

Ichigo Ichie

A Teacher's Journey to Japan

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On my last day in Japan one of my fellow teachers toasted us with the words “Ichigo Ichie.” This Japanese expression roughly means that by sharing one moment together we will be together for a lifetime. I thought about how all the small moments of this experience with the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund teacher program had transformed me, and in turn how I hoped to transform my students. As I looked around the room, I thought about the collective power of these teachers, each changed by his or her own moments in Japan.

Unfortunately not everyone agrees with my vision of global teacher development. This became abundantly clear a few months before my trip. I was excitedly telling a group of non teaching friends that I had been accepted to the JFMF teacher program and was going to spend three weeks in Japan learning about the culture and educational system. In theory my friends were happy for me, but they couldn't seem to get past the idea that somehow I was engaging in a giant scam of some kind. If I wanted to teach a unit on Japan why couldn't I use the Internet—ininitely more cost efficient? Why would a government like Japan (which funded the program) waste that much money on a group of teachers? The fact that my school district gave me time off to participant in the program sparked a huge debate. Obviously I had touched a nerve.

When I applied for this program, I never expected such controversy. In education we talk about the value of bringing a global perspective to our schools and creating a future generation of global citizens, but we rarely are willing to fund the kinds of professional development needed to institute real change. The reality is that the skill-based state assessments drive curriculum and the limited financial resources of most school districts go toward supporting these basics. Luckily my school district recognizes the value of intercultural understanding; teachers from other districts had to take sick days, or forgo pay in order to participate in the program.

What my friends and these other districts did not seem to understand is that the Internet is no substitute for actually immersing in a culture. I have taught Japanese folk tales and shown Japanese movies in my classroom. But my understanding of the culture has always been superficial at best: a drive-by sightseer who never gets beyond the tourist

traps to see what lies beneath. By actually going to Japan, staying with a family, visiting schools, talking to the kids, and participating in educational seminars, I had a far richer and more complex experience than I could ever get online. Instead of my Japan experience being all gardens, temples, kabuki and karaoke, I got a taste of what it must be like to grow up in Japan. I got to experience a culture of wa, a spiritual peace that the Japanese seem to find in simple objects and the contemplation of nature; a willingness to sacrifice their own needs for the common good.

As Americans we pride ourselves on our rugged individualism. In Japan, my independent spirit came crashing up against a culture built on respect for the group. From the moment we arrived, our group leaders stressed the importance of promptness. Seminars started on time; the bus left on time—if you missed it you had to take a taxi. Teachers who were late were reprimanded. No one was late twice. We heard rumors of teachers from past seminars who were made to publicly apologize to the group for tardiness, and even one teacher who was sent home in disgrace for missing a meeting. Being on time is a way of showing respect for the group; tardiness was insult to your host and your group members.

The Japanese learn this sense of wa, or harmony, at an early age. When I spent the day at Shimonoseki City Yumegaoka Junior High School, I learned how to prepare sashimi, participated in a tea ceremony and had lunch with a nationally ranked sumo wrestler. The students wore uniforms, lined up and showed deep respect for their teachers. But nothing prepared me for what happened at the end of the day. A bell rang and I watched in shock as the students changed into gym clothes and began a systematic cleaning of the school. They mopped the floor, cleaned the windows, dusted the bookshelves and swept the walkway. No teachers were supervising this activity; no one was grading their work. No one grumbled or complained or whined. The school is theirs and the responsibility for taking care of it is one the students all share. This daily ritual is repeated all over Japan in every school, every day.

It's hard for an outsider to understand the culture of conformity that Japanese students live in. There is an old saying that says the nail that sticks out is hammered down.

Japanese students do not argue with their teachers, break school rules or rebel against authority. They are indoctrinated into a world of subtle nuance. The Japanese distinguish between *honne*—one’s true feelings—and *tatemai*—the face one wears in public. When your *honne* is at odds with the harmony of the group, a mature, virtuous person is expected to rise above his or her own selfish feelings and, for the welfare of the majority, put on a good face.

The surface looked ideal; I had fantasies about teaching at a school where the biggest discipline issue is smoking, where students are on time and polite, in a country where teachers are universally respected, and passing the national teaching exams is as rigorous as passing the New York bar exam. Then, of course, I looked under the surface. Japan is now facing a myriad of problems and controversy in its schools. Bullying has risen to crisis levels; every teacher I talked with asked how we deal with such things in our schools. Worse yet, the teen suicide rate is growing at such an alarming rate that the government is scrambling to legislate solutions. Pressures from national testing standards, parents and peer bullying are all contributing factors to this sad growing statistic. The day we visited the Diet building (home of the parliament), teachers’ unions were protesting the proposed education bill. Fury and debate seemed to surround the changing face of education in Japan. Nothing is as simple as it seems.

Still, I found quiet in Japan, an appreciation for simplicity, presentation and etiquette. My three weeks were filled with so many amazing moments. But the most powerful was meeting Koji Ikeda, a survivor of the Hiroshima atomic bomb. Listening to this elderly man’s narrative of loss personalized a tragedy I had only read about in history books. He saw his city in ruins, his friends killed, his family burned and poisoned by radiation, and yet he volunteered to speak to teachers from the country responsible for dropping the bomb. He could have easily lived a life filled with hatred or desire for retribution; instead he became a teacher, educating children around the world about Hiroshima, promoting peace and understanding among nations. He believes that unless we teach our children peace, someone else will teach them violence.



Japan has changed me. My experience has transformed my teaching, my future plans and even my little backyard garden. The value of giving teachers international experiences is enormous. I hope that my participation in the JFMF will help ensure that my students will become globally literate and internationally minded. Ichigo Ichie.