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JALT2022 Plenary Speaker • Karen Hill Anton

Crossing Cultures: A Personal Journey

Karen Hill Anton

Setting out as a teenager to uncover the world beyond my New York City neighborhood, my cross-cultural journey began more than a half-century ago. In the decades since, my worldwide travels have been as much a journey of self-discovery as geographical and cultural exploration. The process of learning from and embracing other cultures has been for me a transformation, one in which I have gained a wider view of the world and my place in it. I think of this as the reward for living and learning cross-culturally. In my talk I will share what I have learned and what I have found of value in transcending the limits and limiting labels of identity, nationality, and ethnicity. By chance and by choice, and with a sincere desire to cultivate connection, my journey has culminated in Japan. I accept that with my urban sensibilities and cosmopolitan outlook in my rural community, I will always stand out. Still, having lived with my family continuously in the countryside of Shizuoka Prefecture since 1975, I will share what I have learned about fitting in. This talk will be illustrated with personal vintage photographs. My narration will include the insights and faux pas that highlight my experience of acculturation.

A Lifelong Journey of Crossing Cultures

I traveled to Japan in an unconventional way: I drove here, overland from Europe. Along with my husband and then 5-year-old daughter, we toured most of western Europe before driving border to border across Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. We would later take public transportation to travel through Pakistan, India, Thailand, and Nepal. We were on the road for one year before arriving in Japan on June 1, 1975.

It was fascinating to cross boundaries between countries and realize one of the first lessons of crossing borders and cultures: There is no sharp line that separates one country from another the way it is viewed on a map. Rather, the change is gradual. Traveling overland, I saw the West literally blend into the East.

Many people have asked me if it was difficult traveling with a child, but we had no difficulties whatsoever. While some people might be concerned their child was missing school, we felt our daughter was learning lessons she might never learn in school. And I hope the most important one is that all people are basically alike. Not in their cultures, surely, but certainly in their humanity. I hope she learned that most people are kind and helpful, and that the world we call Earth is a wonderful and exciting place, full of endless lessons. Settling in Japan, I would come to embrace the reality that I too had embarked on a lifelong journey of learning. Although I was not always aware or prepared, in time, I would come to accept those endless lessons as a gift.

I had the opportunity to share my acculturation experiences with the readers of my "Crossing Cultures" column in *The Japan Times* (1990-1999). Men and women, newcomers, and longtime residents were eager to know about this New Yorker's experience of living and raising children in the Japanese countryside. Especially, they were interested to

know how I managed relationships in the community, the neighborhood, and my children's schools.

One question in particular was put to me numerous times: *"What are your coping strategies for living in a foreign culture?"* That question always left me pondering the very term "cope." I thought this word gave the impression of a mechanism that you can put into action as soon as you are faced with a particular cross-cultural difficulty. It makes it appear that you will be able to count on that mechanism working, and that it will get you through until the next time you have to "cope." What was undeniably clear is that this question becomes a matter of pressing concern when people are having a difficult time in a foreign culture. Often, it is a problem of communication, reflecting a person's lack of facility in the language. Maybe it is an indication of what might not be a smooth transition to practicing the behavioral norms of a particular culture and society.

Perhaps there is such a mechanism that can be used as a coping strategy, but in the many years—and it is now five decades—I have lived abroad, I could not tell you what it is. Nevertheless, I can say there are no perfect countries or societies, and that no matter where a person may be, there will be times when they must deal with problems, face difficulty, and try to overcome obstacles. I think facing them is different than coping. Still, without a doubt, there may be times in the life of a person who has chosen to live outside the country and culture of their birth when they feel the best they can do is cope.

In the context of living in Japan, unless you are fluent in Japanese, the hapless foreigner will probably at some point experience the frustration and isolation that results from not being able to communicate in their own language. Even if they are fluent in Japanese, since so much communication in Japanese does not rely on words, it is easy and a commonplace to miss non-verbal cues. I certainly have had these experiences since first coming to live here, and it is not that the question "What am I doing in Japan?" never crossed my mind—it is just that it does not anymore.

That may be because I came to accept living in Japan as not only a challenge, but a learning experience. Being obliged to act and respond in ways that were neither familiar nor comfortable, definitely not preferred, was surely a test of how I managed the acculturation process. In this society, with all its written rules, including many archaic unwritten ones, that apply to etiquette and everyday interactions, my ability to fit in has been regularly tested. So much of the affairs of daily life I saw as an annoyance, and frequently, an intrusion. I found it intolerable being required to do a thing one way when there were many possible ways of doing it.

Quite frankly, as an independent-minded person who has prized her individualism, I was never impressed with the group-oriented mentality. However, although it took years, I have come to appreciate that acting as a group (even when you do not agree) encourages people to act for the benefit of all, to think of others, and to share responsibility. I see that these are the things that make for stable, safe, and sane communities. "Repression" is a strong word, with many negative connotations, but repressing personal desires can simply mean cooperating with your neighbors and putting the needs of your community first. I have long thought the example of strong communities that interact for the benefit of the people in them could be one of Japan's best exports. It has, without a doubt, been one of my most important lessons.

Repression could mean living with the awareness that none of us lives in a vacuum, and that all our actions have consequences. In Japan's densely-populated, openly-interdependent society, these things are taken for granted. It is considered common sense. Seen from the Japanese perspective, it would not be surprising that what might be called "freedom" and "rights" could be regarded as irresponsibility and chaos.

I do not want to make it appear that I have been always so accepting and well-adjusted to Japanese society, because that is certainly not the case. I had a difficult time in the beginning—mainly because I could not take all the structure, proscriptions, and rules seriously. I felt I should act independently, according to the dictates of my own conscience at the moment. But I have changed. I would not call it a metamorphosis, but cooperating with my neighbors and adhering to and respecting the common customs in my community, now comes, well, naturally. I feel neither repressed nor suppressed. What I found out a long time ago was that in Japan people are not expected to act according to personal desire, but rather, they are under obligation to cooperate. Accepting that was not just another lesson, but a big river for me to cross.

When I first arrived in Japan, I found many of the Japanese ways of doing things simply strange. The way Japanese talk, learn, teach, develop relationships, and much more, were all new to me. Nevertheless, over time their ways became my ways, and I hardly give these things a second thought anymore—for the simple reason that cultural behavior is learned, and once learned, that behavior is quite ordinary.

Nevertheless, Japanese culture and society is really different from the one I came from, and no doubt there are many reasons why I was able to settle and make my home here. If I were to begin with "A," I would say that I learned the importance of being *aware* and *attentive*, and that I was willing to *adjust*, *adapt*, and ultimately *accept*, the society I had chosen to live in. And yes, I learned to live with the *ambiguity* of not always knowing what cross-cultural situation I might encounter.

I can say here that no one is more surprised than I am how comfortable I became in Japan. I would not have imagined that I, with my independent attitude and urban sensibilities, would find here so much that is compatible with my thoughts, feelings, and spirit. Cosmopolitan in every sense of that word, it is a matter of some curiosity that I have made my home in one of Japan's principal tea-growing regions, among farmers. Most of the people I know here and interact with on a daily basis do not travel to the neighboring city, let alone go abroad.

There was a lot I did not understand about Japan and its culture when I first came to live here. Reflecting all these years later, it is sometimes disconcerting to think of the many times I must have crossed the invisible lines of decorum and behavior that govern Japanese society. Still, I did see early on that there were cues, and that I could learn by showing a measure of humility. It became clear to me that I could benefit by paying attention, by being self-reflective, and especially, if I could learn to be a careful observer. Now I can say, even after many years living here, one of the things I appreciate most about living in Japan is that I am always discovering something new. I am always learning. Principal among the things I have learned is that even though I will always stand out in Japanese society, I could also fit in.

Years ago, a friend, a Native American Hopi, told me that, when he was a supervisor in the Peace Corps in West Africa, this is what he would tell the volunteers who had come to teach the villagers to read: "First, go into the village—but please, don't do anything. Just observe and pay attention. I know you think you know a lot because you have a university degree and you're going to teach them to read. But believe me, they have a lot to teach you—and you have a lot to learn."

This is the highlight of my experience in my personal journey of crossing borders and cultures—realizing I have a lot to learn.

JALT2021 Balsamo Asian Scholar • Marianne Perfecto

Learning from Learners: Insights from the Lens of Teacher Cognition

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"We teach according to how we were taught" is an adage we have seen in action in many English language classrooms, including mine. Because I learned the English language through its structures—nouns, pronouns, verbs, and adverbs—I taught my first English class that way. After 25 years of teaching, I am still looking for the most effective ways to teach English. I realized that I am still a learner, and that some of my best teachers are my students. I understood this even more because of my research on teacher cognition.

In the 1970s, teaching was viewed from a behaviorist perspective which regards learning as mastering what were considered effective teaching practices (Richards, 1998). Effective teaching was therefore understood as imitating the skills that were passed on by a mentor (i.e., expert teacher) to the novice teacher (Wallace, 1991). This all changed in the 1980s when teaching began to be seen as a thinking activity. Good teaching is now defined as developing one's personal and practical theory of teaching (Richards, 1998). Teachers are seen to have the capacity to make decisions about their teaching and understand the processes and underlying principles that inform these decisions. This shift in perspective of teaching from a behaviorist to a cogni-