, the beautiful culture, and of course, the incessant chirping of the cicadas in the summertime.

Self-Discovery through Japanese Harmony

Shariful Syed (Stony Brook University)

I yearned to study in Japan. I was drawn to their concept of “harmony”. Known as ‘wa,’ it was the name of the country upon its creation. Because Japan can be said to be a nation built upon ‘wa,’ I wanted to gain a real sense of how harmony influences Japan’s way of life so as to enrich my own. However, at the same time I still had to prepare myself for trying to gain acceptance to medical school. Neither goal could be compromised; despite the common wisdom being that if one wishes to pursue the field of medicine they must focus on pursuing extensive lab research and science courses, I felt that the experiences I would have in Japan would facilitate my growth as a person and understanding of harmony. I wasn’t willing to give up a chance to live in another country, totally removed from my normal way of life, and see how my response reveals things about my nature that I may not have ever known.

In Japan, one of my immediate impressions was that I felt a strong sense of community and connection that undeniably seemed harmonious. Japanese society seems to emphasize the value of shared experience and group activities as vital in formation of social bonds. Attending the 60,000-population Waseda University, I felt humbled and recognized that there is a distinct world outside of myself. I had to discover my place. After some research and exploration, I soon found an activity that gave me a sense of belonging. For a few months I led a weekly group discussion with Japanese students. It was a fantastic opportunity to discuss topics like societal pressures and social norms that Japanese were reserved about. Japanese often discourage voicing criticism. As the group leader, I encouraged the members to voice their opinions about any issue they desired. Having such an open atmosphere generated an air of trust and comfort between all of us. The process of creating strong bonds among people is a big part of what brings me happiness. As I found my place, I was grateful to be part of the group.

During the course of my studies in Japan, I read a major work of Fukuzawa Yukichi. I consider his text, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization and Enlightenment* to be the book that has influenced my attitude the most. What impacted me on a deep level was his idea that, civilization is the attainment of BOTH material wellbeing and the elevation of the human spirit. I am someone that believes in the importance of introspection, and the reason I think I value it so much is that I believe that it is a tool that can facilitate the ‘elevation of the human spirit’ or at least my own spirit. The achievement of gaining an acceptance to medical school, I consider, to only have been possible because of my will power and focus. A big part of how I maintain a strong mental disposition is by a kind of meditation that I do outside while burning incense. To me it feels like a sort of mental cleansing, I clear my mind of all extraneous thoughts to the point where I am not thinking of anything. I then slowly start to think of life at the moment and what has been going on and consider the biggest weights on my mind. Branching out I find myself consistently needing to do this to not prevent myself from getting too far away from harmony.

When I think of some of my behavior patterns, the two things that quickly come to mind are a metaphor from Ruth Benedict and a practice associated with Zen Buddhism. When presenting an interpretation of Japanese society and culture, Ruth Benedict, in *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, put forth the idea that a self-conception that Japanese have is that they view their human spirit as something akin to a brilliantly luster sword. She described that while we have the ability to shine brightly we can also quickly become rusted and dull and if gone unchecked we may lose all semblance of our former selves. In the same way I think I need to make a consistent mental effort to maintain a stable peace in my own spirit throughout the trials and tough decisions I face in life.

The other Japanese parallel associated with Zen Buddhism is the practice of Koan. How I relate the Koan to my own internal efforts is that just as the Koan requires one to take a very close look at themselves and make distinctions and connection between their behavior, ways of thinking, perceptual set and see how they have been affected by their personal experiences can then start to get some understanding of their core nature. That is how I think introspection has functioned to facilitate my development into a very curious and questioning person. I find that it is compatible with medicine because it is the task of a doctor to understand the underlying mechanisms causing certain appearance of symptoms and illnesses. For the same reason, I believe that this will help me become an exceptional skilled physician.

A meaningful experience I had in Japan occurred when I was volunteering at a local medical center. I

met an elderly patient that was receiving help. I was assigned to sit by him. I just sat with him, listened to his stories, and kept him company. Even though I couldn't understand most of the things he was saying, I could hear in his voice an air of sadness and loss, the transparent look in his eye made me feel the sense of the void he was feeling internally. Slowly I put together the pieces, he had lost his wife in an accident, and was now did not have much reason to live. I don't know how long it was, but I stayed with him, and tried to show him my understanding and desire to support him. By sharing feelings and being empathetic I think is one of the most meaningful ways to make strong connections with others, and this idea that I came to hold in Japan is one that I carry with me always.

But nothing could have prepared me for what happened next. In the middle of my exchange program in Japan, I was immersed in the March 11, 2011 earthquake. In those dangerous moments, I willed myself to keep steady. Walking around the streets of Shinjuku I was struck by the level of calm that was maintained by the people. Going out to the local food stores I was very surprised to see stores were mostly cleared of all pertinent food supplies, a clear indicator that people were getting ready for the worst. To me it was a display of maintaining composure and doing the most within one's ability to make best of a troubling situation. It really instilled in me a similar feeling as I no longer felt any extravagant fear and just accepted things for what they were and wanting to not allow it to negatively affect me.

On the night before my flight back to the U.S., I reflected on all these experiences and had the conscious realization that I was leaving with a different flow of thought. I grew to discover that all of my life experiences – from my time in Japan to my family life to my college studies – have shaped what I define to be harmony and its key importance in leading a fulfilling life. I feel that I have a clearer perception of myself and moreover, I see harmony as the foundation for the life I want to build as a doctor and a human being.

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Thank You

Emma Alexandra Berniczky (Stuyvesant High School)

“Pull down your shirt!” “Don’t sit like that!” “Don’t put your bag on the floor!” The rules of etiquette my mother would constantly reprimand me for breaking were absolutely interminable. She said she hoped I would come back from Japan more graceful than I had left, but I assured her I would not. In fact, I had no intention of changing, but I question whether I actually changed, or just grew up.

At my first meeting with the principal of my “host” high school, instead of waiting for everyone to be served first, I chugged down the iced green tea a second after it was placed in front of me. I realized as soon as I put the cup down that I had already made a terrible first impression. Without realizing it, that was the moment I took my first step toward fulfilling my mother’s wish.

The perfectionism I met with in Japan hit me like a speeding *shinkansen* train. Although I was amazed at first, I soon became aggravated at the amount of time I saw people dedicate to the most mundane tasks. The cleaner and more organized everything was, the dirtier and messier I felt. Almost as if I had a King Midas touch gone awry! I tried to follow the unsaid-but-set-in-stone rules I observed from other people, but only because I did not want to be ostracized or criticized. I was doing it only as a show for everyone else. After six weeks, I *did* become much more graceful, but I still could not understand the purpose of it all. I felt it was ridiculous to ask, so I continued imitating people, remotely satisfied at the way I was able to conform and fit in with all my classmates at school. After I came back home, I kept up some habits but they seemed out of place away from Japan. It was not until I visited a Zen Monastery in New York that I understood what my mother had wanted me to learn, and what Japan had tried to teach.

I was telling one of the young Japanese priestesses there the story about how I was leaving a fancy traditional restaurant with my host family, and instead of taking out my shoes from the cubby and gingerly placing them on the floor like everyone else did, I dropped the shoes down from waist level. Every single family member turned around and gasped at the huge *slap* they made as they hit the floor. After she finished laughing, she explained to me that Westerners think of shoes as inanimate objects, not worth any respect. But a Japanese person respects them by handling them with care and thinking “Thank you shoes, for supporting me as I walk.” They value the time and labor used to make the objects; because after all, where would we be without the fruit of other peoples’ labor? Even though hardly anything is handmade in the 21st century anymore, this mentality still exists in Japan today. The same attitude is applied to eating: saying “Thank you for this food” and bowing before and after eating a meal seemed incredibly tedious to me at first, before I realized that I was not saying “Thank You” to my rice just because it was rice, but for the energy and nutrition it provided me every day, not to mention its’ excellent taste! Although I had trouble remembering to do this in Japan, I found it much easier to do in America because it was no longer a phrase I needed to repeat six times a day, but a mindset that affected everything I did.

Perhaps what the rest of the world sees as excessive nitpicking and abnormal perfection manifested in countless unsaid rules, the Japanese people simply see as a way of life that accords the proper respect to everything. Instead of waiting until you lose something to truly appreciate its value, why not appreciate it while you have it? I learned that it is possible not only to value other objects and people, but also yourself. By being in good physical and mental shape and by being graceful, you show your gratitude and respect to your body for all it allows you to do. Thank you Japan, for teaching me how to say “Thank You.”

Brooklyn Bonsai

Jake Reiben (Brooklyn Friends School)

The day my mother stepped out on what little we have of a deck in the midst of Brooklyn to find that the one bonsai tree her son purchased but months ago had now multiplied into twenty others was the day I had to answer a hard question: why I had such an obsession with dwarf trees. In what was a reserved manner for a Catholic Italian, my mother fled my deck and its suffocating plants, burst into my room and demanded an answer. At this point, Japan and its culture came to my mind. I asked myself: “Would students in Japan be persecuted for their interest in bonsai?” I then recalled that my Japanese-American friend had laughed at me when I had told her I had a bonsai tree collection. In her opinion, the art of bonsai was reserved only for elderly Japanese men. My friend’s opinion aside, my mother had asked a good question, for I had never been able to create a coherent explanation as to why I had become fascinated with the ancient Japanese art of bonsai. I decided to embark on a quest to prove to my mom that I had not gone off the deep end, but also to clarify for myself why the Japanese art of bonsai seduced me.

Probing the depths of my mind while staring at the trees in which I had invested so much time and money helped me create an answer. I began with putting the sensation I felt while working on bonsai trees into words. This feeling reminded me of the same sensation a rock climber experiences as he safely and quickly ascends a mountain while avoiding the distraction of irrelevant thoughts. Similarly, in the case of re-potting a bonsai tree, the vulnerable bare rooted state of the tree demands that I must concentrate and act decisively to pot the tree securely. Although the mountain climber analogy was a bit of a stretch, I had figured out that I enjoyed the Zen-like state I achieved while working on my bonsai trees. Nonetheless, I still felt that my answer was incomplete; I had yet to convey how the principles of the Japanese art of bonsai applied to my everyday life.

So great is the patience and dedication required to grow and style bonsai that it made me a more accepting person. In bonsai, a tree must slowly be sculpted and styled as not to cause its demise. After killing several trees from making hasty decisions, I learned that I had to slow down and respect them. With this acquired patience, I began to pace myself and properly do my homework, for the practice of bonsai had drilled into me that impulsive actions often resulted in the death of my artistic creations. Furthermore, bonsai helped me embrace the idea that individuals must adapt to sudden changes. This is due to the fact that branches often die in bonsai, yet the tree does not become utterly worthless. Deadwood or “jin” can be sculpted to create a dramatic contrast between the living and dead parts of the tree. I became inspired by this expansive approach as what could have been an unfortunate turn of events can be transformed into a deeper aesthetic experience.

After much deliberation I had finally achieved an answer to my mother’s question. Working with nature in the depths of metropolitan Brooklyn, usually bare of but a patch of grass, was truly reviving. Rock climbing was the only other way that fed my addiction to experience a Zen-like state. My mother and I both know that it is difficult to find a mountain in Brooklyn. Thanks to this Japanese art, I have become more patient and accepting of change; I know there are always options.

Mottainai – Learn to Respect What You Have

Natsuko Sato (Arlington High School)

“Gochisou sama deshita!” Full and content, I started to leave the table, but Grandmother tapped my shoulder and stopped me. Examining my bowls, she told me that I was not yet finished with my meal. I looked at her questioningly, confused about what she meant for I had eaten everything—or at least that was what I thought. Grandmother pointed to my rice bowl and said, “There is still some left.” Peering in, I realized there were still some grains of rice stuck to my bowl. “Mottainai,” she said, which means, “what a waste.” She told me that I must finish every last grain of rice, or else I will go blind from wasting such a precious gift. I must admit, I was taken aback. Having grown up in the United States, I was used to the other children in my class throwing away food without any hesitation once they were full. It never occurred to me that in other cultures, even the last bits of rice could be considered something of such value.

Later on, this occurrence made me reminisce about a conversation I once had with my grandfather. I remembered the time when he explained to me the significance of the character, “rice.” He told me that if the three parts to the character were to be taken apart and rearranged, it would create the number eighty-eight. It symbolizes the number of days it takes for the rice to grow to maturity: from the day when the rice is planted to when it is ready for harvesting. Being a rice cultivator himself, my grandfather knew how much time and effort had to be put into growing them. This memory made me truly understand why Grandmother said “mottainai;” it would have been like throwing away the hard work that the planters put into growing the rice for us.

The Japanese concept of “mottainai” is based on the idea that nothing should be put to waste and that one must appreciate both physical resources and intangible objects, such as talent and time. This idea is already starting to impact the world in many areas. A prime example of its global impact can be seen in the Kenyan environmentalist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Wangari Maathai. Upon visiting Japan, she was impressed by the Japanese’s commitment to the conservation of materials and reduction of waste, and she was inspired to make a difference in her own country. By incorporating the “mottainai” ideal, Maathai began persuading people to shift from using thin, weak plastic bags to thicker, reusable ones in order to reduce the amount of garbage. Another instance where the Japanese’s “mottainai” concept impacted the world was in the 2011 Tohoku catastrophe. The nuclear disaster had resulted in the destruction of a major electricity source in Japan, and countless homes throughout the country were left without electricity. Planned power outages were deemed necessary, and citizens were requested to conserve electricity to compensate for the shortage. Numerous people acted immediately and showed their willingness to cooperate for the cause. Even in the summer, when temperatures rose to be over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit on some days, the Japanese continued to work hard to conserve electricity to the best of their abilities. Some went to public libraries to stay cool since they thought that turning on their air conditioner just for themselves was “mottainai.” Others took smaller actions, such as turning the lights off when no one was in the room. The Japanese proverb, “chiri mo tsumoreba, yama to naru,” which means when small things come together it can make a huge difference in the end, excellently describes how the Japanese cooperated to overcome their hardships. The small acts of conservation that the Japanese undertook to minimize the things they viewed as “mottainai” resulted in the commendable accomplishment of overcoming the mountainous impediment.

Currently, I am a member of my school’s science research team and our primary focus is to promote eco-friendly activities in our community. My experience with Japan’s “mottainai” culture has helped me realize that besides reducing, reusing, and recycling, respecting our environment and appreciating the things we have is also essential in making our world a healthier place and to preserve its beauties. I plan to continue advocating awareness about how everyone can make a difference to save our world by encouraging others to look to the Japanese example of their “mottainai” mentality and be thankful for even the smallest gifts in life.

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Bowing to *Shomen*

Kelsey Weymouth-Little (Ward Melville High School)

As I enter the dojo, the door shuts behind me, and I run to sit in line with everyone else. We close our eyes, cup our hands against our belts, and breathe. The purple and brown belt students to my right are my *senpais*, my seniors. They are closest to *shomen*, the wall of the dojo to which all Karate students are required to pay respect. When we bow to *shomen*, when we even glance at it, we are reminded of who we are, where we are, the tradition we are carrying on. *Shomen* keeps us from forgetting ourselves.

“No,” Sensei says, opening his eyes while we breathe. “Don’t sit like that. Don’t slump your shoulders, don’t arch your back, don’t bend your neck. The slightest mistake ruins everything.”

I remember reading the New York Times article about the Japanese workers at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, struggling to prevent a meltdown,³ and I know Sensei is right. If those workers had made even the smallest mistake, millions of people might have died.

Sensei claps, and we all place our palms on our thighs. We turn slightly to our right and bow to *shomen*, then to Sensei, then to each other. Then we stand, and Sensei begins assigning people to lead the warm ups.

“Now who can lead jumps? Who touches their toes every time? Alright,” he says to Susan, “you can do it. You’re the only one who does it right.”

“Teach these people how to do Karate,” he tells Senpai David. “They don’t know.”

What don’t we know? We definitely don’t know proper technique. I make mistakes every day; so does everyone else. But then I think of the New York Times again, of the reports on conditions in Japan after the earthquake. When the Japanese waited to get into the few open stores, nobody pushed.¹ When the Japanese passed by the abandoned stores, nobody stole. And even before the earthquake, one op-ed writer recalled, when the Japanese children played musical chairs, when they were told to shove each other aside to claim a seat for themselves, nobody knew what to do.² My life has been spent jostling for the best spot on the lunch line, illegally downloading music when I can get away with it, and playing a lot of musical chairs. Behind every punch and kick, there’s an entire culture that I have yet to understand.

Sensei steps out of the dojo, leaving Senpai Ryan in charge. The flow of the class continues the same as it had when Sensei was in the room, yet everything is different. The dojo is not just a place and, when Sensei, the crux of the entire structure, steps out, the dojo itself changes. Now its walls are less rigid, its structure less ordered; everyone still practices but a murmur of conversation undercuts the exhales and strikes. I know that, when Sensei returns, the conversation will cease and the walls will become as sturdy as they were before, but how did they start? Are they made of water that, a long time ago, was frozen all at once? Are they made of bricks that were laboriously laid on top of each other, one by one? Or have the walls been here for so long that nobody can even remember how they were first formed? If these walls were in Japan, I imagine that they would keep standing no matter who walked in or out, because they would have an entire culture to lean on. But here, Sensei spends a lot of time holding them up with both hands.

Crash! The screen covering the back door collapses, hitting the wall on its way down. Senpai David, standing next to it, grabs it before it strikes the ground. At that moment, Sensei walks in. “I could see that was going to happen from outside,” he says. “You guys are slow.”

We all return to our practice, working as hard as we can, not even contemplating getting distracted. Sensei corrects our mistakes, and even smiles when watching some of the younger students practice. He no longer seems as burdened by the weight of the walls.

Class is almost over. We run to sit and bow, first to each other, then to Sensei, and then to *shomen*. Then we stand and line up to bow to Sensei and shake his hand before we leave.

As I depart, I feel guilty for bowing out of the Japanese way of life after just an hour.

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**Selected Essays
from
Eighth Competition
(2012-2013)**

No Stroll in the Park

Madison Jaye LoFaso (Huntington High School)

As I climb the wide path I feel the small stones beneath my feet, and notice a large boulder to my right. I hear birds. I see a pond in the distance. Okay, so I get it. This is nature. But upon entering the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden, I couldn't help but think of all the places I'd rather be on a Saturday morning. Why my parents dragged me here I'll never know. I know better though. Don't make a big deal out of it, and maybe I'll get out of here before the day is over. So I suggest we take this path to the right. Looks like a short cut. Before I can take another step, a tall quirky-looking man approaches us and introduces himself as our guide. Really? We need a guide to walk through a park? I am corrected. This is not a park. It's a Japanese garden, and apparently everything here is placed deliberately to create a "symbolic path to enlightenment."

We begin our journey by walking through ornate bronze gates. Large Japanese maples dance in the wind. Around them lie small Japanese painted ferns. Everywhere, as if surrounded, I hear the sounds of running water and talkative birds. After the guide explains where these plants are usually found, we continue on to a small footbridge that crosses a narrow stream, fed from a vast pond. The path takes many twists and turns, and around each bend is something new and surprising. This tactic, called hide and reveal, is a common part of Japanese gardens.

From our guide – his name is Marshall – I learn that earliest recorded mention of Japanese gardens was nearly two thousand years ago! Apparently there are many different styles of Japanese gardens, and each serves a unique purpose. Some are designed to promote religious meditation, while others are meant as a simple escape from everyday life. There are Rock Gardens, which as the name implies, are made up entirely of rocks of all sizes. Tea Gardens surround tea houses, with a long relaxing stroll leading to the front door. Pond Gardens invite boaters to tour the garden from its central point in the Pond. Elements like sand and statues are commonly used.

According to the brochure in my hand, the John P. Humes Japanese Stroll Garden was built in 1960, after Ambassador Humes and his wife returned from Kyoto, Japan. This garden is four acres large and features a small tea house, bamboo groves, a wisteria arbor, a display hut for bonsai and ikebana plants, and a cascading waterfall. I pass a large tree and as the path takes a sharp turn, I suddenly hear music, which pulls my attention from the brochure.

There before me is revealed a magnificent waterfall and lush pond. As I approach the pond I see dozens of colorful koi fish. My attention turns to one that is jet black and darts around the others, stealing their food. I later learn that his nickname is Hoover, like the vacuum cleaner! The air around me is crisp and clean, and the notes of a shakuhachi flute can be heard from the Tea House. As I look to my left, I see our tour guide beginning to meditate. I am truly intrigued and I ask if we can join him. So we sit on the grass and quietly listen to all the sounds around us.

I unexpectedly hear a buzzing sound which pulls me back to reality. It's my phone. As I dismiss the call, I realize that I have been strolling this garden for over two hours...and I hadn't checked my phone once! We make our way back to the entrance and Marshall wishes us all a good day. My parents and I quietly make our way back to the car. I think back on the day and I am captivated by the designer's careful attention to every detail. I am particularly amazed by the bonsai trees, which are miniature versions of large trees found in nature. Such care and love is required to create them.

On the drive home it hits me; a feeling of regret for my behavior toward my parents at the start of the day. What if they relented and let me stay home? I would never have learned that aspects of the Japanese culture could have such an emotional affect on me. I only hope that someday I can travel to Japan and visit some authentic Japanese gardens.

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A Song in My Heart

Ravi Jain (Syosset High School)

During my early adolescent years, reading, music, and theatre provided a welcome escape from the reality of my undeveloped social skills, self-perceived unsightliness, and unsuccessful attempts to fit in with my classmates. Fortunately, works of fiction in various media afforded me the opportunity to empathize with the emotions and experiences of the characters I encountered. I read voraciously and broadened my appreciation for music and theatre arts.

Obeying the Broadway billboards that decreed, “All must visit the land of Oz,” I saw *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*. *Wicked* sings the story of a college student struggling to fit into an intolerant world where appearance matters more than intelligence or courage. Its lyrics became a source of inspiration for me. While I did not possess Elphaba’s animal activism, magical powers, or green skin, I understood her sadness and could hum her loneliness. *Wicked* encouraged me to look past my puberty-induced handicaps and focus on traits of which I could be proud.

Fast forward to the summer of 2012.

I was awarded a scholarship from the Center for Global Partnership to be an exchange student in Nagoya, Japan for six weeks. Without much embellishment, my parents dropped me off at JFK Airport with cash, my host family’s address and phone number, and instructions to “learn something.” Fourteen hours later, I landed in Tokyo; excited, exhausted, and unable to speak the language, I was helpless. I was reliving my adolescence—I soon realized I was more like Elphaba than ever before. (I even had a different skin color.) I felt I was the Wicked Witch of the Western Hemisphere who came to Japan to propagate fast food and bad manners.

“Watashi no namae wa Ravi desu,” I said, hesitantly introducing my name to my Japanese host mother after meeting her for the first time. She giggled at my poor pronunciation and then embraced me as a son for a month and a half.

Over the next few weeks, thanks to my host family, electronic dictionaries, and intermittent language study, I had “learned something.” I later became comfortable enough to even sing karaoke for the first time, to the horror of professionals everywhere. As I grew intimate with my new friends and family, I began to admire the Japanese even more for their unparalleled politeness. At school, I learned to play table tennis from the true pros – Japanese high school boys. At home, I learned to cook from my host mother, and spent the last night of my stay preparing what my host family claimed was an extraordinarily sumptuous feast (even if they hadn’t liked it.) And of course, everywhere I went, I kept improving my Japanese.

Though I predictably acquired a profound understanding of Japanese culture, I somehow learned as much about myself, especially after my host brother introduced me to his cousin during a weekend stay in Kyoto. Kanako had vacationed extensively during college, but felt her travels were incomplete without a visit to the Big Apple. We discussed my favorite weekend activities in the city, and when I mentioned theatre, she confided she had dreamed of walking down Broadway for as long as she could remember.

Kanako had seen the Japanese version of *Wicked* and fallen in love with the tenderness of its raw passion. However, she knew that for an authentic experience she would have to watch it in English. Blushing, I inadvertently told her I had memorized the songs, and she delightedly suggested we sing them together. The idea was laughable. I spoke little to no Japanese, and, while Kanako’s English was decent, she did not know the English lyrics. But when she started humming the tune, I hesitantly joined in with the English words, and she followed in Japanese. It worked. We had produced a brilliant duet, yet we hadn’t even sung in the same tongue. Our mutual passion for *Wicked* transcended all barriers – language, gender, race.

I found myself in Japan. Somehow though, I was more proud of having found a friend.

Spirit of Self Sacrifice

Emily Linko (Hauppauge High School)

When I was in eighth grade, I moaned and groaned along with the rest of my classmates as I was assigned yet another research project; this one having to do with World War Two. After pondering over possible research topics, I decided to look into something I had heard about many times before yet never truly understood; the kamikaze. Sure, I'd heard the word used as a figure of speech, or even as a cocktail drink, and I had a general grasp on what the kamikaze were, but what I had never been able to comprehend was why.

Finally, after weeks of scouring the internet and library, I thought I had it figured out. The kamikazes, the Special Attack Unit, were the last efforts of Japan towards the end of the war as signs of its defeat approached on the horizon. War is war; the loss of life is always inevitable, and this method seemed to be an efficient way to make the most of each death. The kamikaze provided higher chances of destroying a target than conventional methods, and a blow to an enemy outweighed the cost of an aircraft and a pilot. From a military standpoint, the refusal of a duty such as that would have been a great dishonor. Finally, I understood. Or, at least, I thought I did.

The next year, in my history class, we started from the beginning, looking at how civilizations evolved and changed, and how different factors shaped their cultures into what we recognize today. We learned about Japan's geography, its culture, its emperors, its wars. Then one day we learned about the Mongols, and our class listened with rapt attention as our teacher told us the story of the island they weren't able to conquer, and the sudden typhoon that had destroyed their fleet. "The Japanese people called this typhoon the kamikaze, meaning "divine wind"; they believed it was sent by the gods, the kami, to protect them". And with that one sentence, I realized that I had not, in fact, understood, not in the least. The kamikaze, I suddenly realized, were motivated by much more than a sense of duty toward their superiors. They were spurred by the honor and loyalty that had been deeply ingrained in their culture for centuries, positioned to protect the island as the next "divine wind". And then, I was sure, I understood.

The earthquake in Japan had hit in 2011, and people were hearing about it in phases; first the emergency response, then the short-term fixes, then the inevitably daunting long-term cleanup. Along the way stories trickled in of the kindness and bravery of people there and from all around the world. The one that hit me the hardest was the tale of a group of elderly citizens who volunteered to help clean up the nuclear waste. They elicited a mixed response; some people finding them inspirational and others feeling they should enjoy their retirements in peace. When asked about their motives, the citizens replied that they didn't have long left to live anyway, so they should take the risk of contracting a disease from the radiation instead of the younger citizens, who still have their whole lives laid out in front of them.

I was floored. At their ages, most would want to settle down and take a well-earned rest, letting the younger and more able bodied members of the population take care of new problems. But these people were willing to go out and put their lives and health on the line for others, others that most of them had probably never met. That was when it became clear to me; making such a tremendous sacrifice is about much more than just duty or honor; it's about loving your country and the people in it with every fiber of your being. It's about wanting to protect it and its citizens in any way possible, be it piloting a plane or trudging through toxic waste. And I realized, I had never really understood. Maybe I still don't. But maybe someday, I can figure out what runs through the minds of those who will willingly give up everything for duty, for honor, and for love of their country.

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Understanding Impermanence

Melissa Rose Kavanah (Stony Brook University)

The cherry tree is a favorite subject of Japanese art and poetry. Its blossoms, while extraordinarily beautiful, can also seem tragic; the delicate flowers bloom for a short while, a period of perhaps two weeks at most, before they fall from the tree. The flowers burst open, blossom like fireworks, and fade as quickly. How sad, one might think, that these blossoms should be so beautiful for such a short time, only to fall to the ground and decompose. One scarcely has time to fall in love with its beauty before the blossom is gone, and only the memory remains, like the afterimage of a firework in the sky.

I was not always able to accept the notion of impermanence being a beautiful thing. Shortly before I turned seventeen, my friend Ava passed away. Her death was sudden and unexpected, blindsiding friends and family alike in the way that only meningitis knows how. Being a headstrong teenager, I was furious at and terrified by the idea that things could just disappear.

I had lived my life up to that point secure in the notion that if I could only gather the things I loved towards myself, if I could only hold on to everything at once, I would be perfectly content. To have someone I loved torn away so swiftly, then, was shocking. When I came to terms with the fact that her loss was real, I felt compelled to re-examine my world view. I discovered a sort of vanity in the idea that I could bend the world to my will, using only the force of my own passions. I realized that I cannot and should not expect things to be permanent just because I would like them to be, and I began to try to accept that realization.

To the Zen practitioner, cherry blossoms and fireworks are beautiful in part due to their similarity to the human experience. People shape their happiness around temporary things, from material objects, to relationships, to simply being alive. Buddha teaches that suffering occurs when those things, which have always been temporary, are inevitably torn from the people who cherish them, much in the same way that cherry blossoms inevitably fade. To avoid suffering, Buddhists strive to eschew attachments. While it may seem that this would lead to a life without appreciation for joy and beauty, quite the opposite occurs; practitioners of Zen Buddhism become adept at perceiving a particular sort of beauty, the beauty of impermanence. Cherry blossoms are emblematic of this quality; they fade quickly, but they are no less beautiful for their transience. In fact, their beauty is intensified by the brevity of their existence; one must appreciate them deeply and immediately, fully experiencing the moment, in order to appreciate them at all. By understanding cherry blossoms, one can come to understand the limitations and joys of one's own existence; when one accepts that all things in this world are fleeting, the beauty of impermanence itself is what remains.

It has taken me some time to develop a new way of seeing the world, and I am still fine-tuning my model. I have begun to see the wisdom in eschewing attachments, although I am still very attached to many things. I have developed a deep respect for Buddhist thought, and have begun to try to incorporate some of its principles into my life. Throughout this process, I have come to find the cherry blossom to be a very appealing symbol. Its ability to embody the essence of Zen makes the flower of the cherry tree so well-beloved in Japanese culture. To truly appreciate the fleeting blossoms, one must detach oneself from the concept of the past and the future. To truly appreciate the world around me, I will have to accept that it is not eternal, and that it may even be illusory. That does not leave the world without beauty; it just means that I will have to change the way I appreciate beautiful things.

I think that I have come to understand something important through Ava's death. Ava was more of a burning firework than a gentle cherry blossom, but her beautiful existence was temporary, and so is mine. If I cling desperately to concepts, experiences, or people, the anguish will only be worse when they inevitably fade. Instead, I should will my passions quiet, and appreciate the pure, fleeting beauty in cherry blossoms, and fireworks, and the lives of those around me, for however long they last.

Wabi-Sabi: Nothing Is Perfect, Even Gardens Have Weeds

Ali Gilani Syed (Stony Brook University)

No one is ever comfortable derailing oneself, but I must. You see, in the past, I was not someone you would want as a friend. I was self-centered. Self-interested. Self-absorbed. Self-seeking.

Throughout adolescence, I had a hard time maintaining friendships. I was often consumed in studying and looking for tasks to ‘pad’ my resume. In short, I was a perfectionist geared toward financial success.

In school, I was not motivated by curiosity, but a good GPA. Conversations with friends mainly pertained to grades. I would find myself stressed with assignments, consumed by due dates, and struggling in relationships with family, friends, and myself.

Change was needed, yet I least expected it to arrive at a trivial dinner. During my freshman year, my friend Pavel casually invited me over. He introduced me to his Japanese step-mother, Sonya. When I mentioned my dad was from Delhi, India, she inquired about the Lodhi Gardens. My response, “*How did you know about that?*” was enough for her to discuss her love of gardens. Describing herself as a naturalist, she insisted I tag along with Pavel to visit her workplace, the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens.

With Pavel, I went to the site and Sonya gave us a tour through the collection of gardens. However, one site mesmerized me: the Japanese Hill-and-Pond Garden. With its splendor and simplicity, the red *torii* (traditional Japanese gate) stood in glistening water. The edges of the lake were green in reflection from the surrounding foliage. The pink cherry-blossoms ushered a sense of aesthetic comfort.

The garden was centered on a pond with a small island in the center. Around the pond, clusters of Japanese iris flowers, violet in color. Most captivating was the waterfall; a thunderous splash of water over the rocks creating a soothing, relaxing façade. It all seemed wonderfully placed.

The entire garden was a provision of awe. A miniature paradise. An idealized landscape; a wonderful equilibrium between order and nature, a balance between pleasure and simplicity. Never had I seen nature so organized and formal. My first exposure to Japanese culture- a *nihon-teien*, a Japanese Garden.

Sensing my delight, Pavel invited me to more retreats. At first, I was reluctant, but my inner curiosity gave in. Over two months’ time, I partook in activities I never did in two decades: kayaking, mountain-bike riding, canoeing, hiking, rock-climbing, and more.

Gradually, I realized nature provided a serene venue where I could remove my cloak of tension and anxiety. I could satisfy my youthful longings for privacy and tranquility and absorb the curative power of art and nature.

It was at this point in my life, I learned about *wabi-sabi*, a Japanese philosophy of seeing beauty in life’s imperfections. Sonya described *wabi-sabi* as something that concentrated on the acceptance of impermanence and imperfection in life. *Wabi-sabi* taught that in life, “nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect” (Powell 2005). So why not enjoy it?

In nature, I could sense *wabi-sabi* everywhere. Everything had its flaws, yet nature was still beautiful. The rough bark of the trees. The asymmetry of the rocks. The decaying color of leaves. Unrefined and crude, yet stunning. My retreats became liberation from the mundane. The lens of *wabi-sabi* showed I could live life with my senses and absorb life rather than be consumed by it.

When my grandmother was battling breast cancer, I used the appeal of *sakura-blossoms* to acquaint her with Japan, a place she never visited. Amidst the Cherry-Blossom trees at the Sakura-Matsuri Festival, we were drinking *sakurayu*. There were no worries about grades or assignments, just happiness that my *Nanijan* (Hindi/Urdu: Grandmother) was there. Unfortunately, my grandmother would leave me, but my new-found outlook of life assisted me in accepting my loss.

To me, *wabi-sabi* meant there was one rule: learning to be content with life. Let life run its course. Flaws exist, tragedies happen. Grow from them. Accept them. When you try to do something

perfect or attempt to make something perfect, it just doesn't work.

Some parts of the 'old-me' still remain, as I can't instantly shed the previous eighteen years of my life. But, I will definitely learn and improve over time. As Sonya once told me, even "*the most beautiful Japanese garden has weeds*". I realize that there is so much to see in this world. In this short time period I call life, I am both a *Gaijin* (outsider) and a *Yujin* (friend). But above all, I am a *Ningen* (human) who appreciates beauty in imperfection.

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Putting Things into Perspective: Lessons from the Far East

Charles Beers (Huntington High School)

It has been approximately four weeks since Hurricane Sandy struck Long Island and plunged our region into an unforgettable period of darkness and misery. While many have attempted to put those dark days behind them, it is impossible to truly forget the effects the storm had on everyday life. Almost all of Long Island went without heat and electricity for about two weeks, during which temperatures reached seasonal lows and tempers rose to new heights. I remember how each night I desperately hoped for the power to return, and how I was disappointed for more than a week. It was a miserable experience without electricity and heat and most days saw me and my family trying to stay warm and waiting for night to come. That feeling of helplessness and anger at the LIPA officials will always resonate throughout my life and I initially thought that all of Long Island had faced the true epitome of pain, especially the residents of Long Beach, who experienced the worst of the storm. Most of its residents had to relocate in order to have a roof over their heads and a place to sleep, as some of their houses and schools were completely demolished by the powerful storms.¹ Because of all the tragedies across the island, kids were eager to return to their schools and try to return to normalcy, using their education as a cloak to all the grief occurring around them. I remember waiting eagerly for the daily message from our superintendent, hoping that each report would contain the message that the high school would reopen. For me, going back to school was the only way to move on from the crisis. Thankfully for me and my friends, the high school was waiting for us after the storm, and I could finally reunite with friends who I'd lost contact with over the course of those dreadful two weeks. However, as I was later reminded, kids around the world aren't always that fortunate. Even when I thought I'd been through the worst two weeks of my life, it only took a reminder of the 2011 Japanese tsunami to bring me back down to earth and make me grateful for all the things that I hadn't lost in the hurricane.

Last year, a 9.0-magnitude earthquake struck the Japanese nation. As seen by previous disasters, this underwater seismic activity results in tsunamis that cause massive destruction to coastal cities and towns through colossal waves. These waves are virtually unstoppable forces of nature, capable of demolishing anything in their path. While the Japanese citizens have taken a multitude of safety precautions to counter these waves, nothing could have prepared them for what they saw in 2011. Over 10,000 Japanese citizens were killed from the disasters that ensued and millions lost their homes and even their cities from the damages. However, unlike Hurricane Sandy in our neck of the woods, children and parents across Japan had nowhere to turn after the tsunami has finally subsided. According to interviews, many Japanese schools, such as Togura Elementary School, had children in them when the waves appeared on the horizon, some of them even exceeding the heights that the officials were originally anticipating. When the tsunami hit, children and teachers had to run for their lives in order to reach an area high enough to avoid the deadly waves. The aftermath, though, was even more heart-wrenching to imagine. The same township where the Togura Elementary School resided was completely leveled, some reporters even stating that the town "now barely has any marks of human existence."² In short, nothing was saved from destruction, and the helpless children who suffered through this ordeal had nowhere to go and nothing to come back to. Trying to imagine these horrific events unfold was difficult for me to do and evoked newfound levels of grief inside me, as well as an equal amount of guilt. While I was worrying about when electricity would return to my house, children across the seas were worrying where they would live and go to school. Reflecting on their catastrophe should serve as a lesson for all Hurricane Sandy victims. Be grateful for the luxuries you have, such as friends and a school where you can be safe from harm, and when you feel like you have gone through the worst of times, always remember the Japanese tsunami survivors, the men and woman who continue to persevere in spite of having the weight of the world on their shoulders.

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The Tea Ceremony

Lewin Kim (Horace Mann School)

Steam rises in the air as the tea flows from the pot into my ceramic bowl. The smell is faint, yet familiar. I'm conscious of the green and red flowers painted on the white surface of the bowl. As my fingers wrap around it, I kneel on a cushioned mat, balanced and calm. *Sensei*, in her emerald kimono that seems to change shape with each graceful movement, watches me. I take a sip, feeling the green tea's warmth travel through my body, down my arms, and to my fingers. *Sensei* offers me a bowl of sugar candy, explaining that it serves as a spiritual balance to the bitterness of the tea. We both stand and bow as a sign of appreciation and respect.

While this scene could have taken place in any teahouse in Kyoto, the ceremony transpired at the Horace Mann School in the Bronx on Japan Day. Although I was born in the U.S. and have no ancestral ties to the Japanese, this tea ceremony reminds me of what I value about their culture. My upbringing was shaped by years of watching Japanese films such as *Princess Mononoke* and picking up groceries from the Mitsuwa Marketplace. In school, I chose to study Japanese as my foreign language.

My parents took my family on a trip to Japan so I could see with my own eyes the beauty of the country. I was stunned by the bright and colorful lights of Tokyo at night. Exploring the Japanese countryside was equally impressive and was where I tasted the unrivaled softness of Kobe beef for the first time. It was also the first time I bathed in an *onsen*, a Japanese hot spring, which rejuvenated me both physically and mentally. What struck me was the level of inventiveness in Japan. While most people think of Tokyo Tower or other typical tourist attractions when they think of Japan, I was inspired by the newer, creative buildings such as Joypolis, a huge indoor amusement park that was built to look inconspicuous in the heart of Tokyo's offices and towers.

After my memorable trip, I wanted to continue my cultural ties to Japan while living in the states. As a high school freshman, I joined East Wind West Wind, a school club that promotes a better understanding and awareness between Eastern and Western cultures so I could share my knowledge and experience with others. I realized that Japan, despite being one of the smaller countries of the world, is a leader in creativity, ingenuity and hope.

Even as Americans, we can benefit from embracing Japanese culture because it is a culture of learning and teaching. Japan's traditional folk tales and stories emphasize the strength of family and dreams. Today, its movies carry valuable lessons: Hayao Miyazaki's imaginative films *Ponyo* and *My Neighbor Totoro* touch upon the importance of friendship and reciprocation to others, and appreciation for nature. It is important to the Japanese to pass on their ancient traditions.

The tea ceremony gives me the opportunity to share my knowledge of Japanese culture with others who are unfamiliar with it. After the ceremony ended, one of my friends passed by and asked me what was happening. I explained the spiritual significance of the ceremony and encouraged him to try it. I led him to my *sensei*, and as my friend knelt on the cushion, I introduced them. As I started walking to my next class, I caught a glimpse of my friend carefully raising his bowl of tea, while a harp softly played *Gagaku*, the traditional music of Japan, the sound bouncing off of every string with a light pluck.

The Flower of Fire

Natsuko Sato (Arlington High School)

The hot, stuffy air of summer mingled with the distinct smell of tako yaki and yaki soba coming from the shops, and the music from the bon-odori played softly in the background. I was at the matsuri—the Japanese traditional festival that was held every summer in my town.

The matsuri was almost over, and I relocated to the hillside to settle down to see the fireworks. Sitting down amongst hundreds of other people who were also there to see them, I gazed up at the dark starry sky, feeling my anticipation grow with each passing moment. I was ready for the magic to begin.

Huuuuuuuu. Don! Suddenly, with a booming sound, the first of the fireworks was shot into the sky. The crowd around me clapped and cheered loudly—the wait was finally over. One after another, the fireworks shot up and burst out stunning streams of lights. The extravaganza culminated in a grand finale as dozens of fireworks of all different colors, sizes, and designs simultaneously shot up, brightly illuminating the night sky.

Throughout the entirety of the hanabi show, I was simply awestruck; awestruck at the magnificence of the scene and the sheer scale of it all that no words could possibly fully articulate my amazement. My eyes were simply glued to the spectacle unfolding before me and my heart was fully enraptured by those flowers that bloomed in the cobalt blue sky.

In Japanese, “hana” means flower and “bi” means fire. Loud, extravagant, and admired by hundreds of people, those flowers of fire are the symbols of Japanese summer. They are what move the Japanese’s hearts and bring them excitement. Moreover, they represent the skill, artistry, craftsmanship, and hard work of the hanabi makers themselves. Like flowers, these hanabi beautifully captivate the viewers and create picturesque scenes in the night sky.

But the Japanese appreciation of hanabi is not solely based on its extravagance and the exhilaration that it brings. This brings me to my second story:

As much as I loved matsuri and the beautiful hanabi shows during the summertime, they were obviously not regular occurrences. So instead, I would often beg my grandmother bring me to the convenience store to buy a pack of house fireworks. And of course, being a typical, grand-child-loving grandmother, she would happily bring me to the store and buy me a nice pack of miniature hanabi. In the pack were various types of fun-looking fireworks, from simple handheld ones to more thrilling “rocket” ones, which came in cute colored wrapping and designs.

Upon returning home, I would anxiously wait for the sun to set. And as soon as it did, I would grab the hanabi pack, call out to my family to come light them with me, and head outside.

“Don’t point the tip of the hanabi at others!” my father warned me every time, “You don’t want to light people on fire.”

“I know,” I always replied, “but they’re just so pretty that I get tempted to twirl them around!”

In any case, all of these hanabi sessions at my house concluded with the lighting of the senko hanabi—the sparklers. They were by far the most simple and frail-looking hanabi in the entire package. I took a strand of the senko hanabi and held it in my hand, dangling it down vertically to light the end of it with a candle. As the end quickly shriveled up into a ball of fire, I crouched down and tried to hold my hand as still as possible. I silently gazed at the ignited ball, which soon began spurting out branches of delicate sparks that progressed into more powerful and energetic sparks. I was quickly mesmerized by its beauty, but continued to concentrate on keeping my hand still. But before long, the sparks died down and the ball of fire quietly burned out.

Unlike those fireworks at the hanabi show, these flowers of fire are quiet, simple, and mainly only admired by the person holding them. But they are also beautiful in their own way. From them, the Japanese enjoy the sense of wabi-sabi, the concept of appreciating the ephemerality and imperfections of objects. The burning out senko hanabi evokes a sense of sadness, but allows the viewer to appreciate its brief but considerable magnificence. Some even say that the senko hanabi represents human life—frail, ephemeral,

and imperfect, yet quite beautiful.

Both types of the Japanese flowers of fire continue to bloom and glimmer beautifully in my heart today.

And In a Place So Different, We Are All The Same

Kate Snider (Herricks High School)

“I was in love with the place, in my mind.” -Sufjan Stevens, *Chicago*

I tiptoed around upstairs, old wooden floorboards moaning under the weight of my body. When I reached my destination, my hands softly nudged the door open as I slipped inside and immediately became entranced with the musty scent of age, history, and the storage of time. My eyes scanned the length of the walls, taking in the remnants of 82 years of life. In the far left corner resided a deep brown bookcase, only decipherable by scarce patches of wood that breathed through the clutter. I started over to the bookcase, taking care not to knock over piles of loosely stacked cardboard boxes. My fingers grazed the buffet of memorabilia, feasting on the grand array of literature, clothing, dishes, and antiques. There were carved, wooden chopsticks, piles of books filled with poetry, recipes, and tales. A glass case highlighting a beautifully painted porcelain doll dressed in silk garments stood alone, an air of elegance to her every detail. These relics, these little moments snatched from space, now sat as reminders of a distant time. And even in a place so different than where they once resided, these items seemed to blend right in.

My Grandpa, born and raised in Brooklyn during the 1930s, has traveled to Japan thirteen times. It must have been a strange sight: a young wide-eyed business man from America weaving in and out of swarming Tokyo commuters, or singing loudly in broken Japanese for the entire karaoke house to hear. After his first visit, my grandpa was enamored with the culture. From the moment he stepped off the plane and into Tokyo International Airport, every cell in his body became electrified. And after returning home to his wife and three children, my grandpa longed for the day he would return.

There was much to love about Japan; however it was not the beauty, the food, nor the language that lured my Grandfather back countless times. Instead, it was the kindness and honesty that was sewn into the fabric of the culture. Etiquette was different in Japan, and unlike America, violence and deceit were rare disgraceful acts. Vendors and shops would leave display tables full of merchandise outside, certain that nothing would be stolen. Waiters and waitresses did not expect tips, as working hard was merely an act of civil service. Men with hunched backs due to years of bowing were not uncommon, lending as walking representations of genuine respect. This overwhelmingly widespread innate trait of kindness was nothing Grandpa had experienced before.

As a child, Grandpa would tell me story after story about his life, usually centered around both mine and his favorite topic: Japan. As a treat, he would welcome me into a what we called "the junk room", due to the amount of relics crammed into a tiny space - a space dedicated to the preservation of his memories and heartbreaking passion. He'd let me browse and rummage through the shelves and boxes of old Japanese keepsakes, taking the time to explain the origin of every minuscule item.

Grandpa learned a lot from his time spent in Japan, and in turn I did as well. High up in a building, Grandpa sat in a tiny bar and spoke to men who poured drinks as they poured stories of brothers and fathers killed in the attacks on Pearl Harbor, the very same attacks that spilt American blood. Yet these men knew grief, these men knew loss, these men were just the same. Grandpa, a WWII veteran himself, listened and understood that even oceans away we were all inherently similar.

Growing up around a man who was molded by the ideals of Japanese culture heavily affected the person I was slowly becoming, and the person I am still growing to be. I learned that a kind and gentle heart can fill a person with warmth, and that generosity is better than selfishness. I learned that classification only leads to separation, and that war does not discriminate. But most of all, I learned that as time passes and each generation brings new ideas to the table, the roots of culture still tie us together. As Japan is changing due to technology and westernization, the foundation of trust and respect remains the same. As I continue to wander through life, I will carry the lessons brought home from Japan by my Grandfather and store them here, in my own home. Just like the old antiques in Grandpa's house I once adored, these lessons will now reside in a place so different from where they were taken, and yet seamlessly blend right in.

**Selected Essays
from
Ninth Competition
(2013-2014)**

A Little Respect Goes a Long Way

By Stephanie Lin (Stuyvesant High School)

It's intimidating, walking into a new school. You meet new people and make new friends, but it's a whole different atmosphere. Especially, if it's high school. It's all made worse by the fact that you're also taking a new language. For me, I was nervous, but at the same time, really excited by the prospect of learning Japanese. It seemed like such an elegant language, with its complicated stroke order and many different pronunciations. As I walked into my Japanese classroom, I was greeted by a graceful woman in a cardigan with her hair slicked back into a ponytail. "Hajimemashite," she said as she bowed. I looked around nervously, hoping that the other pairs of eyes that were staring at me from the desks in the classroom could help, but they all returned with blank stares. I blushed, gave a quick bow, and ran to sit down in a seat.

It was later on that I learned that it was completely natural, what she did. It was a standard in Japan for people to bow when meeting one another. It symbolized respect. We were taught how to bow properly, and "Kiritsu, Rei, Ohayou Gozaimasu!" became part of everyday class. At first, it felt unnatural, but it gradually became a routine I was proud to participate in. It was different from our New York lifestyle, where people bump into you and walk away without apologizing. As I continued learning Japanese, I also learned more and more about their culture. Respect is such a big part of their lifestyle. Whether it's bowing or taking off shoes before entering a building, it all goes back to respect. Punctuality is important, prolonged eye contact is rude, nodding is imperative; my head swirled with all the formalities and customs of their culture. But at the same time, it was remarkable. The culture puts so much emphasis on respect and responsibility; it wasn't shocking to find out that their crime rate is lower than the crime rate in all other developed countries.

It really put things in perspective. How had I treated my mother that morning? It probably involved yelling at her and complaining. In retrospect, I was ashamed. How could I have treated my own mother that way? My mother, who moved from Taiwan just to give us a better life. My mother, who sacrificed everything for my sister and me. I would do everything to make sure I treated her better from then on. I would do everything to make sure I treated everyone better. I would come to school with a smile on my face. I would respect my teachers. I would respect my family and friends. New Yorkers might be a little rude, but if Japanese people could live with such an emphasis on respect, I could try it as well.

As I became immersed in the language during class, I also tried to incorporate more and more of their customs into my life. Nodding is natural; it shows that you are paying attention to the speaker. I started to listen to my friends and family more, instead of talking about myself. I took modesty and being humble more seriously, as it is a polite response to a compliment in Japanese culture. Respecting personal space became a must if I did not know a person well. Politeness and respect are very important to others, but in the end, it is important to learn how to treat people nicely for your own benefit. I became happier, I felt that my relationships with people became better, and ultimately, I felt more satisfied with life. It was amazing. Every day as I say, "Kiritsu, Rei, Sayounara, mata ashita," to my sensei, a wave of gratitude washes over me. She introduced me to such an incredible lifestyle and culture.

As it is, a little respect here and there goes a long way.

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Effortless Grace: A Hero in Two Hemispheres

Charles Beers (Huntington High School)

There are a few moments in a baseball game that can't be described as anything less than perfect: the crack of the bat to hit that game-winning home run in the bottom of the ninth; the last-minute dive by a runner to safely avoid the tag of a catcher at home plate. But perhaps the greatest and rarest of all of these is robbing a batter of a homerun. Players have made their fortunes scaling outfield walls and taking long fly balls away from the outfield bleachers with spectacular grace. If there was ever a player that had mastered this sacred art of fielding, it was Ichiro.

Ichiro Suzuki was a name I frequently heard throughout my Little League career. As I sat in my dugout eagerly anticipating my next at-bat, I occasionally got pieces of advice from my coach. "Hit it like Ichiro."

Ichiro has never been known for his power. His speed, however, made any connection between ball and bat a threat to the opposing team. A routine ground-ball to the pitcher's mound could turn into a single in the blink of an eye. No matter how bleak the outlook seemed, Ichiro had determination I had never seen before and will likely never see again. His probable Hall of Fame career has featured some incredible statistics: 10 dominant years with 200 or more hits which was deemed impossible by baseball experts around the globe (www.baseball-reference.com) and 2001 Most Valuable Player award in his first year in the Major Leagues. Every time I struck out in Little League, I always remembered how Ichiro would always bounce back. With his perseverance in mind, I never gave up.

It was impossible to describe my excitement in 2012, when the front page of the newspaper announced that Ichiro was becoming a Yankee. To me, it was a match made in heaven: one of my favorite players on my favorite team. Ichiro was much more than simple statistics and awards. He served as a symbol of perseverance and hope to both the United States and his home country of Japan. In 2011, Suzuki donated 100 million yen to the Japanese Red Cross in order to aid earthquake relief efforts, motivating the Mariners to donate profits from the first six home games (sports.espn.go.com). Additionally, when Ichiro was traded to the Yankees, he signed his equipment and donated the proceeds to 26 different charities across New York (kenthimmel.blogspot.com). I realized then that one of baseball's greatest players was also one of the world's greatest international heroes.

Ichiro settled in well with the Yankees in 2012, leading the team to the postseason with his stellar performance at the plate. However, my story with Ichiro didn't end there. During the summer of 2013, I was offered a chance to interview relief pitcher David Robertson for Newsday and explore Yankee Stadium as a reporter. Words cannot describe my energy as I sprinted to the ballpark, took my stadium pass to the stadium, and followed my guide through the maze of hallways that held endless secrets.

After hours of exploration, it was finally time to step onto the field. The entire team was out for batting practice. Up at bat was none other than Ichiro himself, looking as confident as ever as he scattered hits all over the ballpark.

I watched with bated breath as he walked back towards the dugout where I was sitting and looked me in the eye with a smile on his face. He didn't speak English well and he had never seen me before, but the way he shook my hand and welcomed me into this unfamiliar place said enough. That same day, Ichiro hit a monstrous home run that helped the Yankees win the game, and is a moment in my life I will never forget.

Ichiro's kindness and compassion are inspiring. He is a symbol of Japan in more ways than one. He is tranquil and patient at the plate, using precision and grace in every at-bat. His generosity has transcended his native country and he has become the embodiment of international charity. Most of all, Ichiro is the embodiment of perseverance, never giving up on or off the field. For this reason, Ichiro is an inspiration and I try to emulate his effortless grace. When assignments seem insurmountable, when exams keep piling up, and when I feel like caving in to the pressure, I think of #31 dashing to make the seemingly impossible catch, and keep my eye on the ball.

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The Rain of Flowers

Fangrui Tong (Ward Melville High School)

It was there that I stood, only one person in a vast world of many, but for that one moment I could pretend that it was only me. A subtle breeze, warm and comforting blew past and on it rode a flurry of pink, delicate and soft. A single petal gently caressed my cheek and as quickly as it had come, it was gone, going back to join the wind in its graceful dance. The springy grass underneath my bare feet wriggled between my toes, valiantly defying gravity in its attempts to grow and rise. The taste of the late March air was fresh on the tip of my tongue, but an incessant beeping sounded from somewhere, muffled at first but growing in a dreadful clarity with each passing moment. My eyes flickered open and my fingers blindly reached out in the winter cold to turn off the alarm as I sighed, wanting to return to that wonderful place.

But unfortunately I had never really been there to begin with.

In all my past decade and a half years of existing on this planet there had always been two things that fascinated me to no ends, a calming existence in my hectic world- rain and flowers. I still remember the day these two seemingly ordinary works of nature had combined in this glorious mess of wondrous delight. I had been on a field trip to a botanical garden, sometime around when I was seven or eight. Everyone had decided that we would play tag in this marvelous house of intricately intertwined branches. However, while everyone else was running around in the vain hopes of avoiding whoever was it, I was static, gaping, staring at the orchard that lay before my eyes; an orchard of cherry blossom trees.

It was really a fantastic sight to see. With each gentle breath of a wind, the branches shook, quivering, releasing tiny streams of petals to float loftily in the air and eventually settling onto the ground, but not before giving a spectacular performance. It seemed as though some sort of enchanting music was playing, for they swayed in time to a beat, fluttering and floating and coming to a gentle rest. The dark chocolate brown of the tree trunks was almost masked and hidden by the plumes of descending blossoms, and indeed it looked as though each flower was a single soldier in a vast army of pink raindrops.

It was raining flowers, and I was in bliss.

“The sakura are blooming.”

I turned around, startled out of my trance. It was the tour guide. He went on to explain that sakura meant cherry blossom in Japanese; how every year the trees would bloom, decorated with the pink flowers, and a week after they'd nearly all be gone. Hanami, he said, was a Japanese custom where the people would enjoy the beauty of the flowers while everything was still alive.

And it was since then that I became fascinated with such an idea. That for one week every year something so magical could happen and as quickly as it had come, it would be gone. I would visit Japan everyday through my computer screen and simply stand there with all the falling petals. It was truly my happy place.

It was also since then that I kept having the same recurring dream of being able to stand in Japan among all that beauty, among the rain of flowers, and I still hope that someday my dream will be realized.

Awake

Iman Esmailzada (Farmingdale State College)

No matter how mundane events in your life may seem, you may step back years later and realize that those were moments you are never going to forget, for they shaped you in ways you wouldn't have understood at the time. We have photographs for the bigger moments: birthdays, family trips. But my most vivid memories don't have snapshots to go along with them; they live in my mind, raw with feeling. My childhood experience with Japanese culture was one of those memories.

Memories are emotional waves that live on in my mind, bright with color and vibrating feelings. Jumping on the trampoline in our yard made me feel awake, full of life. I would jump as hard as I could until my knees would give out and my enormous brown hair covered my eyes, my mouth erupting laughter until my belly hurt. Writing left me in a dream; my stories and journal entries let me be anywhere, with anyone, doing anything I wanted. Playing the violin with my peers during lessons in school left me frustrated. I could never master Mary Had A Little Lamb. I played my own version of the rhyme and was asked to leave for disrupting the lesson. My mother moving away left me feeling numb. An unexpected divorce filled my home with a sudden deafening silence. I didn't want to jump or run or write anymore. Staying numb is a safe feeling. Neither high nor low, I could stay in that place and be content.

But one day, while spending the weekend with my mother, I was given *bachi* drumsticks. I was told to bang out a sound on an enormous Taiko drum for fun. I hit the skin of the drum hard, felt the *bachi* vibrate back into my hand, into my skinny arms. The sound was enormous, full, and powerful. I made my own rhythm and was lost in the noise. My eyes were wide. I felt alive.

My sister, mother and I learned how to play Taiko together from family friends who showed us the art of Japanese drumming. We each had our own *bachi* drumsticks, long thick pieces of wood, rounded at the top. My mother's friend, who was Japanese, gave us special shoes made of cloth and rubber to wear while we drummed. We learned different songs, how to stand during each song, how to perform, what to say and chant together. We yelled, we laughed, we learned together, and our arms were sore after practice together. We helped make drums, with hide and water, stretching it over the barrel in the basement of my mother's friend's house: our very own *sensei*. We were nervous before performances, made mistakes, got red in the face, blossomed under the applause of a crowd, and felt giddy with energy. I was told to make my own solo that the group incorporated into a song. We were all a part of the music, and with that, together in our creation of something beautiful.

Taiko gave me an outlet. The drumming was a physical and emotional release of pent up energy. I was told to beat on a drum hard, and make a bigger sound, louder, stronger, fill the room, follow the beat, get lost in it. With the beat of six other drums thumping away, never were you too loud. I could drown out my own thoughts or worries, all while creating a beautiful, powerful song next to my family and my new friends. Taiko gave me an outlet of physical energy that helped me feel alive again emotionally. As a child, I thought I was merely tagging along with my mother and her friends, participating in something new and fun. I never realized how much Taiko did for me. Now I remember how special it felt to do something with my mother. All together we drummed, supported one another, creating new things, like a big mismatched family.

My memories of Taiko drumming are so engrained in me because of how I felt in it and because of what it meant to my family. It was time with my mother and sister. It was empowering. It was beautiful. It was special. It was something we needed and something that made us closer. Japanese drumming was a deep breath in, a pause, and with wide eyes, an explosion of sound that kept my heart beating fast, my emotions flowing, and my family close.

Instructions for the Tenzo

Kyle Tulod (Stony Brook University)

The Tenzo is a senior monk in a Zen Buddhist monastery charged with cultivating the physical and spiritual well being of fellow practitioners by preparing the meals with meticulous and meditative care ('Instructions,' 53). This is a paraphrase of a question I posed early in the course of study of Buddhism in Japan:

I understand that the Tenzo is not to waste a single grain of rice. Having read some Buddhist texts, I can guess the scripture explaining why what I am about to say is not the Buddha-Way. But I must ask: if the Tenzo had the means to save and multiply all the grains of rice to feed all hungry mouths, how and why should that temptation be resisted?

There is a long pause before the reply comes, in which Sensei seems to wish a Kyosaku were handy. This is the 'stick of encouragement,' a wooden implement used in a gesture of non-punishing striking to wake monks from attachments such as sentimentality, logical thinking, and egoism ('Kyosaku'). In retrospect, all three were deeply embedded in my question. So, if I am to understand Sensei's answer, I need to understand the assumptions of Western thought that lead to my attachments.

My wish, "to feed all hungry mouths," arises from my sentimentality. However, Shinran, founder of Pureland Buddhism, points to, "the [Vimalakirti] Sutra [which] states: 'The lotus does not grow in the solid ground of lofty plateaus, but in the muddy ponds of lowland marshes.'" In Pureland orthodoxy, Shinran is emphasizing the all-encompassing power of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow to grasp all persons entrusting to her compassion without regard to their past faults, and only based on their presence of mind here and now (Shinran, 76). Yet there is a hard lesson here too for the secular western humanitarianist examining Shinran's philosophy: benevolence is easily distorted into sentimentality, if an attachment to the transitory state of the world leads to instant gratification rather than the highest good.

My hypothesis of a, "means to save and multiply all the grains of rice," arises from my logical thinking. The Western scientific method is prone to imply that for all problems there exist physical causes for which solutions can be engineered. Yet, "An ancient Buddha said, 'A painting of a rice-cake does not satisfy hunger ('Painted,' 134).'" Zen master Dogen interprets this on one level by recognizing the spiritual needs of humanity beyond mere physical hunger. However, his inner meaning points to painted manifestations of rice-cakes which, while illusory phenomenal forms, encode the truth of reality: such that the true rice-cake is the great taste that drives spiritual hunger ('Painted,' 136-7). This has tremendous consequences for the problem of rice shortage, because it suggests the "problem" may merely be a symptom underlined by a deeper problem, and subverts the assumption that rationality and science are the solution.

My presumption, "if the Tenzo had [this] means...", arises from my egoism. To assume all problems have solutions in a progression in utopianism places no limitation on human agency to control society and the universe. The role of the ego self as an illusion is at the very heart of Buddhist enlightenment and cannot be neatly summarized. However, a self-explanatory passage from the "Regulations for Zen Monasteries" intended for the Tenzo and also pertinent to rice shortage helpfully instructs: "Just think about how best to serve the assembly, and do not worry about limitations. If you have unlimited mind, you will have limitless happiness ('Instructions,' 61)."

But back to the beginning: Sensei sees in my earnest yet tactless question my obvious ignorance of any of these subtleties. Finally, Sensei decides to gently encourage me, asking, "Where does this idea come from?"

I hesitate. Sensing that Sensei seems not to want my baggage from the West, I set it aside, admitting, "It comes from me, apparently."

Sensei's reply, striking for its novelty, would soon become as familiar as a chant, and just as melodic. The first syllable is a staccato, brief and sudden as if sharing in my epiphany; the second syllable is slightly prolonged, as if savoring the moment: "That's right." Then, as if I were not already sufficiently startled, Sensei suddenly cocks her head forward and, widening her stare, challenges me, "And are you Buddha?"

“I don’t know... it... yet...” I am at a loss, with no other recourse but to cite whatever little I thought I knew about Buddhism up to this point.

Sensei smiles, nods faintly, and our study continues.

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My 20-Minute Inheritance

Monique Bloomfield (Binghamton University)

I was already used to having feet slightly bigger than desired for woman, but my weight gain became an additional burden. While the other girls in my study abroad group showed off their dresses and shoes that they bought in Shibuya and Harajuku, all I had managed to buy were t-shirts; stockings after scouring several stores. The Japanese size of LL struck me with fear and embarrassment, as I left several stores empty-handed. My bags were full of cute *omamori* or good luck charms but when it came to finding something to wear, maybe that wasn't a part of Japan that was meant for me. So naturally, when some friendly *obaasan* at my host school gave me a chance to wear a kimono, my first thought was if it would even fit me.

I was nervous about making an awkward visage out of the beautiful garment, the only thing that had captured my eye when I combed through glossy depictions of Japan in 6th grade. As beautiful as the grassy fields littered with delicate cherry blossoms were, nothing gripped me like those flowing layers of cloth. I had never seen anything quite like the one-size-fits-all garment that managed to remain era-appropriate: I saw them elegantly wrapped around the waists of not only *geisha* and *maiko* but everyday women as well.

The kimono was not just something that was out of style like hairstyles from the 80's or hand-me-downs given away when it no longer fits. It was a living and breathing symbol of its own, lending to the ever-expanding mecca of what it means to be Japanese. It has meant so many different things to different people: it was an attire during the day, and a blanket at night; a way to show allegiance; to show social class or marital status. It was a canvas upon which talented artists could showcase their legacy with the sense of pride that I admired about Japanese work ethic. The time it took to choose and put together the right *obi* and *kimono* was an art in itself, showing the Japanese values of patience and harmony.

So much of the kimono wearer's identity is shown without words, avoiding the directness I had to tone down once I arrived to Japan. My concern was whether a foreigner like me, who preferred jeans over dresses, would do such elegance justice. The three *obaasan*, looking flawlessly in-synch with the kimono they were wearing, were not concerned with my body type as they fussed over my *furisode*. As they consulted with each other too quickly in Japanese for my brain to comprehend, I felt a rush as I pushed my arms through the pastel green silk kimono, its long sleeves brushing against my ankles. The bright orange *obi* hugged my waist, much like one of the hoodies I was fond of.

Even though my steps had to be reduced dramatically and I resorted to tipping over like a teapot to pick things up from the floor, I did not want to take it off. I was amazed at how well it represented me from not only a physical level, but a spiritual level as well. The fabric welcomed me, embracing my body perfectly to serve its purpose. I was without race or size, only concerned with care of what I could see myself calling my kimono. Just as quickly, it was removed from me, ready to become owned by another.

I wish I had known enough Japanese to ask the *obaasan* about how many hands had passed through this beautiful silk. How many young unmarried women, since that is who *furisode* were for, had worn this? Whose grandmother? Whose aunt? All I could muster was a very heartfelt, "*Arigatou gozaimazu*". I am forever thankful for that 20-minute inheritance that truly felt like my own. There was no need to change myself for the kimono because size or background did not matter. I felt a sense of belonging that no clothing store could match, in a traditional garment I would never have the chance or reason to wear again of all things. Perhaps the reason why the kimono continues to live on despite its decline is because of the impression that stays with you. It was one and at the same time many when it needed to be. To me, it was the part of Japan that I was looking for, beyond the justification of tags.

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Procrastination and Me

Shaikat Islam (Stuyvesant High School)

Without any regard for anything going around me, I sit on my plush desk chair and I begin my cycle. The snow white screen of my monitor surges a temporary relief into my body as I begin to browse. I click. I check my email. I watch some YouTube videos. I watch more. More. I check my email again. I go on Facebook. I wait. Then, the relief absconds, leaving behind an undesirable: agitation. I look around for the source of this restlessness- out of nowhere; my schoolbag suddenly makes it into my line of sight. Oh. At this time, I try to make a decision: “Now or later?” but before I reach a sound conclusion, temptation and lethargy redirect my attention towards the screen. The cycle repeats, and the ability to work is superseded by the thirst of entertainment. As a high school student carrying the weight of his future, I dared not say the word- p-p-pro- procrastin- procrastination. Out of all students, me, a Stuyvesant student, procrastinating? Without even knowing it, I had been conditioned; conditioned for procrastination.

Although I try not to admit it, procrastination has become my dogma, my disease: my fault. Unfortunately, this disease also affects 70% of American students, according to the American Psychological Association, and students are not exclusive to it: from 1978 to 2007, 27% of the American public thought of themselves as chronic procrastinators, while in 1978, it was a meager 5%. I chuckled to myself- America, the country with the greatest GDP, a nation of procrastination. Insomnia and schoolwork don't go hand in hand, but they burned a lot of my time, so I began doing what I did best: browsing. I searched the Internet for ways to mediate my procrastinating, and in the process gained lots of information on procrastination, and found methods, which to no avail, could not help me. Then, I found something new, something fresh: kaizen.

Kaizen means “improvement,” but has evolved to be translated as “continuously improving”. The term “kaizen” began in Japanese business after WW2, where the economy of Japan lay in shock, after having surrendered to the Allies. The ideas that would serve as a base for kaizen came from a joint operation between Emperor Hirohito and allied occupation forces. The head of this operation was W. Edwards Deming, a statistician whose work granted him an award from Emperor Hirohito and inspired the creation of the Deming Prizes by the Union of Japanese Science and Engineering (JUSE). I began to relish in these facts: Deming must have created something awe inspiring; something that worked.

Kaizen has since evolved greatly from post-war Japan, with Toyota changing it to implement it in their factories, but its key characteristics: standardization, waste reduction, and problem solving, still stand, along with its most unique characteristic: variability. Kaizen can be implemented in corporations, by individual people, in life therapy, and even health care systems. A NY Times article shows how the Seattle Children's Hospital transformed from being unreliable and a place where “nurses...would stockpile stuff” in a makeshift manner to a simplified area where supplies were stocked efficiently. Variability also exists in time lapse. Contrasting from a New Year's Resolution, kaizen can work with both short term and long-term goals, in lieu of one long-term goal.

Kaizen has many forms, as stated before, but much of the modern kaizen comes from the evolution of Toyota's kaizen system. This is why kaizen, when used personally, may remind someone of an automated factory. Nonetheless, the key characteristics still remain: Problem solving- Take on the smallest problems first, creating initiative to solve bigger problems later. Waste Reduction- Organize your thoughts effectively and error proof your day. By error proofing, I mean finishing a problem and thinking of ways it could've been solved even faster. By organizing, you also reduce waste, which increases productivity by allowing more work to be done in a short time. Standardize and Automate- Man takes on machine! Make your tasks automatic and standard, as if in a factory. As you practice, this becomes easier, and there you have it.

Japan has always been self-improving. Its post economy after WW2 had skyrocketed like a miracle, and more recently, Japan showed incredible progress after the Tōhoku disaster. Japan serves as a model for anyone, showing that self-improvement, even in the worst of times is still possible. As we go into the New Year, add kaizen to your resolution. I know I will, maybe later.

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To Love, To Live Japan

Erich Makarov (Staten Island Technical High School)

I had never been enchanted with a culture before. That is, until I stumbled upon a simple, yet absolutely beautiful, piece of music. The piece was Koto Funk by Minoru Muraoka. Utilizing almost every traditional Japanese instrument, the Shakuhachi master created more than a euphonic beat: he captured my heart. I listened to the vast array of sounds, the combinations of low and high, new and old, soft and booming, surrounded by an aura of complete tranquility, enveloped in emotions and desires I could not yet comprehend. This was my first touch of Japan.

With every new piece of Japanese music I listened to, no consumed, my desire to uncover the full culture that lay behind these masterpieces became ever keener. Beginning with Japan's history, I learned of the great wars which engulfed the three islands, and the intermittent peace which fathered the beauty I was falling in love with. I studied in great detail the wars of the Taira and Minamoto clans, the cunning and brilliance of Oda Nobunaga, and the betrayal and insatiable desire of Ieyasu Tokugawa. I delved in delicate poetry and yamato-e drawings of the peaceful Fujiwara period, the ukiyo (floating worlds) of the Edo period, the westernization of Japan after the Meiji Restoration, and the revival of the 1960s that only a people as industrious and dedicated as the Japanese could ever bring about. Nothing was quite as dramatic, suspenseful, and motivational as the history of such a small group of islands off the coast of Asia. I was intrigued, I wanted to know everything.

I gazed at a paper filled with hundreds of characters. By now I had learned the hiragana and katakana systems of writing, but before me lay the greatest obstacle: kanji. I knew very well that this was not an easy journey, but language was my bridge to the unobstructed beauty of Japan. I needed to cross it as quickly as I could to enjoy the treasures that waited me on the other side. Many nights, I ploughed through the rows and columns of characters, connecting images with words, sharpening my pronunciation, and practicing the subtle strokes which produced these miniscule symbols – symbols which alone radiated with history and aestheticism. To continue with such a difficult endeavor, I needed motivation, and what better motivation is there than food.

“Kyō wa niwatori no kara age o junbi shimasu” (today we will be preparing chicken karaage) said the grinning lady on my computer screen. My hands were washed, the chicken lay in front of me, and the other ingredients were neatly positioned around the table. I was ready.

One hour later.

Flour was everywhere, speckles of oil covered the stove, all the plates were smothered in soy sauce, but my prize was radiating in the pan. There they were, golden brown, sizzling in the heat, twenty pieces of delicious chicken karaage. I stood smiling at my creation, until my mother came down and saw the condition I left the kitchen in. True, it looked like a tornado had just passed, but I couldn't care less. I had done it: I made my first Japanese meal. That was only the beginning. In the next months I created a vast array of Japanese dishes. I did not cook simply for the enjoyment of the meal. No, cooking was something else: it was a way to discover Japan that no other medium could provide. Aromas, precise hand motions, the calming music of the shakuhachi playing in the background – united, these factors brought a culture to life. I was no longer studying the history, or observing the customs, I was living them.

As I sit today, writing this essay on a cold, rainy December morning, I cannot help but picture the people of Tokyo gathered in the night, celebrating the Chichibu festival. How I would love to see those magnificent fireworks, and the splendid Chichibu floats, decorated in shining lanterns. How I would love to transport to Sekigahara, and witness one of the greatest battles in the history of the world. What I would do to see the hills dotted with the rosy blossoms of the sakura. What I would give to meet the hundreds of valorous men who built the nation of Japan, who created this unique world. People tell me I cannot do it, but they are wrong. I can do it. I do it every day. Even as I am telling you of my dreams, I am living them.

The Training of a Professional

Anju Okamura (Elwood John Glenn High School)

In America, there are variety of types of restaurants you can go to for food. There is Italian, Chinese, Mexican, Korean, American, and Japanese restaurants spread all over. Now, you can have food from a different country right in your own town without traveling on a airplane to go to the country but sometimes at the restaurant you are eating at, the chef cooking for you may not originate from the country of the restaurant. For example many Japanese restaurants on Long Island have a Korean or Chinese chef. The training they have experienced in America is very different from how a Japanese chef in Japan would train. My father owns a Japanese restaurant here on Long Island and the way he trained is very distant from the training of someone outside of Japan.

My father was born in Japan and his bloodline is all Japanese. He started studying to be a sushi chef when he was only 15 years old and did not attend school during his training because in Japan, when you enter high school, you are not made to go. He was very determined to be a chef. During the first three years of training, he was only permitted to make deliveries and clean around the restaurant. He was not allowed to be in contact with any ingredients including fish. In the morning, around five A.M., he would visit the fish market with his mentor and examine the fish that was taken out of the ocean that morning. My father would study the fish and determine which of the fish would have the best taste and freshness. After these three years of just cleaning and studying without touching, he was finally allowed to make the rice and prepare small fish and clams. In Japanese the meaning of sushi is vinegary rice. This is the correct type of rice made for sushi. The mentors of sushi in Japan would not teach their apprentices how to make sushi. The apprentices would have to steal the mentor's techniques by watching them carefully. My father was able to steal his mentor's way of making sushi rice and made it. After another two years of this, his mentor finally allowed him to make sushi rolls. Many people may think making sushi rolls is easy but really it is not because you need to know the correct amount of rice and how to cut the ingredients that goes into the rolls. My father was able to quickly move on the make "nigiri" sushi which is the sushi with the fish on top of the rice. In the beginning of his overall trainings, there were six others going in to training. Throughout the training, many left because of the hard, long training that continued for over 7 years. In the end, my father was the only chef that stayed for his full training.

In contrast to the Japanese training, in America, many of the people who learn to become sushi chefs, come in contact with fish on their first week. Their training is only about 2 years at the most and they are allowed to stand in the sushi bar on their first week of training. Chefs in Japan are able to tell the difference between fresh fish and old fish and are able to estimate the price of a fish just by looking at it. In America, the apprentices are taught how to make sushi by their mentors instead of them stealing the techniques by watching their mentors carefully. Learning how to cut fish is very difficult because with a wrong way of cutting, the flavor of the fish is not able to come out at its fullest and the taste will be affected. The way of cutting also affects the texture of the fish which is very important when eating sushi. Many Japanese restaurants in America adjust to American customers by making rolls such as crunchy spicy tuna rolls or a Philadelphia roll which do not exist in Japan. Many of the rolls at Japanese restaurants in America were invented here because they do not include fish so people who do not like fish are able to have sushi too.

There are many differences in the Japanese and American sushi restaurants and their chefs. This is the reason why restaurants in places outside of their original country have different dishes than they would have in the original country. Professional chefs of Japan are able to do a variety of things.

Life's Beautiful Tragedy

Daniella Schoen (Huntington High School)

It was a beautiful April day. The sun was shining, and there was a slight breeze. I can remember it as if it were yesterday. Walking hand in hand with my dad as we meandered around the National Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington DC. I can remember the sense of pure happiness I felt as we strolled along the path, with big beautiful bright pink and white flowery trees as they draped over us. There were people everywhere, and not one person I saw did not have a smile on their face. Children laughing, birds chirping, music playing and people picnicking beneath the breathtaking trees. The whole scenery was breathtaking. It wasn't until the encounter my dad and I had that I truly understood what exactly the festival was about and why it was such a big deal.

My dad and I were just parading along, admiring everything around us, until we met this wise old man who forever changed my life. He kindly approached us and introduced himself as Akito. Before I knew it he began explaining to me the significance of the day. He explained to me that the beautiful trees were known as a Cherry Blossoms and that they were the national flower of his country Japan. He then began to unfold the truth about the flower and what made it so special to him and his country. He began "For hundreds of years, the Japanese culture has looked at the cherry blossom as a representation of life. But first you must understand one thing before you can truly fathom what exactly I mean." To be honest, when he first started by saying "For hundreds of years." I immediately thought that he was going to give me mini lesson on Japan's history and I started to lose interest. I think he sensed what I was feeling because he quickly assured me before he continued that I would learn a life lesson and he would not bore me. He then continued by first explaining to me that the cherry blossom trees only bloom for a short time each year. Before I knew it he reached up and picked a flower off the tree and placed it behind my ear. "You see?" he questioned. "Look around you, all the happiness among the air and how beautiful it looks." I took a second and glanced all around me. He was right. He continued, "The cherry blossom represents how fragile life is and how the beauty of it. Just like the tree, life is overwhelmingly beautiful but tragically short. So each year when the tree blossoms it's a reminder of how precious life truly is." I just stood there for a while, soaking in what he said. His last and final words to us were, "Just remember how short life is and to appreciate the beautiful aspects of it." I reached out, hugged him and thanked him for what he had shared with me. I could tell he wasn't expecting that reaction from me, he was pleased and after I let him go, he smiled and was on his merry way.

Akito truly touched my heart and reminded me how thankful I was for everything I had and everyone in my life. After he left, my dad leaned over and whispered to me that the cherry blossoms were his favorite tree. He told me that I reminded him of the tree because I was just as beautiful as the flowers. I spent the rest of that day with my dad walking around, treasuring every second with him. I was so jubilant, that I was able to spend such an exquisite day with my dad, it was an experience I will never forget. Akito taught me to not take life for granted.

A few years passed and I was once again reminded of the cherry blossom tree. But in this case it was unfortunate. My dad had passed away. All I could think about was how he now reminded me of the tree. The time I shared with my dad was beautiful and I cherish every moment I ever had with him but Akito was right. Life is tragically short. Little did I know the long lasting effect Japanese culture would have on me. Between the life lesson Akito taught me and my dad passing on, I truly appreciate the cherry blossom tree and everything it represents. Which is why the cherry blossom is and will forever be my favorite tree.

Tokyo Kareem

Qire Snowden (West Babylon High School)

My Godfather Kareem used to live in Japan for a few years. He taught English at a Junior High School and said it was one of the best experiences of his life. Once a week he would also teach at an elementary school. I asked him what he taught the students, and he shared most of his lessons with me. I knew it would be a blessing to adapt to the Japanese language and wondered if I could learn those same words. Knowing it would take some time to remember most of the language, Kareem would spend hours with me teaching me about Japanese. He would not only teach me the language but also tell me a lot about the culture of Japan and what it was like living there. He told me that Japan culture was diverse from other places and was widely known for its traditional arts. Along with teaching, Kareem also loved the music he had discovered while staying in Japan. Kareem lived in Chiba-ken, which is like the New Jersey of Tokyo, but he would hang out in Tokyo often. This is where Kareem got his nickname “Tokyo Kareem”. He would go to Hip Hop and R&B clubs and make friends with the Japanese people that also enjoyed Hip Hop and R&B music. Kareem went on to meet one of his greatest friends today, Masayuki. He met Masayuki at a Hip Hop club named “Harlem” which is ironic because Kareem’s birth place was Harlem, New York. It made me wonder how Kareem and Masayuki had become friends. He told me that they had a common interest in music. I was introduced to Masayuki at Kareem’s wedding where he would later on share with me some of his experiences in Japan. I had no idea that Japanese people listened to the same music as I like to listen to. This is when I realized that Japanese arts & culture are often represented in Urban/Black arts & culture and vice versa. Masayuki happened to be a producer who also enjoyed listening to Hip Hop and R&B. Using music as their common denominator, Masayuki and Kareem used the song lyrics to teach each other English and Japan respectively. Kareem said that he was amazed and inspired by Masayuki’s dedication and commitment to learning the meanings and that motivated him to study Japanese harder. My Godfather Kareem told me that he incorporated the Japanese work ethic and dedication to his studies. When he returned to New York, he continued to study Japanese and started his first business coordinating tours and translations. Masayuki and several of his Japanese friends came to New York to visit as tourist and when people would see Kareem speaking Japanese to them, they simply called him “Tokyo Kareem”. Then, he realized that people were asking his friends from Japan about their clothing because they appreciated their style. The Japanese brands like Evisu, A Bathing Ape and UNIQLO became just as popular in Urban/Black culture as the Urban/Black music is over in Japan. There appears to be traces of Japanese culture in many elements of Urban/Black arts, from fashion to music. Kareem inspired me by showing me that you could learn more than one language and how important it is to understand other cultures.

Getting to Know My True Self

Jeanette Wetherell (Stony Brook University)

A professor I had began her Japanese Buddhism class by asking the question “What is the self?” As we went around the room sharing what we thought, I heard things like “student,” “mother,” “daughter,” “son” and “friend.” Some said their name and listed characteristics, while others just shrugged their shoulders. I personally thought; “I am a yoga teacher and student.” I said this because I was so proud of that recent accomplishment and because yoga was something that defined me at the time. Little did I know, my professor was eluding to something much greater than the color of our skin, or the characteristics we define ourselves by.

As a child, one of the most profound memories I have is sitting with my mother, in a space we dedicated to meditation, holding our “energy” stones, devoid of dialogue, just meditating. We did this for so many years. However, as I grew older, I lost this sacred practice. I became preoccupied with my friends, how I dressed, what my hair looked like and following the latest trends in order to fit in. Like so many of us, I became consumed with the phenomenal world we live in.

I found yoga when I was 17. I started this journey as a way to deal with the never-ending pain I suffered from due to an autoimmune condition. Stretching and strengthening my body was a form of healing. My yogic asanas began to flourish. Before I knew it, I was able to stand on my head, balance on my forearms and twist myself into positions others can’t even dream of. Yoga was my favorite form of exercise, and I would even go as far as to say that yoga saved my life. However, something was missing and I felt an emptiness because of it. That something was meditation.

During my yoga teacher training, meditation was introduced marginally, but there is only so much that practiced in 200 hours. So, I was encouraged to pursue meditation on my own. I was given all the tools, and told exactly what to do: “Find a comfortable seat, sit up straight, breath in this manner, quiet the mind and it will come.” All this valuable information was given to me, yet I still could not quiet my mind. Until I studied Buddhism.

Throughout the semester of Japanese Buddhism, we studied Zen and Pure Land Buddhism. We learned concepts such as Zazen, Nembutsu, Tariki and Shinjin and heard stories of Buddhist monks reaching enlightenment. The concepts, beliefs and traditions of Japanese Buddhism struck my interest. Something about this religious practice intrigued me unlike anything else I have ever studied

It wasn’t until the end of the course that I understood the intention of my professors’ question. She didn’t want to know about our favorite foods, the music we listened to or even what religion we practiced. Her intention was to deepen our understanding of our true self. Nothing is permanent, so there is no purpose in being attached to anything I have. I am not the job I do or the car I drive. The body I inhabit is a part of the phenomenal world, but I exist otherwise. What I truly am is something I have only experienced glimpses of in my savasana after a 60-minute asana practice. My true self was something that I did not have access to.

While yoga introduced the impermanence of this life to me, the study of Japanese Buddhism solidified it. Because of this realization, I began to meditate. At first, for just five minutes every few days. Then, for twenty minutes here and there, until it became a part of my daily life. The benefits I have gained are immeasurable. I see things in a new light. I understand this existence in a profound way. While I do not know if I will attain enlightenment in this lifetime or any future life, meditation has brought me closer to understanding my true self. I do not pretend to be a Buddhist or to understand all there is to know about Japanese Buddhism, however, I cannot deny the impact it has had on my life. Buddhism is the reason I am beginning to understand what I truly am and what my purpose is. I consider this the greatest gift.

My yoga teachers were right when they told me “It will come, if you practice” I just needed to find the motivation. This life-changing course on Japanese Buddhism was my motivation.

**Selected Essays
from
Tenth Competition
(2014-2015)**

Fly With Me

Arianna Vetrano (Eleanor Roosevelt High School)

Step 1. Lay your square sheet of paper on the table.

“Dekita!” My mother’s voice jumped with excitement. There, floating on the palm of her hand perched a delicately crafted paper crane. My brother and I, with our eyes aglow, pondered on how three minutes ago that geometric object was none other than a flat piece of paper.

“But how, mama?”

She chuckled, “Here, we’ll do it together. Don’t worry, you’re both young and it takes patience and practice. I was around your age when obaachan first taught me as her mom taught her.”

As my mother promised, with years of dedication, I became just as good at doing origami as her. The Japanese art of folding paper to craft beautiful representations of life remains a symbolic part of my cultural heritage and is what keeps my inner child alive.

In our living room can be found a wooden side table which would be fit for a beautiful glass vase or a collection of picture frames. Instead, there lay a colorful variety of origami that my brother and I have crafted over the years.

Step 2. Fold sheet into a triangle and repeat once more.

Two summers ago I became a junior counselor at Downtown Day Camp, located in lower Manhattan. Initially, I was concerned about how I would transform into a good counselor after many years of being a good camper. With the roles reversed children would now be looking up to me for guidance.

Step 3. Stick your index finger into the pocket and open it up. Repeat on both sides to form a square.

I pulled up a seat next to Alice who was coloring vigorously with a stubby Jazzyberry-Jam Crayola Crayon. As I reached for a blank paper in the center of the table and laid it in front of myself, I felt her seven-year-old eyes peer up at me. I smiled and with a soft, encouraging voice said, “How would you like to learn how to make a paper crane?” She nodded timidly but with an affirming smile. I picked up a second sheet of paper and slowly slid it in front of Alice. “We’ll take it step-by-step,” I reassured her.

Step 4. Don’t forget to make the creases! Lift up the flap and join the middle pieces to create a point. Repeat on both sides.

She folded her paper ever so carefully as if she were threading a needle. Her eyes rarely looked up, for they were busy shifting back and forth from her paper to mine. After the very last fold, Alice broke her concentration and beamed; she had made her very first origami crane, and she had made it alongside me. Other children flocked to our table, mesmerized by our creations. So, I taught them how to make cranes as well, with Alice eagerly participating.

Step 5. Fold the four corners of the diamond in and then fold the flaps over like a page in a book. Lift both wings up, up, up as far as they can go!

Making origami cranes became a regular activity in group 2AB. As each day passed, I saw improvement; the creases became sharper and the birds more defined. Naturally, however, memorizing the steps remained a stumbling block for the children and I would find myself hovering nearby in case of a folding emergency. Until one morning, at drop off, Alice came running to me bursting with excitement.

“Arianna look!” She exclaimed as she held out a finished crane in the palm of her hand. “I made it myself!”

Her mother, having now caught up, laughed and added, “she’s been making them all night. In fact, she’s even tried teaching me origami!”

It later dawned on me that I did have an impact on the young campers by passing down skills, values, and Japanese culture, just as my mother had done with me.

The origami collection on the wooden side table grew twice as large that summer with every paper crane I received from my campers. Each day, the uniquely colored and patiently folded cranes remind me of the little hearts that I touched.

Step 6. Fold down the wings and beak. “Dekita!” an origami crane!

Tea For Me, and Tea For You

Monica Bederman (The Brearley School)

As we hang up our coats in the closet, I can already imagine myself doing something embarrassing—spilling the tea, for instance, or knocking into a piece of furniture as I try to stand up. I’ve been practicing sitting in *seiza* style for a week, and still haven’t mastered the fine art of not letting my legs go numb. I also may have forgotten how to form honorific verbs—and on second thought, perhaps I should have dressed more casually, for I’d misinterpreted Haruka’s “no jeans” warning as a request for formal wear. I try to cast my nervous thoughts away; the day I have dreamed of since the beginning of high school has come at last in my eleventh-grade year.

Although I had begun to study Japanese in eighth grade, I only developed an interest in the tea ceremony a year later, after I read *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* by Muriel Barbery. The novel’s main character, a concierge named Renée, uses tea as a way of reconciling herself with the chaotic, somewhat absurd world around her. She explains that “when tea becomes ritual, it takes its place at the heart of our ability to see greatness in small things”. Soon after, I read Okakura Kakuzo’s *The Book of Tea*, which Renée cites. *The Book of Tea*, written in 1906 for an English-speaking audience, outlines the influences of Taoism, Zen Buddhism, and what Okakura refers to as “Teaism” on the Japanese culture. Okakura explains Teaism as “a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence”, but makes it clear that aesthetics are not its sole preoccupation. Teaism makes all of its followers, rich and poor alike, “aristocrats in taste”, and permeates every aspect of human existence, from hygiene to economics to morality.

Okakura had given me a lovely introduction to the history and philosophy of tea. Yet as I stand on the unfamiliar carpet in my white socks, it isn’t his lovely prose that runs through my mind, but rather a fear of inadvertently breaking an important etiquette rule, of destroying the fragile harmony of the room’s atmosphere with a clumsy move, or of failing to attain the proper state of selflessness and spiritual enlightenment.

Haruka’s teacher, Mitani-sensei, produces three small folding stools seemingly out of nowhere; she explains that they are *seiza* stools that remove pressure from the sitters’ feet. “So we can cheat a little,” she says with a twinkle in her eye. Haruka and I giggle.

As expected, I stop feeling my legs about fifteen minutes into the ceremony. I don’t know what to say after bowing, or what part of the tea bowl to drink from, but Mitani-sensei explains every step gently and patiently, and I feel grateful that I can follow her lead. The silence that fills the small room has a sort of refinement about it, and the warm, bitter tea a calming aroma. As I sit and admire the tea bowl, my mind begins to wander.

I remember having met Haruka only a few months ago, when I was assigned to give her family a tour of my school. I learned that she was originally from Tokyo, but had been living in Manhattan for five years. She grew very excited when she found out that I was studying Japanese, and we discovered many shared interests—international cuisine, fashion, comedy, manga, and, of course, tea. Overall, the tour was a delight; yet at the time, I hadn’t thought that we would meet again and become close friends. Usually, I only receive a short thank-you email from the prospective applicant; I was surprised and quite moved when, a few days after the tour, Haruka suggested over email that we attend a tea ceremony together. After exchanging phone numbers, we began to text regularly in Japanese and in English. I knew since the beginning that she would always correct my language errors with sincerity and humor, but never judge me for them—and she knew the same was true for me. Okakura characterizes Teaism as “a worship of the Imperfect... [and] a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life”. I close my eyes, take a sip of tea, and wonder if friendship can be defined similarly.

A year later—when Haruka has moved back to Tokyo, and we still talk nearly every day despite the time difference—I think it can...

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Two Fateful Days

Dillon Wu (Stuyvesant High School)

On August 6, 1945 the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. 80,000 people died in the immediacy of the impact and 110,000 died from the fallout. Three days later, a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki and 45,000 more people died.

I had learned about World War II from previous history classes. My teachers had all lectured about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, about Japanese internment camps, the political structure at the time, and the battles fought. We had also learned about the Manhattan Project, about Little Boy, the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and Fat Man, the bomb dropped on Nagasaki.

However, to me, all this information never amounted to anything more than apathy. I learned and memorized facts about the war, but in the end, they were just that: facts. I believed that history happened and it could not have happened any other way. I believed that the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was justified because they put a speedy end to the war. I never thought about the people who were affected because I didn't consider them to be people; they were history.

It was in Japanese class when my sensei showed the movie Barefoot Gen that I realized what the atomic bomb really was, what it truly meant. The movie started out nice and slow, with a portrait of Gen's life with his family. Although he was impoverished and hungry, he was a happy child; he had a little brother who was also his best friend and a family that cared for him. The lack of food in the family was evident, but still, he and his family were able to pull through with hard work and they were relatively happy.

The moment the bomb dropped in the movie, when the clock froze at 8:15:45 and there was nothing but a harsh whistle, was the moment I realized what the atomic bomb was. I watched a young girl holding a red balloon melt. I watched her face twist in fear and her body burn away until there was nothing left but an unrecognizable corpse. I watched the old man and the young woman and the baby shrivel up and all I heard was the sound of the movie but it felt like it was the sound of people screaming. I was horrified; I didn't want to watch it. I wanted to turn away and pretend like it never happened, but at the same time, I couldn't stop looking.

I realized afterward that the most horrible part was that what I had seen was just a movie.

After watching Barefoot Gen, I decided to do some research on my own and found that the movie was based off the manga, which was drawn by Keiji Nakazawa. Nakazawa-sensei is a *hibakusha*, which is the name given to the surviving victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even after the war, the hibakusha suffered: people like Nakazawa-sensei were discriminated against and harassed. He told, in an interview, of a girl who hung herself because of the discrimination and abuse she faced. Many victims also suffered from diseases like leukemia and other forms of cancer, while physical growth defects, mental disabilities, and malformation plagued young children and children who had not been born yet.

However, I also learned that peace movements and anti-nuclear movements arose as well. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, for example, was built in honor of the victims and is a manifestation of people's desire for world peace. Moreover, there were people like Sadako who brought about hope and change by folding 1,000 cranes and giving it to other bomb victims.

Watching Barefoot Gen and learning about the bombing changed me. I am no longer apathetic about the effects of war. I believe that now, more than ever, should be a time for demilitarization and peace. Death like those shown in the movie should be a thing of the past. Nobody should ever have to experience something so horrifying. Nobody should ever have to watch their family die before their very eyes. I believe that as people, we should set out to make sure that there is no third Hiroshima or Nagasaki. They are the moments in history which we must always remember, but never repeat. The people that died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki on those two fateful days must serve not only as a reminder of the war, but more importantly as beacons of hope that may guide our choices in the future.

Cup Half Full

Nicola Shannon (Stony Brook University)

I hate dropping cups. A sudden fumble and frantic air-grabbing is followed by a menacing crack or crash as solid hits solid.

My teeth unclenched in relief that my white cup had not shattered on the kitchen floor.

“At least you’re not using one of those pretty ones.” My friend gestured at the selection of decorative mugs in the cabinet, painted with arrogant-looking birds perched on flowery trees.

“Hm...yeah...”

I retrieved my cup and examined it. It was smooth, but I could feel shy grains in the clay under the white glaze. It was not perfectly round but it had no harsh angles either, and no handle. The finish was just shiny enough to reflect a bit of light. On the bottom, almost undetectable, was a trace of a fingerprint left in the clay that was exposed where some of the glaze had chipped. The elegant lines that the cup made in space and the weight that it had in my hands it were both confident and purposeful, but not aggressive. It *was* pretty. It was beautiful.

My cup had been one of many displayed in a pottery shop in Mashiko, a town in the Tochigi Prefecture of Japan that is known for creating pottery. This shop was slightly outside of the main streets, next to a small barn where the owner worked and lived. The tiny man in a smock greeted my father and me when we entered. In my thirteen-year-old eyes he looked old and wise, but looking back, he was probably no older than 40. I scrutinized the contents of the display case, perplexed as to what the artistic point of these white cups and bowls were.

The man seemed to read my mind.

“Nice. Simple. Natural,” he said. “Not too big, not too loud. Shibui.”

Shibui is the adjective for *shibusa*, or *shibumi*. It took me a while to grasp this term, but from what I have gathered, it refers to an undistruptive beauty. Subtly is often a key element of something that is shibui, but its simplicity is relative, depending on how deeply one observes it. Shibui objects and people have quality and meaning that can be found hidden behind small details that are often overlooked. The importance in shibusa is found by reaching inward to explore what something is, as opposed to loudly shouting the importance and trying to turn something into something it is not.

I now realize how foreign a concept shibusa has been in my life and the lives of so many people around me. We grow up being pushed to win, stand out and waste no time as we climb to the highest position possible. But the small, wonderful parts of life that occur intuitively, both inside of us and out, are often ignored. We rush past opportunities that could be explored as we search for a title, an endpoint or recognition. Even as young as 13, I stood angrily at my middle school graduation, knowing how much work I had put into having the second best grades in the class, and knowing there was no award for that. I have seen medical students in college living to become doctors, miserable if they could not get the grades they needed. Yet I have also sat next to a family member in a hospital room as people who *had* become doctors rushed in and out, checking numbers and levels, without even looking at their patient’s face.

Shibusa does not mean laziness. Effort and success are ingredients of a great life. Yet, people often grasp for objects and experiences to haphazardly paste onto themselves without stopping to do something wholeheartedly, to really sink their teeth into something, even if it is some small detail—just for them.

I am okay with never being President of the United States or a chief surgeon. No matter what profession or stage of life I am in, I will live with proud modesty and with senses open to detail. Even if no one is handing me an award or a title or a raise, I will strive to never eat anything without tasting it fully, never listen to music without hearing it thoroughly, never forget that the simplest and slightest of actions can and should be appreciated. My shibui white cup is sincere, straightforward and, to most people in the world, nothing special. But the potter’s fingerprint has left a permanent impression on the way I see the world. I have not dropped a cup since.

Am I Caught Between Two Worlds?

Rina Inaba (Stony Brook University)

One of the toughest challenges I have faced in my life was figuring out which culture I belong to. Growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood, I experienced minimal cultural diversity. I was ashamed to speak Japanese in front of my friends because I was afraid I would be looked at differently. This made me feel like I had to choose one culture to identify myself with. Being born and raised in America with my first language being English, my parents were concerned that I would lose touch with my Japanese culture. As a first generation Japanese- American, my parents believed that it was important for me to be able to speak and write Japanese; therefore, they enrolled me in Japanese Weekend School when I was five years old. While my friends were hanging out or sleeping in, I was spending my Saturdays from 8:30 to 3:30 at Japanese School from kindergarten to my senior year of high school, a total of ten years, learning math, history, science, and Japanese customs and traditions. I resented the idea of me having to attend school on a weekend. Although I was given the opportunity to quit after the eighth grade, my perseverance and unwillingness to quit enabled me to embrace the importance of Japanese customs and traditions.

Having the opportunity to attend both Japanese and American schools, it did not take a long time for me to realize how different Japanese culture was compared to American culture. In American school, I was used to having custodians, teachers being in charge of all the classwork and attendance, and the professional yet somewhat casual relationship between teacher and student. My experience at the Japanese Weekend School was very different in terms of the values that were promoted and the relationships formed with my teachers. One of the most interesting differences I noticed were the dynamic interactions that occurred during lunch. In American school, my parents would typically make a sandwich; in Japanese school, lunch normally consisted of a formal bento. As opposed to American school where there are custodians, we were in charge of cleaning up at the end of the day at Japanese school. In Japanese school, we also had *tōbans*, where students were assigned to a specific duty each week. For example, as *nichoku tōban*, I would be responsible for taking attendance, creating a to-do-list of the day, and summarizing what occurred in class at the end of the school day. At first it was difficult to see the purpose of *tōbans*; I later realized it gave me a sense of responsibility and unity with my fellow Japanese classmates.

One of the first things I noticed was how most teachers at Japanese school emphasized the strict educational relationship rather than the more casual and approachable relationship with American teachers. Coming from an American school that focused on class participation and interactions, I was always encouraged to ask a questions and state my own opinion. However, in Japanese School I noticed this sense of superiority and inferiority dynamic (referred to as *senpai- kōhai*), an essential element of Japanese culture. I noticed the commonality for a lower classman to show respect to an upper classman by speaking more formally and following the *senpai's* orders while in turn the *senpai* serving as a mentor by protecting and guiding the *kōhai*. These morals and traditions are aspects I would not have been able to understand from simply reading a book or watching a movie; rather, they require first hand experiences to fully immerse in Japanese culture.

Rather than viewing Japanese School as a Saturday wasted, I now see it as an opportunity that my parents gave me to embrace my Japanese heritage as an American citizen. Being able to attend both American and Japanese schools have helped me answer the question with which my essay is titled. I did not have to choose which culture I belonged to, rather I have learned to exist outside both bounds, and at the same time thrive in each.

Beauty Is in the Eye of the Beholder

Irene Chen (Townsend Harris High School)

It starts on a spring day, sitting in the computer room. The only sounds audible are the whirring of computer fans and the voice of our teacher. 32 pairs of eyes wander the room, looking for a respite from the school work. In a brief moment of focus, I hear the teacher talking about words that are unique to certain languages and my interest is piqued. 31 pairs of eyes now wander the room as my attention shifts to my computer screen. I'm browsing through a list of words that are unique to other cultures when I'm drawn to one word: *komorebi*.

Komorebi is the Japanese word for the sunlight that filters through the leaves of trees. I'm immediately drawn in by the picturesque vision of sunlit rays falling on green leaves. But my second thought comes in the form of a question: this word seems so exceedingly specific and unique. Why create a word just to describe this relatively uneventful and common occurrence? Well, I found my answer a few months later.

It is the summer of 2014 and my family is at the Japanese Tea Garden in San Francisco. The moment I enter the garden, I'm greeted with an array of multicolored bushes, shrubs, and leaves that border a pond, tinged with green. Light grey rocks speckled with white and red are scattered in a seemingly random, yet unexpectedly pleasing formation. As I walk through the garden, I'm astounded by the order and beauty around me. I see koi boasting beautiful colors, reminiscent of fire dancing along their delicate fins. Trees with branches marked off with the light feather touches of a green leaf. Clear ponds dotted with lily pads and the lightest of pinks found in the petals of a lotus flower. I come across an arched drum bridge that crosses a thin river, stone statues of cranes frozen in place in ponds, bright red pagodas, stepping stone paths, a small zen garden, and a traditional tea house in the heart of the garden. Needless to say, I'm amazed. You see, I previously thought of gardens as fields of flowers or small, personalized patches of land for families to use recreationally. However, completely submerged in the experience, I found that the meaning of a garden went far beyond America's backyards, geared towards practicality.

A major part of Japanese culture involves an appreciation for nature and a pursuit of simplistic beauty. That's not to say that countless other cultures don't value nature and simplicity, but this is the first time I've witnessed such a pure devotion in applying those principles and melding them together to create such a garden that is there for the purpose of eliciting a sense of peace, serenity, and contentment. And *that* is the answer to my question. The whole reason why *komorebi* exists as a word is because Japanese culture is rooted in minimalism. There doesn't need to be a special occasion to acknowledge beauty. Rather, it is finding the extraordinary in the ordinary and looking at it from a new perspective every day that makes life so much more enjoyable. Instead of constantly seeking happiness, you learn to incorporate happiness into your everyday life.

So here I am, standing in the middle of a Japanese tea garden and breathing in the crisp summer air. First I look at the floor. Then I look around me. Finally, I look up at the trees to see a collage of colors: greens, yellows, and reds. I see the way the leaves sway in the breeze, the way sunlight shines through holes in the canopy while contrasting against the silhouette of leaves for a holistic embodiment of beauty in the mundane. I mean, I see this every day, but I'm suddenly looking through a new lens. Just like how the sunlight hits a barricade of leaves and illuminates it from behind, unveiling a whole network of interconnected veins from where I stand, I now see this display from a completely new point of view. And you know what? Sometimes, you do need another perspective to let beauty reveal itself where it was once hidden.

Saying Sayonara

Charles Beers (Huntington High School)

I've never been great with good-byes and I hate the awkward moments leading up to them. The queasy feeling in my stomach, combined with the golf ball-sized lump in my throat and the inevitable welling of tears, foreshadows the inescapable words. Yes, I am a mush, and although I'll never master this skill, I realized this past summer I'll need to learn.

A group of friends and I were sitting at our usual table in Kashi, the local Japanese restaurant where we had forged our friendship. I remember every sight and smell vividly. There was the steam of the grill that cast a warmth into the air and a sizzle to our hearts. There was the roar of conversation, dancing back and forth from Japanese to English like a perfectly synchronized couple in the midst of a serenade. Best of all was the indescribable taste of that first pork gyoza mixed with a steaming bowl of miso soup. It should have been heaven, but this perfect painting of a Japanese dinner had a dark smear that lingered in the corner of the canvas: it was a farewell dinner for Ben.

Ben was a senior, and one of my closest friends. We and a few other friends from art class forged a friendship over Japanese cuisine and movies over the past three years. You could imagine that strange feeling that crept up on me when he sent me a text saying he was leaving for Chicago in a matter of days and could we have one last group dinner at Kashi. I was excited that he had gotten into his dream school, but disappointed that he would be moving so far away in so little time. So while the rest of the group scarfed down Angry Dragon Bento boxes, I was lost in thought about the future. Would this be the last time I saw Ben? What about me? What would happen when I had to leave my friends behind for college next year?

After we were stuffed with Japanese delicacies and had bid our waitress sayonara, we drove back to Ben's. Ben had told us several times that he had seen one of the greatest movies ever made: an old animated movie titled *Spirited Away*, by Hayao Miyazaki. When the movie started to play, I tried my hardest to take my mind off the inevitable of the evening.

In the first five minutes I realized something important: it was WEIRD. While the opening seemed relatable, a little girl feeling anxious about heading off to a new school, things quickly took a very strange turn. The parents transformed into pigs, animals and mystical creatures started talking, and the girl, Chichiro, was forced to work in a bath house while trying to figure out a way to free her parents. I was awestruck. What was I watching? But the more I watched, the more I became glued to the screen. The colors were bright and beautiful, and I was eager to explore the fictional, nonsensical world. There were funny moments, dark moments, weird moments, and even moments where characters questioned their own identities. But the tone continued to be upbeat, and I became hooked on the spirited fantasy; I didn't want it to end. Then, as all things must, Chichiro left the magical world, said good-bye to her new friends, and returned to reality with her parents driving to her new school. It was over.

When Ben drove us home, I was lost in thought at the strange, addictive fantasy I had just seen. I felt like Chichiro, embracing reality and facing the inevitable change that came with it, which is when I realized the true message of the movie. I got out of the car, gave Ben a big hug and wished him luck at school, and watched him drive off into the distance.

As I mentioned, I'm not good at good-byes, and that was one of the hardest. Leaving places and people I've grown so attached to is inevitable as I now prepare to leave for college and discover new roads to travel. However, I'll always remember the message of *Spirited Away*: make the most of the time you have now. There are interesting new faces to see, places to visit, and memories to make. Chichiro and Ben taught me that. One day I'll return to that fantasy world again, laughing alongside Ben as we devour spring rolls or revisit Miyazaki's masterpiece. But for now, "Ima o tanoshime."

Examining the Pacific War in the Context of Japanese and American Culture

Brian Brew (Herricks High School)

My grandfather enlisted not long after his eighteenth birthday. As it was 1944, he reckoned he had a choice: join the Navy and serve America in relative safety, or risk being drafted as a soldier or a marine. Upon finishing boot camp, he was assigned to the transport ship *Riverside* and served as a radar man for the duration of the Pacific War. He carried a prejudice within him for the rest of his life after the conflict – a prejudice against the Japanese people. His intolerance was neither blatant racism nor contempt. It was rather a form of distrust, mixed with an omnipresent resentment. Any item with a “Made in Japan” tag was only to be bought as a last resort. Owning a Japanese car? Unthinkable. Whereas my generation knows Japan for its history and vibrant culture, his found it difficult to look past Pearl Harbor and the kamikazes.

American culture in the war years hardly helped improve people’s perceptions of Japan. Emperor Hirohito, who is remembered today as a soft-spoken, good-hearted man, was portrayed as a buck-toothed monkey. And sadly, men of my grandfather’s ilk, who merely refrained from buying Japanese and cast the occasional suspicious glance, were the minority. Japanese Americans, even those born stateside and their families, were the victims of bitter racism during and after the war. Internment camps and signs reading “Japs Keep Moving” were the norm of the time. During the Second World War, Americans – civilian and soldier alike – hardly understood that the determination of Japanese soldiers stemmed from centuries of culture and tradition.

American GIs saw the banzai charges and suicidal fervor of their foes as a disturbing brand of fanaticism. They had next to no knowledge whatsoever about the principles of Japanese society that motivated their actions. First and foremost, of course, are the codes that stemmed from centuries of samurai traditions. Bushido, the well-known Japanese equivalent of western chivalry, is prominent among these codes. Bushido places emphasis upon justice, honor, and loyalty. In addition to Bushido, the ancient Japanese religion of Shintoism played a role in motivating the empire’s soldiers in the war. Among the principal beliefs of the faith is that the emperor is a divine figure to be obeyed without hesitation. Shintoism, which served the Japanese military establishment in the early years of the war, served to help the allies in the end: after the attacks on civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to say nothing of the threat posed to Tokyo, Emperor Hirohito refused to allow his people to suffer further from the horrors of war. A coup against him failed, and a recorded message from the emperor was delivered to Japan’s people and its troops via radio for the first time in history. It was in part through Shintoism, which stirred countless Japanese soldiers to fight hopeless battles for their emperor and their country, that the warriors laid down their arms and peace talks with the United States began. The military regime perverted the practices of Japanese culture, such as loyalty to the emperor and ritual suicide for the sake of honor, to suit their own purposes, just as terrorists in today’s world distort peaceful teachings to justify their own atrocious agendas.

My grandfather spent time in Japan after the war’s end, in the early months of the occupation. But he didn’t just spend time there. He was, according to the tale, among the first Americans to lay eyes upon the smoldering ruin of Hiroshima in the summer of 1945. He felt no joy, nor pride, nor patriotism at the event. He was simply horrified. And that, I think, helped keep his bias against the Japanese people from ballooning into hatred, and kept him from instilling that bias in his children. A surgeon in his later years, he developed a motto that he instilled in his three daughters and three sons, the youngest of whom is my father: when you cut into someone, we’re all the same. American and Japanese leaders seem to have grasped this fundamental fact. In the long decades since the war, the old foes have become good friends. It gives one a definite feeling of hope.

Nana Korobi, Ya Oki

Seung Hye Yang (Queens High School for the Sciences at York College)

“*Nana korobi, ya oki*” means “Fall down seven times, get up eight” in Japanese. It took me a long while before I fully understood what that meant. Growing up as the firstborn daughter of a very traditional East Asian family was a heavy burden to carry, because anything less than perfect was absolutely unacceptable. I was raised to believe that my self-worth was defined by the straight A’s I was expected to bring home, by the pride I brought to my parents. I was raised to be exemplary. And for a while, I thought I was.

That all changed in 8th grade. I was at the highest point of my life, or so I thought. I had the best grades in my class, and I would always show up on the top honor rolls in school. I was the daughter all the other Asian parents wanted their children to be. My parents bragged to their peers about my every accomplishment. Teachers would constantly remind me that I was set up for a bright future. I thought this was it. I thought I was happy. But deep down inside, I knew I wasn’t. There was always the nagging feeling that something was missing- and the realization came all at once. I was completely empty inside. I had nothing but the so-called “honor” I valued so much. Who was I? If you took away my grades and my manners, I had absolutely nothing.

This realization hit me like a brick, and around the same time, my grades began to fall drastically. For me, a girl who knew how to do nothing but study, it was a difficult time. I lost the respect of my parents, who felt the need to remind me every day how disappointed they were in me. I was disappointed in me. It was all too much at once, and it was terrifying how I couldn’t get back up again. I’d never experienced failure before in my life, and now I was one.

What saved me was my 8th grade exit project. We were told to depict a certain part of World War II, in any kind of media. I chose to make a comic book about the bombing of Hiroshima. I loved history, but I always unconsciously drifted away from the whole picture, opting only to focus on the winners’ point of view. However, for the first time in my life, I chose to focus on the history of the losing side, to see just how things went down for them.

I was absolutely horrified. I went in knowing Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the only two places in history to be attacked with the atomic bomb, but I never knew the terrifying effects of the nuclear energy that came with it. Studying the bombing of Hiroshima opened my eyes to a new world. I was forced to look at images I would have otherwise never stomached, to read the graphic accounts of firsthand witnesses, to feel the despair that surely rose over the city as it smoldered and burned. I read about how the innocent civilians in direct contact with the bomb’s initial radius either died immediately, or died shortly from throwing their burning bodies into contaminated water. I read about how the people near the bomb were blinded by the light, and how people in the future were afflicted by the after-effects of the radiation that followed. I was utterly in shock, and found myself wondering just how this city looked like today.

Naturally, it came as a complete shock when I saw that today, Hiroshima is a beautiful, modern city with skyscrapers and highways. I learned that after the bombing, the people of Japan and the world worked together to rebuild the destroyed city. In that moment, I knew the most important thing I learned from the project was that you could always bounce back. Failure is inevitable, but it is merely a setback. It’s okay to stumble and fall, you’re human. Hiroshima went from a thriving city to nothing, to a thriving city once more. The people never gave up on Hiroshima, and it returned to its former glory in a matter of decades. I saw Hiroshima in me.

Nana korobi, ya oki. I can feel myself falling again. I’ve fallen countless times since then. It may be the seventh time, or the hundredth time, I’ve lost count. But it doesn’t really matter. I’ve learned to get back up.

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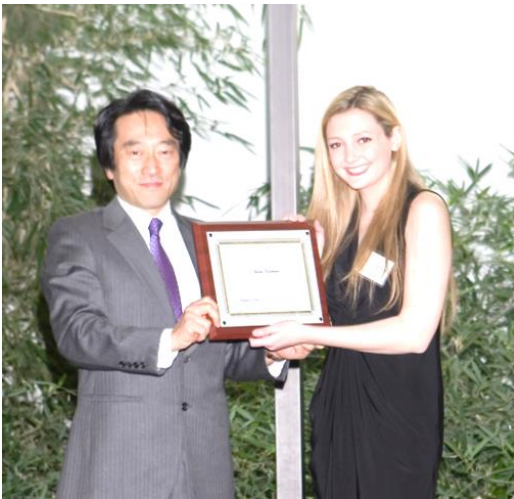
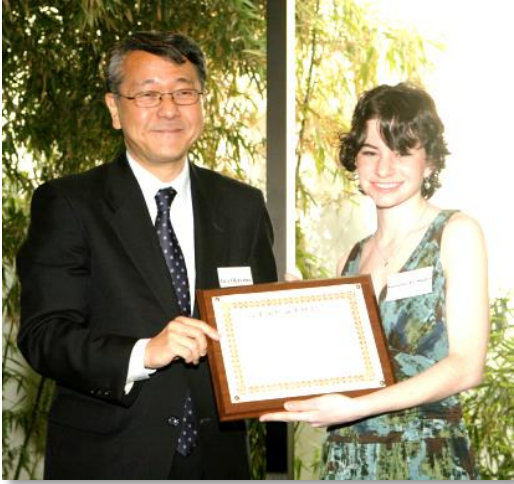
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Memorable Moments



Award Ceremonies







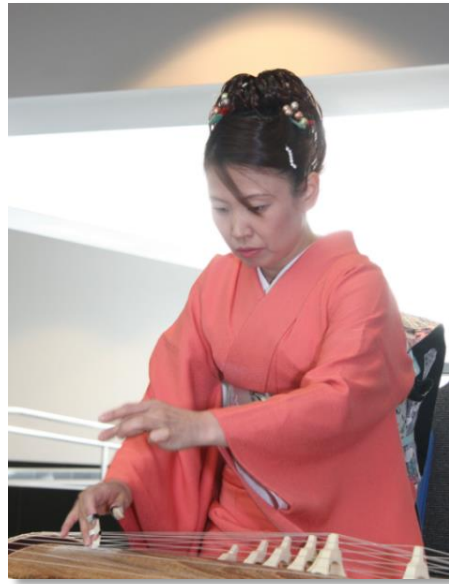
Reception







Performances



Raffle



At Ambassador's Residence



Ambassador & Mrs. Reiichiro Takahashi
(May 23, 2015)



Ambassador & Mrs. Sumio Kusaka
(May 24, 2014)



Ambassador & Mrs. Shigeyuki Hiroki
(May 25, 2013)



Ambassador & Mrs. Shigeyuki Hiroki
(May 12, 2012)

In Memory of

The late Mr. Kinya Uchida



Mr. Uchida's warm support was instrumental in launching the JCSB Essay Competition sponsored by Canon U.S.A. in 2005, to which JCSB is deeply grateful. The JCSB instituted Uchida Memorial Award in honor of the late Mr. Uchida in 2013.



People



First Competition (2005-2006)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

- 1st Place: Nora Micheva (Ward Melville High School)
2nd Place: Michael Cohen (The Fieldston School High School)
3rd Place: Amita Jain (Syosset High School)

College Division Best Essay Award

Robert Donnelly (Stony Brook University)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Nora Micheva (Ward Melville High School)

Honorable Mention

- Kaitlyn Ann Ferris (Mount Sinai High School)
Jerry Michael Blackman (the Cooper Union School of Art)

Finalists

- Kimani Calnek (United Nations International School)
Michael Chow (Syosset High School)

Joanna Goodman (Stony Brook University)
Shunna Ide (Northport High School)
Ji Kim (Syosset High School)
Jenna Kon (Northport High school)
Kellie Murphy (Earl L. Vandermeulen High School)
Jordanne Nash (Stony Brook University)
Benjamin Pierce (Paul D. Schreiber High School)
Lauren Sharan (Cold Spring Harbor High School)
Jason Sim (Half Hollow Hills High School West)
Victoria Wong (Lynbrook High School)
Dan Xue (John Bowne HS)

Second Competition (2006-2007)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

1st Place: Molly Baum (Longwood High School)

2nd Place: Joan Kim (Syosset High School)

3rd Place: Melida Maldonado (Marble Hill School for International Studies)

College Division Best Essay Award

Heather Highfield (Stony Brook University)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Molly Baum (Longwood High School)

Honorable Mention

Pratima Bhattacharyya (Bronx High School of Science)

Stephanie Miceli (Floral Park Memorial High School)

Ruthie Nachmany (Hunter College High School)

Finalists

Briana Codispoti (Longwood High School)

Sarah Flood (Longwood High School)
Justin Walsh (Deer Park High School)
Allycia Barbera (Islip High School)
Alice Hung (Townsend Harris High School)
Alice Kai (Townsend Harris High School)
Samantha Rubinstein (Longwood High School)
Jen Klock (Longwood High School)
Richard Edele (Townsend Harris High School)
Ashley Graham (Deer Park High School)

Semi-Finalists

Lawrence Brenner (Stony Brook University)
Jonathan Stimmer (Hunter College)

Third Competition (2007-2008)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

1st Place: Samantha Dupler (South Side High School)

2nd Place: Mari Iwahara (The Dalton School)

3rd Place: Elizabeth Morgan (Bronx High School of Science)

College Division Best Essay Award

Lauren Phillips (Stony Brook University)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Samantha Dupler (South Side High School)

Honorable Mention

Caresse Rose Correa (Longwood Senior High School)

Matthew Auster (Columbia Prep School)

Omena Ejekpokpo (Aquinas High School)

Lisa Kawamoto (Columbia University, Columbia College)

Finalists

Michael Behan (Bronx High School of Science)
Caitlin Etri (Huntington High School)
William Fechter (Longwood Senior High School)
George Hull (Hunter College)
Allison Kade (Columbia University)
Ashleigh McDougall (Longwood Senior High School)
Samantha Palmer (Longwood Senior High School)
Tracy Soto (Stony Brook University)
Ashley Thompson (Queens Gateway to the Health Sciences Secondary School)
Iris Yu (Shoreham-Wading River High School)

Fourth Competition (2008-2009)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

1st Place: Juliet deButts (Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School)

2nd Place: Jessica Joseph (Bronx High School of Science)

3rd Place: Christina Rombola (Longwood High School)

Special Award: Alessandra Ansbach (Lynbrook High School)

College Division Best Essay Award

Special Award (A): Sandy Hernandez (Stony Brook University)

Special Award (B): Stephen Lanuto Jr. (City University of New York / City College of New York)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Juliet deButts (Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School)

Honorable Mention

Skyla Budd (Plainview Old-Bethpage JFK High School)

Ashley Jones (Longwood High School)
Shelby Lin (Ward Melville High School)
Ashley Schreck (Longwood High School)
Frances Shi (Hunter College High School)

Finalists

Priom Ahmed (Bronx High School of Science)
Peter Battifarano (West Babylon High School)
Nicole Goodwin (The City College of New York)
Wonmin Lee (Stuyvesant High School)
Melissa Lohmann (Barnard College of Columbia University)
Justine Perez (Norman Thomas High School)
Hatsumi Faith Yoshida (Preston High School)

Fifth Competition (2009-2010)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

- 1st Place: Gen Ishikawa (Syosset High School)
2nd Place: Ethan Hamilton (Horace Mann High School)
3rd Place: Sarah Lam (Bronx High School of Science)

College Division Best Essay Award

Elizabeth D Kaufman (Stony Brook University)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Gen Ishikawa (Syosset High School)

Honorable Mention

- Giovanna Braganza (Sewanhaka High School)
Yanling Fang (Lower East Side Preparatory High School)
Sandy Patricia Guerrero (Longwood Senior High School)

Kathleen Rivera (CUNY Hunter College)
Stephanie Song (Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts)
Leighton Suen (Staten Island Technical High School)

Finalists

Kimika Berger (Kings Park High School)
Kevin Chen (Ward Melville High School)
Jinnie Lee (Lehman College)
Lauren Yoder (NYC Lab High School)
Krystle Rodriguez (Hunter College)
Mary Rossillo (Longwood Senior High School)
Davanie Singhroy (Sewanhaka High School)
Peter Vey (Hunter College)
Sophia Washburn (The Berkeley Carroll School)

Sixth Competition (2010-2011)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

1st Place: Jessica Goldman (North Shore Hebrew Academy)

2nd Place: Spencer Kirsch (Lynbrook Senior High School)

3rd Place: Aya Terki (East Meadow High School)

College Division Best Essay Award

Special Award A: Eric Andrew Engoron (Stony Brook University)

Special Award B: Manami Ogami (Stony Brook University)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Jessica Goldman (North Shore Hebrew Academy)

Honorable Mention

Megan Yuan (Staten Island Technical High School)

Paul Hart (Bronx High School of Science)

Finalists

Azequay Rice (Frederick Douglass Academy I)
Dakota Blackman (Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School)
Joyce Yoo (Townsend Harris High School)
Elizabeth Whitcher (Huntington High School)
Alex Wallach (Townsend Harris High School)
EmaadKhwaja (Huntington High School)
Anqi Wei (Brooklyn Technical High School)

Seventh Competition (2011-2012)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

- 1st Place: Yumiko Siev (Valley Stream Central High School)
2nd Place: Mizuho Yoshimune (Bronx High School of Science)
3rd Place: Duke Atalay (Ward Melville High School)

College Division Best Essay Award

- Special Award A: Daniel Xu (Princeton University)
Special Award B: Shariful Syed (Stony Brook University)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Yumiko Siev (Valley Stream Central High School)

Honorable Mention

- Emma Berniczky (Stuyvesant High School)
Pauline Ceraulo (Trinity School)

Jake Reiben (Brooklyn Friends School)
Natsuko Sato (Arlington High School)
Kaitlyn Shin (Jericho High School)
Kelsey Weymouth-Little (Ward Melville High School)

Finalists

Jasmine Jang (Syosset High School)
Catherine Koumas (Huntington High School)
Steven Menelly (Garden City High School)
HusnainKaukab Mushtaq (Oceanside High School)

Semifinalists

Mitchell Abrams (Fiorello H. LaGuardia High school of Music & Art and Performing Arts)
Begina Armstrong (A. Philip Randolph Campus High School)
Rohit Bachani (W. T. Clarke High School)
Monisha Dadlani (Fiorello H. LaGuardia High school of Music & Art and Performing Arts)
Justin Daane Engelscher (Huntington High School)
Bonnie Kaprat (Wellington C. Mepham High School)
Emily Rose Kass (Smithtown High School West)
Doyun Kim (Townsend Harris High School)
Julia Y. Lee (Trinity School)
Brian Murphy (SewanhakaHigh School)
Gianna Ortiz (The Mary Louis Academy)
Aya Terki (East Meadow High School)
Ashley Wong (Syosset Senior High School)
Amanda Yan (Townsend Harris High School)
Marissa Young (Hebrew Academy of Nassau County)

Eighth Competition (2012-2013)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

1st Place: Madison LoFaso (Huntington High School)

2nd Place: Ravi Jain (Syosset High School)

3rd Place: Emily Linko (Hauppauge High School)

College Division Best Essay Award

Melissa Kavanah (Stony Brook University)

Uchida Memorial Award

Ali Syed (Stony Brook University)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Madison LoFaso (Huntington High School)

Merit Award

Charles Beers (Huntington High School)

Lewin Kim (Horace Mann School)

Natsuko Sato (Arlington High School)

Kate Snider (Herricks High School)

Finalists

Thomas Abdelmalak (Valley Stream Central HS)

Santiago Alzate (Huntington HS)

Jenny Chan (Benjamin N. Cardozo HS)

Kaitlin Dayton (Huntington HS)

Arman Nasim (W.T. Clarke HS)

Tanu Rani (Benjamin N. Cardozo HS)

John Reilly (Huntington HS)

Rivka Schuster (Manhattan High School for Girls)

Yumiko Siev (Valley Stream Central HS)

Semi-Finalists

Hakeem Donovan Jamal Abdella (Frederick Douglass Academy)

Jesse Chang (Stony Brook University)

Kyle Gallagher (Stony Brook University)

Brittany Lopez (Morris Academy for Collaborative Studies)

Sydney Kahn (Lynbrook Senior HS)

Christopher Kuhner (Saint John the Baptist Diocesan HS)

Hanna Murphy (Huntington HS)

Caitlin Rieger (Garden City HS)

Daniella Schoen (Huntington HS)

Adam Lee Struhl (Syosset HS)

Ninth Competition (2013-2014)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

- 1st Place: Stephanie Lin (Stuyvesant High School)
2nd Place: Charles Beers (Huntington High School)
3rd Place: Fangrui Tong (Ward Melville High School)

College Division Best Essay Award

- Iman Esmailzada (Farmingdale State College)
Kyle Tulod (Stony Brook University)

Uchida Memorial Award

- Monique Bloomfield (Binghamton University)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

- Stephanie Lin (Stuyvesant High School)

Merit Award

- Shaikat Islam (Stuyvesant High School)

Erich Makarov (Staten Island Technical High School)
Anju Okamura (Elwood John Glenn High School)
Daniella Schoen (Huntington High School)
Qire Snowden (West Babylon High School)
Jeanette Wetherell (Stony Brook University)

Finalists

Sheryl Chen (Staten Island Technical High School)
Mindy Feng (Millennium High School)
Joice Im (Townsend Harris High School)
Parina Kaewkrajang (Townsend Harris High School)
Valerie Kehoe (Smithtown High School West)
Hyun Sue Kim (Stuyvesant High School)
Hilary Lee (Townsend Harris High School)
Lily Lin (The Cooper Union)

Semi-Finalists

Monisha Afrooz (Townsend Harris High School)
Corinne Banning (Stony Brook University)
Michaela Carnesi (Huntington High School)
Eleanna Cerda (Marble Hill School For International Studies)
Elizabeth Corrao (Huntington High School)
Grace Curran (Huntington High School)
Hayley Drace (Huntington High School)
Francis Foo (Staten Island Technical High School)
Prathana Gurung (Long Island City High School)
Tabashshum Islam (Stony Brook University)
Kioma James (High School of Language and Diplomacy)
Anjali Kapur (Huntington High School)
Alex Lamy (Valley Stream Central High School)
Bliss Amanda LoScalzo (Huntington High School)
Emma Lou (Stuyvesant High School)
Ivan Miketic (Townsend Harris High School)
Miranda Nykolyn (Huntington High School)
Jan Pazhayampallil (Townsend Harris High School)
Alexander Robateau (Valley Stream Central High School)
Isabella Scarpati (Huntington High School)
Romaan Sheikh (Bay Shore High School)
Ryan Smith (Garden City High School)
Donnie Stewart (Huntington High School)
Rhode Elise St Jacques (Medgar Evers College)
Michael Towson (Lynbrook High school)
Casey Woo (The Mary Louis Academy)
Susan Wu (Stuyvesant High School)
Brenda Yue (Townsend Harris High School).

Tenth Competition (2014-2015)



Winners

High School Division Best Essay Award

1st Place: Arianna Vetrano (Eleanor Roosevelt High School)

2nd Place: Monica Bederman (The Brearley School)

3rd Place: Dillon Wu (Stuyvesant High School)

College Division Best Essay Award

Nicola Shannon (Stony Brook University)

Rina Inaba (Stony Brook University)

Uchida Memorial Award

Irene Chen (Townsend Harris High School)

Consul General of Japan Special Award

Irene Chen (Townsend Harris High School)

Merit Award

Charles Beers (Huntington High School)
Brian Brew (Herricks High School)
Seung Hye Yang (Queens HS for the Sciences at York College)

Semi-Finalists

Renny Cho (Staten Island Technical High School)
Kathy Chu (WT Clarke High School)
Julia Engle (Huntington High School)
Mehnaz Hassan (Suny-Old Westbury)
Tiara Hess (Stony Brook University)
Crystal Huang (WT Clarke High School)
Joice Im (Townsend Harris High School)
Tabashshum Islam (Stony Brook University)
Erin Kim (Hunter College High School)
Adrian Kloskowski (Stuyvesant High School)
Coral Kopetz (Stony Brook University)
Veronika Koziel (Syosset High School)
Veronica Lee (Queens High School for the Sciences)
Zachary Marccone (Kings Park High School)
Julia Menges (Northport High School)
Howie Miller (Garden City High School)
Pauline Okuda Ceraulo (New York University)
Gabrielle Rich (The Brearley School)
Ana Segarceanu (Oceanside High School)
Alisa Su (Stuyvesant High School)
Michellica Seecharan (Bard High School Early College Queens)
Nanase Shirokawa (Hunter College High School)
Stina Trollback (Fiorello H LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts)
Carolyn Wilson (New Hyde Park Memorial High School)
Sally Xie (Townsend Harris High School)

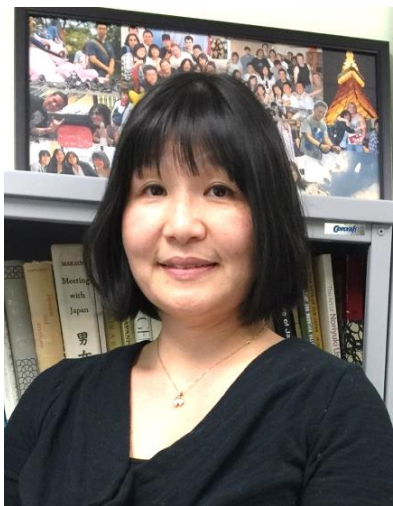
Judges



Mary Diaz
Department of Asian and Asian American Studies



Clifford Huffman
Department of English



Eva Nagase
Department of Asian and Asian American Studies



Sheldon Reaven
Department of Technology & Society

Committee Members



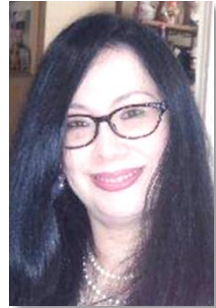
Roxanne Brockner



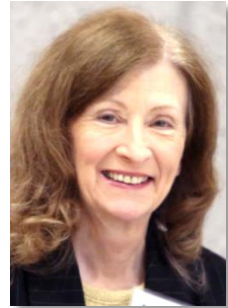
Carolyn Brooks



Marlene Dubois



MaryAnn Hannon



Patricia Marinaccio



Joan Miyazaki



Francesca Nakagawa



Chikako Nakamura



Shingo Omori



Atsuko Oyama



Mitsuko Post



Gerard Senese



H. Mae Sprouse

Epilogue

The editorial team has been filled with pure excitement and joy throughout the process of publishing *Heart of Japan*. It not only commemorates the 10-year anniversary of the Japan Center Essay Competition, but also helps us share the vibrant unique essays with a much wider audience. Nonetheless, the editing process of this collection involved numerous time-consuming tasks. Seemingly simple tasks such as selecting a title and a cover design required multiple trials and thought processes. We came up with many possible titles including *Thoughts on Japan*, *Perspectives*, *Horizon*, *Visions*, *Connections*, and *Friendship*. However, we eventually chose *Heart of Japan*. It is somewhat vague, but is inclusive enough to warmly represent a variety of thoughts young authors developed in connection with Japan. Similarly, we were offered with several ready-made professionally designed book covers featuring cherry blossoms. Although aesthetically pleasing, none of them emotionally appealed to us. Eventually, we decided to take photos of cherry blossoms by ourselves in front of the Charles B. Wang Center. It indeed made perfect sense because the Wang Center is the very place where the authors of the essays in this collection were formally recognized, year after year, during cherry blossom season. Nevertheless, arriving at our final cover photo was not an easy task. We did shoots on different days, at different times, from different angles and with different compositions while watching the weather forecast and the cherry blossoms' development literally every day. Such determined efforts were obviously the reflection of our passion toward this essay competition and indeed represent our *heart* toward the young authors of the essays included in this collection.

This essay competition has been the highlight of the Japan Center's outreach efforts since its inauguration in 2005. Our aim is to encourage young American authors to think outside the box and find a connection to Japan, a culturally distinct country. Although we evaluated essays based on a set rubric, originality was ultimately what we were looking for. The essays submitted during these first 10 years remain in our memory. We still talk about the very first award-winning essay written by Nora Micheva, who discovered the transience of life through the hardships of her artist friend in Kyoto. Some authors shared how they achieved their goals by adopting Japanese concepts. Michael Cohen completed his long bicycle trip across the country, adopting the spirit of *Zen*. Molly Baum overcame physical difficulties due to her handicap, adopting the spirit of *gaman* (endurance). Some authors sent an impactful message through their essays. Jessica Goldman was determined to condemn discrimination and hatred, inspired by an encounter with a Japanese man who spoke with Anne Frank's father decades ago. Duke Ataley and Emily Linko showed their respect to the brave unnamed rescue workers in Fukushima, who put the welfare of their nation above their own health, after a 9.0-magnitude earthquake struck Japan in 2011. Charles Beers encouraged the victims of Hurricane Sandy to learn from the experience of those earthquake victims in Japan. Some Japanese American authors revealed their family stories. Yumiko Siev shared the heroic role her grandmother played in helping an aged former American soldier return a sword to its Japanese owner, decades after their armies fought during World War II. Shelby Lin proved the emotional impact of not knowing one's heritage language, stating, "*I felt regret in my chest each time I heard Japanese being spoken, but most especially when it came from my mother's mouth.*"

We believe that writing is undoubtedly the pathway to developing ideas and sharing them with a wider audience. We also believe that the juxtaposition of different cultures and values can produce positive energy through the process of writing. The authors of the essays in this collection validated these convictions. Their young spirit, genuine emotion and fresh ideas deeply touched our *hearts* and will also continue to do so for the future readers of this collection.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the editorial team members, Dr. Iwao Ojima, Ms. Yoko Ojima, and Ms. Patricia Marinaccio. Special thanks go to Ms. Yvette Vetro, a student of Japanese at Stony Brook University, for taking the photo of cherry blossoms for the cover of this book with Ms. Yoko Ojima and me. The assistance provided by Ms. Kanako Nozawa at the Consulate General of Japan in New York and Ms. Dawn Shields at Canon U.S.A. for this publication was also very much appreciated.

Eriko Sato
Editor-in-Chief