

Ken Yamamoto

Understanding The World from Multiple Angles

japan

Ken found that studying abroad in Japan with his adult perspective was very different from growing up in the country as a child:

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When he decided to study abroad for four weeks in Kyoto, Japan at Doshisha University, Ken Yamamoto, an autistic alumnus of the Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship, found more than professional and academic experience. He gained a new perspective on Japan while getting to know his family better.

The dragon statue leading to Kiyomizu-dera Temple in Kyoto, Japan.

Honn and Tatemae

In many societies, there are social norms around how people communicate what they really want or think and what is considered appropriate or acceptable. This is particularly true in Japanese society where social harmony must be preserved. One's inner desires are known as honne, or what is under the surface, while what people express to the world is referred to as tatemae. It is assumed that in various social situations, people within a given society know how they are expected to behave.

For example, if you are visiting your Japanese friend whose mother asks you if you will stay for dinner, the correct response might be to say that you were just on your way out even if you might enjoy accepting the invitation. It is important to not disturb social harmony by expressing inner intentions that would be considered selfish by the majority. But what happens when someone doesn't read the social signals necessary to adhere to these norms?

Ken set off on his study abroad trip familiar with how challenging this could be, having spent some of his childhood in Japan, struggling to navigate the complex social nuances. "I created many awkward situations and was either upset with myself or upset with others," recalls Ken. At the same time, his Japanese heritage was a key motivator to learn more about the country.

Ken studied the types of social situations where these exchanges might arise. He went over each in his mind, and practiced his response.

But there were still hiccups. One day Ken went to the bus station to confirm that his Japanese bus pass was working. When he reached the front counter, the woman asked him how his day had been, and he proceeded to give her a full and unwanted account of all of the events leading up to that moment, when she was only making small talk. Ken reflects that "when you have an invisible disability, people will not understand why you don't get something."

A Target on Your Back

While he was aware of services for students with disabilities, Ken preferred not to disclose his disability or request support from the University of Arizona or the host institution. Previously, he found that even when he did disclose his autism and asked for accommodations, support did not come. He also sensed that he was treated differently after people knew. In one instance, he requested that peers take more time to explain jokes, but then things continued as if he had not disclosed and made this direct request.

"I have heard how people talk about those with disabilities when they are not around, so disclosing almost puts a target on your back from my experience."

Ken's Tips for Preparing for Travel

- Look up the airports, figure out how they operate, the working hours, size of the airport, charging stations, religious rules, taxis, currency exchange, traffic laws, etc.
- Cross reference when your flight lands, traffic information, business hours of transportation method, city information related to traffic, and potential costs.
- Call ahead to the hotel and get information on contact numbers, crime rates, help desks, landmarks, best means of travel for arriving there, employee uniforms (especially if that hotel has a shuttle service), and what is nearby the hotel.
- Create a small list in the local language of phrases to say (that can also be read), address you're going to etc.
- Don't always assume your phone will have power.
- Figure out any laws that will apply to your initial travel. Nothing too deep just common headliners, no littering, no gum in public, dress code, etc. Lastly, create a plan of action and a backup in case the first doesn't work out. Send that plan to your local contact, and a family member.

One avenue of support Ken did pursue was the U.S. Department of State's Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program. The Gilman Program was a valuable resource for Ken while he participated in his exchange in Japan. Staff gave him information about the healthcare system as well as commonly used Japanese phrases. They also checked in regularly to ensure that he was having a positive experience.

A New Perspective

Ken found that studying abroad in Japan with his adult perspective was very different from growing up in the country as a child. He visited the same Kyoto shrines that he went to as a kid and was able to absorb a lot more information. According to Ken, "as an adult I am able to see all the details and truly appreciate everything in my culture."

Spending time in a location where he had an aunt and uncle also meant that he had the chance to visit them. He helped with farm and house work and joined them in preparing and demonstrating his family's traditional tea ceremony to others. They visited the Iga museum, named for the town where his relatives live.

Studying abroad and immersing himself in a culture that was still largely unfamiliar gave Ken a sense of empathy for those who do not understand his disability experience.

"Being a kid you just react to things; you don't see the big picture. You don't know as much. As an adult, I can now follow and understand the actions of others, knowing that conduct comes from a place of not knowing instead of ill will."

His time in Japan gave Ken the push that he needed to learn how to understand peoples' inner intentions by looking at the world from their perspective. This new found empathy impacted his life for the better after returning to the States. It enabled him to find his first internship, and his first job, working in construction management. All this became possible from understanding the world from multiple angles. ■



Fushimi Inari Taisha, a shrine in Kyoto, Japan.