

Discovering Difference Through World Travel

by Vicki Versland



On July 3, 2000 I made my exit from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire scene with a Bachelor of Science in Education, a Fulbright scholarship which would allow me to teach English in South Korea, and a mission to discover myself and the world. Of course I hoped I could get some good teaching experience in as well. I knew I would face barriers, but I also knew I would overcome these barriers. My first barrier came on the 12 hour flight when I became sick. When I arrived in Korea, I could only depend on my program leader to take me to the embassy doctor. I had a 102° fever, lost the ability to function and spent my first few days in Korea confined to my bed. I would overcome and soon jump this small hurdle.

South Korea was not my first experience of living in a foreign country. In 1996, I lived in Riga, Latvia for 6 months where I studied through the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. In 1997 and 1998, I spent the summers living in Mexico participating in a Spanish language program and a Mobility International USA (MIUSA) Leadership, Diversity, and Disability rights exchange program respectively. In Latvia, as a foreign student who did not speak Latvian, I was different. In Mexico, as I desperately and with poor pronunciation asked “donde es el baño”, I was different. On the MIUSA program as a person without a disability, I was different yet the same as the rest of the excited, motivated youth on the program. My various experiences of living in foreign countries have made me realize how all of us are different and how differences of all kinds should be celebrated as opposed to ignored, mystified and shunned.

Once upon a time, as a special education major with a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) minor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire I thought I was a very open-minded person. I worked with the international students on campus, with various populations of people from the Hmong, to the illiterate, to the disabled. I thought I did not pay attention to stereotypes. In fact, I was quite angry when one of my professors told me ‘If you are white, you are racist.’ Although I do not agree with this statement, I now understand what this professor was really trying to communicate. Don’t look down on people because they are different. Don’t stand by and watch injustice as it happens. Don’t always take the upper hand without questioning it. Don’t be ignorant to the upper hand you hold with your position in society.

It was through the MIUSA program where I learned how many ignorant, incorrect stereotypes I held in my stereotype free, open-minded mind! The leader of the MIUSA program was in a wheelchair? Oops. You are blind, I will sleep on the top bunk. Vicki! You know at home, my favorite hobby is to water ski. Even though I am blind, I can do anything you can do. I just need your eyes to guide me. Oops. Then there was Johana, who because of lack of oxygen at birth had no control of her muscles, had almost incomprehensible speech and was bound to a wheelchair. At first glance, she looked like she had cognitive disabilities. Strike that thought when you try to interpret her speech for others to comprehend and you realize that her vocabulary is so much more advanced than yours, and she is 8 years younger! Later, Johana went on to study at Stanford. Could I have had any more ignorant stereotypes?

With the MIUSA program I learned how ignorant I was as an open-minded person. After the MIUSA program, I tried to devote myself to a stereotype free style of thinking. Along came Korea. Wow! Was I different. During the 2 years I lived in Korea, I learned loads about differences. The length of my nose and the light color of my body hair seemed to be the most fascinating aspect of my differences to the Korean children. I was told to shut up because I was too loud, or because I would speak English with my American friends. At night in order to catch a taxi home, I as a white person would have to hide, and jump into the taxi after my Korean looking friend secured its service. I was always asked why I did not wear make-up or why at age 25 I was not married. In Korea, I was different and in Korea it is not okay to be different.

After Korea, I moved to Houston, Texas where I taught English in a resource room in a school with a 97% Hispanic population. The school was in an area infamous for its gang activity. Somehow after coming home from

a soccer game of which I was the coach, everyone knew to hit the floor when a rock hit the bus sounding like a gunshot. Yep, as expected, I was different! Not only did I look, sound, and act different, I had no idea of the culture of the neighborhood or the barriers the children faced daily. (I know they thought me strange, but I believe they loved me all the same.)

Now, I am in Japan studying in the special education department at Hyogo University of Teacher Education. Bingo! Am I different? Of course! Let me tell you, it is not a good thing to be different in Japan. The Japanese believe in the collective, their culture is tied to respecting the collective thinking of the group. Your individual desires should always be set aside for the benefit of the group. Do not even try having a Peruvian/Brazilian looking face in an all Japanese elementary school, because you will go home crying everyday. Even though you were born in Japan and speak Japanese, Spanish and Portuguese, your face looks different. Good luck.

So what do we do about the people who are different in Japan, the people who walk with a limp, people who are labeled as autistic or as having Asperger Syndrome, or various other syndromes such as Rett Syndrome, or Down Syndrome? What about the physical disabilities? What about the learning disabilities? What about looking different, acting different, or speaking a different language? Or just having a different view or perspective?

In Japan, people with visible syndromes such as Rett Syndrome or Down Syndrome seem to have a simple social life. They most often go to special schools (sometimes special classes in regular schools) where they enjoy a very low ratio of student to teacher, usually about 1, 2, 3 or at max 4 students to 1 teacher. They do not seem to be faced with the stressful social chore of trying to be and act like the majority of the collective group. They seem to have a special sort of freedom from the complex social rules that other Japanese have to figure out (quickly) or face a life of social isolation. In fact, these days many young Japanese are choosing not to attend school. They were first labeled as 'school refusals' and now the label has evolved into 'hikikomori.' According to Wikipedia, the Japanese Ministry of Health defines hikikomori as individuals who refuse to leave their parents' house and isolate themselves away from society and family in a single room for a period exceeding six months.

There is a reason these students are choosing not to attend school or take part in society. I have had the opportunity to work with an 11 year old boy who fell several meters from school monkey bars when he was 5 years old. In the states, with his frontal brain damage he would most likely qualify for special education services under 'other health impairments.' In Japan, he just stays with everyone. He has problems with kanji, the Chinese characters used in the Japanese writing system. You have to memorize about 1000 characters and their many readings by the end of 6th grade. His memory with his brain injured brain refuses to memorize these characters in the traditional manner. This young boy is now different. He has become truant from school. He becomes physically distressed if you mention the word school or anything having to do with going to school. His mother is scared of him being bullied at school. I am sure he won't go to school because he knows he is different and he will be bullied at school. Kids are kids, they tend to tease each other. In a culture where being like everyone else is the number one priority, kids do not accept differences of others. Being different is not a simple task, especially when the difference can not be physically seen.

Imagine having Asperger Syndrome or autism in Japan. The difference really is not in the way you look, but definitely in the way you act! I work with a 1st grade student with Asperger Syndrome. He does get picked on a lot, but in a way I think he leads a pretty good life in Japan. He is not weighed down by all the social constraints. He says what he wants, does what he wants. There is a belief in Japanese education that the young kids do not know proper social behaviors but will eventually conform to the group in their due time. Of course, what the Japanese do not yet realize is the student with Asperger Syndrome will most likely not conform without direct training of the social rituals. So it seems this young 1st grader with Asperger Syndrome is in social heaven in Japan. He is different, and does not try to change being different. He just acts like himself. I assume many Japanese are envious of his social freedom.

One little girl I worked with is tagged with the 'self selected mute' label. She also has a label of cognitive disability and attends a special class in a regular school. My thinking, is she has ADD, dyslexia, and an under developed muscular system. I think she is seen as different, the kids are mean to her, and of course she decided not to talk to anyone. I think I would have done the same in her situation. She is different and even though the

Japanese are trying to change the situation, it will not happen over night. You can not change centuries of history and culture in a split second let alone a decade. Change is slow, especially in Japan.

Growing up in the United States education system, I have never been labeled as having a disability. I never qualified for special education services. (Based on the way I act, I think they probably just overlooked my disabilities!) In a way though, living in Japan and not speaking Japanese fluently, I feel like I have a disability.

When I want to set up a bank account, install a phone line, get insurance, set up internet or most anything that requires filling out a form, I must have someone who can read and write Japanese in order to help. Where is the privacy? Imagine having a physical disability where someone has to help you use the restroom. What about a communication disability or a learning disability where letters and numbers reverse themselves or jump off the page not allowing you to read? When I want to make an important bank transfer, I need to have a Japanese friend along for the transfer. When I get sick, of course my friend is needed to interpret my aches and pains no matter how personal. People always stare at me. They think I can not do basic things, just because I do not speak Japanese well. They even talk to me like I am severely cognitively disabled and do not have the ability to complete basic things. I can not speak your language, but I can pretty much do anything else. (Vicki, Even though I am blind, I can do anything you can do!)

Then there is the education system. I am studying about special education. All my classes are in Japanese. Because I majored in special education, and the Japanese special education system is built on the American system the content of my classes is easy for me to understand. I rely on my dictionary to understand what is being said in class. I can not read kanji, but if the professor just sends me their notes/handouts through E-mail through the internet, I can easily change them from Kanji to hiragana (phonetic alphabet of Japanese) and be able to read the required readings. This is a simple modification, but was quite difficult for the special education majors here to understand. I have to patiently fight to get such a small modification met. But once it is met, I can easily do the required class work. I can succeed! I become enabled! I am still different, but not disabled. Many people with disabilities are different, but society tends to disable them instead of celebrating the differences.

In all the countries I have had a chance to live in, I was able to visit or work with people with disabilities. In Latvia, Mexico, Costa Rica, South Korea, and Japan I worked with people with Down Syndrome. Guess what! No matter where they came from, the people with Down Syndrome shared the same physical characteristics. Their eyes have an upward, and outward slant. Their face tends to be flat. Their hearts are often weak. It made me realize as humans we look, act and sound different but we are the same. We need to accept the differences in us all.

If you have the opportunity to live in another country, be taken out of your comfort zone, or to live out of the context you are accustomed to, please do. Especially if you are studying to become a teacher more specifically a special education teacher, please take the time to discover differences. This discovery will only lead you to a better understanding of yourself and your students. Together you will all be enabled to believe in yourself and accomplish the things thought most difficult to accomplish. Celebrate the differences in us all!

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