

On an Open-Ended Learning Curve

By Hanne Juul Jørgensen

My daughter battling to control her chopsticks at the age of three is something I can still picture in my mind.

This goes back many years in Copenhagen. Her father had just been on a long trip to a place very far away: JAPAN. Upon his return we had a “Japanese” period, where we tried in small ways to share and understand his experience. A number of years had passed, and although we travelled and moved a lot, Japan was never “en route.” The chopsticks though, were occasionally used for the family’s Eastern style meals, and several framed prints by Hiroshige (the late Edo period *ukiyo-e* artist Ando Hiroshige [1797-1858]) adorned the walls.

When going to a new place, I guess you try to make up for lack of knowledge by plunging into all the books you can get your hands on. I was no exception, but winding up a job, getting everything ready for the move, plus the arrival of a new grandchild, was definitely not something which got one off to a “flying start.”

In hindsight, so much the better; no reading could have prepared me for the real Japan, and I was not burdened by a lot of mental luggage. A crash course in survival Japanese back in Brussels just gave me a glimpse of an open-ended / never-ending, and possibly very steep learning curve: a real challenge and a fun one.

In my first year in Tokyo a lot of time was spent on walks, bicycling and getting around by public transport.

This helps you get your bearings right, get a sense of independence and above all, see a lot.

Gradually, you lose the feeling of being a goldfish in a fish tank incapable of any participation and just watching the world go by.

Mind you, it was not easy, and a lot of preparation had to be done before I ventured out on my own. First of all to



Photo : Hanne Juul Jørgensen

The author and two Japanese women in traditional kimono in Kyoto

make sure I carried the details (map, phone number etc.) to see me back home if I lost my way. On my first trip which included the subway and a JR line connection, I managed to get the wrong ticket twice, lose my way to the platform, jump over the closing flaps of the ticket gate, and at some stage get close to panic. But most importantly I also managed to arrive at the right place thanks to a number of very helpful subway staff members and passers-by who took pity on the lost tourist.

Unfortunately I managed to scare the wits out of several innocent passers-by in the streets by asking for directions in English before I grasped the right way to behave. It is very simple: you just stand there looking very lost – that is not difficult anyway – and someone will approach you and very kindly offer their help. In many instances they will “see you to the door” if your destination is in the neighborhood.

My Japanese is still very “*sukoshi* (limited),” but by being able to decipher the *Kana* (a Japanese system of

syllabic writing) and all the time expanding my knowledge of *Kanji*, I somehow survive. If things take off too fast you can always pull the emergency brake with a “*chotto matte kudasai* (wait a minute).” Now I sometimes take pleasure in deliberately getting lost just to test my own ability to get out of trouble.

Many people posted in Japan try their hand at *Sumie*, *Ikebana*, calligraphy etc. For a Scandinavian, the simplicity of Japanese art and architecture is very appealing and in many ways familiar, whereas mastering the brush, or getting the flower in the right position, is quite a different matter. However, every small step forward improves one’s ability to appreciate the exquisite works. It is often argued that Japanese culture is so different from the Western way of looking at life. Yes and No – I tend to think that way below the surface are quite a number of parallels – stories, myths and philosophy – which can be seen more as a common property of the human race than of any nationality in

Photo : Hanne Juul Jørgensen

particular. The Greeks admired the perfect circle, and the symbol of it was the 12 stars, which are nowadays to be seen in the EU flag on a blue background. The Japanese were moon viewing with the most perfect round produce exhibited on the porch. For all we know this was not something they had discussed with each other beforehand. And how come the figure 12 seems to be so important in many connections?

I live in a very central and convenient part of Tokyo. Through my window, I find a few old houses still remain but they are fast disappearing. At the beginning I was shocked by this "lack of reverence" for "history." How could they knock down this or that picturesque little house? From a practical perspective today, however, I would probably also prefer to live in a house with all the comforts of modern life, not to mention a safer structure in case of an earthquake.

Tokyo is an absorbing place to live, like many other big cities almost a world of its own. For all its qualities, it is however very important to remember that there is a very different kind of Japan to be experienced outside the "walls of Edo." Beautiful scenery, breathtaking coastlines with small fishing villages tucked away on narrow shores, majestic mountains, an abundance of shades of green, and cities and

historical places waiting to be explored. It should come as no surprise that so many local cultures are to be found since Japan until recently was so difficult to travel around. Nowadays, an abundance of *shinkansen*, express roads, tunnels and several airlines has solved that. Alas all at a very costly level. As a guest in Japan, I am fortunate enough to "have" to go to many different places. However, I feel very sorry for the Japanese people that domestic sightseeing comes at such a high price – hence the fact that the Japanese are among the world's globetrotters everywhere, except their own country.

In a diplomat's life your diary is constantly filled up with events to come. Many of them are both interesting and stimulating although not necessarily the choice you would have made, given a free hand.

It is most important to have a small niche to call your own. My choice is two 3rd grade classes in a local elementary co-ed school where I teach once a week.

This particular school has a program in which they are trying to introduce English at an earlier level than in most

Japanese schools. Given the fact that these kids are struggling at the same time to learn *Kana*, *Kanji* and how to progress in a Japanese school, it goes without saying that it is a bit risky to introduce "my" alphabet.

Nevertheless it works, and as it turned out the kids seem to know most of it already, wherever they got it from. I am under no illusion that my teaching will make them any way near fluent in English, but if it can be seen as a contribution to making the language



Japan has advanced transportation networks but the cost of domestic travel is very high

more accessible and less frightening on their road ahead than that is not too bad. Anyway, to work with children is always a positive experience be it in Japan or elsewhere.

Ever so often the following question is asked: What do you like most about Japan?

Careful here! That could be a tricky one. At the beginning I was obviously completely at a loss. I had absolutely no idea – the change was just too big and absorbing. Today my answer is clear. Above I have mentioned that I came with little mental luggage – read prejudice if you prefer – but somehow we all have ideas without knowing where they got on board.

The "blank" Japanese expression. "You never know what goes on inside their heads."

Well, maybe? But in that case I might be a bit daft, because I have found that a friendly smile, a polite attitude and being yourself, with your two feet planted firmly on the ground, will take you a long way here – as it does in the part of the world where I have my roots. I feel that I have made many Japanese friends and they are clearly what I like most about JAPAN. **UJI**

PS: For the record my two grandchildren are now trying to master chopsticks.

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A Japanese passer-by giving directions to a foreign visitor