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Overseas Studies Essay Contest

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There is a shrine in the forest near Kyoto, famous for its miles of trails and hundreds of *torii* gates. In the Shinto tradition, the *torii* represents the gateway between the human world and the world of the spirits, and it can be found at the entrance to every Shinto shrine in Japan. At this particular shrine, however, the gates line paths that seem to wind on and on forever through the forest. To visit the place is to pass through literally hundreds of entrances to the spirit world, and to see almost as many private shrines to local gods scattered along the way. On the cool November morning when I made this shrine my last stop before returning to Tokyo, I wandered along the trails for hours but was still unable to explore every corner, pass through every *torii*, or pay my respects to every spirit housed there. I expected nothing more than another beautiful landmark among many in the cultural capital of Japan, but the effect of this shrine was such that now, when I think of Japan, the image that floats across my mind is of all the gates and all the spirits housed in that quiet place.

There is a lesson to be learned in Shinto, and as with all the great lessons in my short life, I came across it suddenly and unexpectedly, on that unassuming day in Kyoto. If we look carefully, I think it is a secret we can uncover in all parts of the world. It is not, however, one that can be understood from the safety of our own homes, snugly nestled in the security of a culture we have known since childhood. Setting aside the also valuable experiences of travel, study, and friendship for a moment, I will venture to say

that this is the core of the study abroad experience, the treasure that I would encourage future travelers like myself to seek out. I found it in a shrine in Japan, and others may find it anywhere their travels take them.

A month later, back in Tokyo, I nervously approached a microphone to explain my study abroad experience to an audience of teachers, friends, and host families. It was my school's annual *Nihongo Happyokai*, a Japanese speech presentation in which exchange students like ourselves demonstrate newly acquired language skills by speaking on the ups and downs, triumphs and failures of our time in Japan. Preparing to speak to so many Japanese people in their language about my impressions of their country was one of the most intimidating things I have ever done, and I agonized over what to say that would be both meaningful and, given my improved but still limited Japanese, possible for me to explain. Finally, I went to a Japanese friend for help, and as he and I tried to make sense of my ideas, I thought of that shrine in Kyoto and realized what I wanted to tell everyone. "People should hear your perspective," he said. "Just write what you feel, and we'll worry about the Japanese later." In the next few days we put my American perspective through his Japanese filter, and came up with the speech that I nervously presented.

When I first arrived in Japan, my speech began, I looked around me and saw how much of Japanese life is different from life in the US, but as time passed my thinking slowly began to change. I stopped defining life in Japan in terms of the ways in which it differs from the US, because I came to realize that, as they say in Japanese, the two countries are not *hyoriittai*, opposite sides of the same coin. Trying to understand Japan by comparing it to the US is useless, and more importantly, holding the US as the

standard against which all other cultures are compared is an even greater mistake.

Looking at the world from that perspective is like seeing it through sunglasses, I said. It casts a shadow over everything and distorts the true brightness of the colors around us. We can learn about Japan with the sunglasses on, but in order to understand Japan we must take off the sunglasses and see it for what it really is: not as “a different culture” with “strange” customs, but as a culture that, in its own right, millions of people happily see as the normal way of life. Japan is not defined by the ways in which it is different from the US, and during my stay I realized that the more I could simply recognize my American ideas and leave them out, the more comfortable I became with living in Japanese culture.

In my experience, studying abroad is about more than just learning about another culture. We can do that from a classroom in America. What we can't do from here, what we can only gain from studying abroad, is the actual experience of what it is like to live somewhere other than the US, and approach things as simple as daily life from a perspective that is not our own. I lived with a Japanese family just outside of Tokyo and learned their manners and daily routines. I ate with chopsticks, took Japanese-style baths, and wore *kimono* for special occasions. I went to school with my host sister and practiced *kanji*, Chinese characters used in Japanese writing, with her. I did all these things, and many more, and after a while they started to seem as natural to me as the customs I grew up with in my own family. People have so many ways of doing things, I realized, and it is not necessary to compare them, only to see that they exist next to each other, and that they come in as many varieties as there are personalities in the world. As many as the small shrines in the forest in Kyoto.

A few short weeks later, the program came to an end. Though the nerve-wracking *happyokai* was thankfully long over, I was surprised at the closing ceremony to hear my words repeated by a host mother in her farewell speech to all of us. She reminded us to think of Japan and its culture when we go home to our own countries, and remember how we learned to see the world from Japan's perspective as well as our own. She asked us to continue studying, traveling, and learning about the world, all of all of which I will do gladly, and hopefully often, in the years to come.

When I remember Japan, I see my host family, my friends, and my teachers, and then I see the paths of the shrine in Kyoto. I imagine Japan and America as two small shrines among the hundreds scattered throughout the forest. In Shinto, there are as many gods as there are families to worship them, and equally many shrines where one can appreciate these spirits and the benefits they provide. There are spirits for trees, mountains, family, and even in this modern age, spirits for business success and company promotions. None rules over the others, because they all have a different purpose, making them all equally necessary in the monumental task that is keeping the world alive. This is the moral of my story in Japan, learned from a very old religion and a very modern collection of new friends. The next person's story may be quite different, but that is to be expected. It is why there are so many shrines in Kyoto and so many cultures around the globe keeping the world alive.