

(1st of 2 installments)

Special article for promotion of Japan-US student exchange

My Memories as Exchange Student in U.S.

By Natsuko TOYODA

Last year, I received an email from the Japan Specific Interest Group (Japan SIG) within the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) expressing interest in using *Japan SPOTLIGHT* magazine as a source of information for their members working as educators with Japan. NAFSA is a US-based organization for educators all over the world designed to promote international education. Since contacted in this way, an idea emerged to jointly write articles about international exchange between Japan and the United States. In 2008, then Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda set a target to increase the number of foreign students in Japan to 300,000 by 2025, and measures have since been taken to promote acceptance of students from abroad. What kind of merit is there in accepting foreign students? In this issue, I would like to introduce my own experience studying abroad and talk about advantages from a personal perspective. In the next issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, Japan SIG will introduce merits as seen from a wider viewpoint.

Cornfields of Iowa

In 1994, when I was in the second year of senior high school, I became an exchange student and spent a year in the US countryside — a town in the state of Iowa. This adventure had its beginning when I was a second-year junior high school student. My father, who happened to be watching a TV program about student exchange, turned to me and said, “Why don’t you go abroad to study?” My father might have casually asked the question, but it had the effect of immediately filling me with dreams. To get out of the small town I was living in, and to live in a foreign country by myself! It was the chance for a once-in-a-lifetime dream. From then on I made preparations, looking up foreign study organizations and studying English. And so it was that as a second-year high school student, I was making my way to a small town called Fort Atkinson in Winneshiek County near the borders of Minnesota and Illinois in northeastern Iowa. The tiny town had a population of around 400. All around me, as far as the eye could see, were fields and fields of corn.

The host family who kindly accepted me was a couple in their 30s, and their three children. My host father worked in a secondhand car shop in town, while my host mother had a job in a factory outside town. My host family’s ancestors were immigrants from the Bohemian region of the then Czechoslovakia. Many people of Czech descent lived in the towns nearby. In the neighboring town of Spillville, there is a museum made out of the house where Czech composer Antonin Dvořák, who at the time lived in New York, enjoyed his summer vacation. I was impressed by how knowledgeable American people were about their family roots and how much they respected them.

What is Happiness?

Everything I saw was new to me. Sitting in a car filled with country music, I would not tire of looking out the window and gazing at the cornfields. My host father, who was driving, would seem a little surprised at this and laughingly ask me whether there was anything interesting in watching a landscape that remained the same. While the place

was in the countryside, there was proper infrastructure, and the mode of daily life was modern. The food was large-sized, plentiful and cheap. America, as I had imagined, was truly the richest country in the world.

One day, while sitting in the car, I noticed a black horse-driven carriage approaching us from the opposite lane. I could not believe my eyes for a moment. A horse and carriage in a country as modern as America? I later learned that people in the carriage were called Amish and were Mennonite Christians. Based on their faith, the Amish people have preserved a way of living that has continued from older times. They do not use electricity. They wear simple clothes, and use their own language called Pennsylvania Dutch. Their children do not attend ordinary schools, but are educated within the community, being taught the minimum essentials needed for farming and their daily lives. There are quite a number of such Amish communities dotting the Midwestern area, and their rights are established. Amish angel cakes are wonderfully delicious. I learned that the Amish make not only their own flour and eggs, but all the food that they eat. The families work together and support each other and live modestly. Learning about the ways of the Amish, I began to realize that happiness does not necessarily mean materialistic wealth or a convenient lifestyle. For the first time, I began to ponder the real meaning of happiness and abundance. While such questions entered my mind, I was also impressed by the openness of America, by how different values and ways of living can co-exist.

Differences in Customs

During my stay, I learned that household chores are shared by every member of the family, and that good teamwork is in place. Unlike the tradition in Japan, the housewife is not expected to do all the housework. This balancing of work and housework had a lasting impression on me. The work/life balance is a theme that *Japan SPOTLIGHT* featured two years ago, but I have to say that the Americans have achieved so much more than we Japanese in this aspect.

It was the custom for families to visit church every Sunday. I found there was a calming effect in singing hymns and shaking hands with the people next to me. When I said the Japanese do not hug or kiss, my

host mother said to me in disbelief: "How do you express your love?" Indeed, I wondered myself, how do the Japanese feel love and closeness with others? Just because the Japanese do not express their affection, it does not mean that they do not feel affection. But I was unable to answer the question put to me. Nonetheless, this question on the expression of "love" was very meaningful for me. I was only a teenager, but I had been given the chance to encounter differences not only in language, but in the fundamental differences of values and culture.

School Was Fun

During my stay, I went to Turkey Valley Community School, which provided education for children from kindergarten to senior high school. Children from the seven neighboring villages attended, and the total number of children from junior and senior high school came to around 350. While the number of students was not large, the school was spacious and had good facilities — a rich environment indeed.

In Japan, high schools are divided into various categories according to the future plans of students. For example, for students planning to attend university, there are the ordinary schools that have preparatory curriculums or English courses, while for those who plan to seek work, there are the "commercial high schools" that teach business and commerce skills.

I found that in the United States, children, whether seeking higher education or intending to find jobs on graduation, can pick what suits them from a variety of classes. In the class for woodwork called "World of Manufacture," a group of ninth-grade boys and I made a wooden cabinet shelf together. At my junior high school in Japan, I only had handcrafted a tray during a home economics class. At Turkey Valley Community School, computers and industrial machines were used to design and make objects. Once the craftwork was made, students even decided on the price and actually sold them. Students were able to learn the whole process of labor and payment. When painted and finished, some of the things that were made looked good enough to be sold at a furniture shop. After the sale, the profits were divided, and I remember getting around 20 dollars.

It was interesting that there were classes for learning human relationship such as communication, psychology and family relationship. The class on family relationship was compulsory for students in the 12th year. In this class, students learned about the various phrases of life including romance, marriage, divorce and old age as well as about homosexuals. Students not only learned from reading textbooks, but also through being involved in projects and telling the rest of the class about their findings. There were experiences I probably never would have had at a Japanese school, such as exchanging views with classmates on what "love" means.

One unforgettable project, dubbed "Egg Baby" in this class, was looking after an egg, as if it were a real human baby. Students would decide whether they would look after the Egg Baby as a couple or as a single father or mother, and take care of it for a week. Since the Egg Baby had to be looked after 24 hours a day, the "parenting" students would need to ask their friends to babysit during a physical exercise class. The egg had a face drawn on it, and it was curious how I gradually grew fond of it as I carried it around everywhere in a basket.

It was not easy for me to keep up with discussions during a politics class in the 12th year as its themes were complicated. Because it was the year of presidential elections, we once debated which political party we supported. The voting age in the United States being 18,



there were students who could actually go to the polls, and there was a sense of reality in the discussions. I was impressed by how many of the classes at US schools were practical for real life.

I had fun learning how to use the computer. I was touched by how the teacher of a computer class once praised me for my efforts. The teacher said he had been doubtful at first about my ability to continue attending the class because I could not even use the keyboard. But the teacher said he was truly impressed that I had made the effort and that I could now do all the tasks like everyone else. There were many teachers like this. They would give me positive feedback on matters that are not necessarily written in a grade report. They gave me such encouragement and support. I think that one of the great things about the United States is that regardless of whether the results are good or bad, people willingly give you credit when you try hard.

One day, when the time for going back to Japan had drawn near, my host father, driving the car, said that this was my home and I was welcome to return any time. My host father was a person who liked to make jokes, but when he said these words, there was a solemn look on his face. I tried not to cry, but tears kept filling my eyes. A year ago, we had been strangers, but after living together, a bond had been created.

Through my stay, I saw the United States as a country of honesty. I don't mean it in moral terms. I mean American people can take good care of what one wants to do. It brings about hope and positive thinking. I think it keeps the United States in vigor. I was also given the opportunity to learn more about myself and about the characteristics of Japan which differ from those of the United States. I feel that if more people from abroad come to Japan, they will learn more about this country, and also be able to look at themselves and their countries from a different perspective. I think that by learning more about ourselves through such experiences, we can increasingly enjoy the differences of foreign countries. Perhaps this kind of acceptance is what would make the world a more peaceful place. I hope that many people will have a chance to study abroad and that their experiences will enrich them and enable them to savor all the differences. **JS**

Natsuko Toyoda is a member of Japan SPOTLIGHT editorial staff.