



Stefan

from Burlington &
Burlington Lakeshore

to

Japan

“konnichiwa tenki wa ii desu ne”

In a state of equilibrium, the first move to disturb the balance sets forth a series of chain reactions that inevitably shape the future. Several facilities known to a human through the course of their life obey this principle. Society, hierarchy, and power are all good examples of this. However, beyond those, the most directly influenceable and observable aspect that follows this phenomenon is one’s individual journey, and the paths in life one chooses to take. As I write this to you, I am sitting on a bed in the room of a small apartment within the capital city Kanazawa, of Japan’s Ishikawa prefecture. Certainly, if you had met me two years ago and revealed to me that this was my future, I would not seriously consider you to be telling the truth. However, as life has done and always will, within those two years, a small opportunity presented itself, which, when grabbed a hold of, quickly unravelled itself to be something much grander than at first glance. Such an opportunity I surely would have missed had I not made the “first move” when the moment was right. Boarding my flight to Tokyo from Toronto Pearson Airport, I sat in my seat knowing that I had made it there not by some arbitrary force such as luck or chance, and not by an unstoppable cosmic force such as fate or destiny, but as a direct outcome of my own deliberate choices and actions, and the actions of the many people that supported me along the way. A direct outcome occurring through the process of causality, stemming from the “first move.”



When I arrived at Komatsu Airport, I was greeted by all of my host family members, along with a large sign reading "Welcome Stefan." I met my first host family, and after a long car ride I made it to what would be my new home for the rest of 2018. During the following week, I spent lots of time comfortably at home, adjusting to the new scenery. It was still Japan's summer break, so school hadn't started yet. Together with my host father, I prepared myself for the student life by receiving my school uniform and meeting the school's faculty. Once school started, the pace of life rapidly picked up. Days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months. I felt myself slipping into a tangible scheduled life, leaving behind the formless sloth of summer break. Every day I learned something new to build on my understanding of Japan and Japanese culture, a process that is still occurring daily. I have been thrust into more unpredictable, un-planned for situations these past three months than I ever had been in the last three years of my life. One of the quickest lessons I've learned about being a student on exchange is that very frequently, things in life will pop out and I have no choice but to improvise and move along with it. The number of times I have been surprised with the task of delivering a small introduction speech, a large introduction speech, going for dinner with new people eager to meet me, and participating in events out of the blue, is so large that by now it has become a part of my expectations. I have fine-tuned my ability to improvise and plan quickly, something that was lacking in refinement before leaving Canada.

Of course, what I imagine to be the proverbial "elephant in the room" for everyone right now is language and communication. Japanese is nothing at all like English, so how have I been able to communicate with others thus far? How far am I progressing with my Japanese skills? These questions were on my mind as well before I left on exchange. To be completely immersed in a foreign language was something I had never experienced before in my life. To answer the first question, I was somewhat surprised to learn that many people in Kanazawa can speak almost-fluent English. My homeroom teacher, along with several other teachers at my school can speak English. Coincidentally, many of them have also studied abroad in English speaking countries in their post-secondary education years. Currently, my host father can speak English about as well as I can speak Japanese. It isn't much, but when I arrived in Japan I couldn't speak any Japanese at all, so his English was extremely helpful when important information needed to be relayed to me. Moving to the second question, I'd like to think that my Japanese is progressing well. I study for more than one hour every day, using a variety of different resources. From Canada I brought several Japanese textbooks made for English learners, here in Japan I have obtained Japanese workbooks intended for Japanese students entering elementary school, and of course, conversing with other people in Japanese are all various ways I've been able to learn as much as I have already. On average, my listening ability has improved the most, and speaking is following closely behind. About one month ago, I was able to understand 50% of things people said to me, without being able to respond. Now, I still can only understand 50% of what people say to me, but now I've begun to associate words and meanings together, and I'm imitating common words and speech patterns used by those I know. Being immersed in another language is by far the most effective way to learn it without a doubt, and I've noticed that one of the reasons why is because I have been able to directly monitor and observe the small changes occurring in me daily, and I have been able to test my areas of strength and weaknesses every day in conversation. While I am nowhere near fluent, and still far away from even casual conversation, I think that a solid foundation is being laid right now, and that in another three months I will have much more noticeable changes to report.

Moving on to the final topic of culture, I would like to preface this with saying that Japanese culture is one of the most interesting, historical, and educational cultures I have ever had the pleasure of experiencing. Naturally, one is only able to appreciate a culture after having experienced it first-hand, so I may be a little biased in saying this (ha ha). When seeing a large city such as Tokyo or Kyoto on television, it looks on the surface level very similar to large cities in the west, such as New York or Toronto. However, on the interior, the foundation of Japan's society follows rules whose differences from those of Canada and even the United States are so nuanced, that the interactions each fundamental piece has on the others ends up being noticeably different than in my familiar home country. Small things, such as the way vending machines work, unwritten social etiquette, the way public transportation is viewed, all accumulate into an almost surreal experience of Japan looking just like home, but not quite feeling just like home.

Much of Japan's daily practices nowadays stem from ancient tradition, and any question I have about the reasons for Japan doing something in a certain way is always answered with a brief lesson on some of Japan's history. For example, I had a conversation with one of the teachers in my school about the way people greet each other. In Japanese, "konnichiwa" is the standard greeting that can be roughly equated to "hello" or "good day" in English. However, I learned that "konnichiwa" is actually a very shortened form of the old sentence "konnichiwa tenki wa ii desu ne", which means "good weather we're having today, no?" This was the standard greeting in old Japan because five hundred years ago, agriculture was at the heart of society. People greeted each other with a comment about weather because good weather was a valued thing, since bad weather inhibited crop yield and caused food shortages. This is just a small taste of the things I have learned since coming here, and I expect to learn much more as life here continues.

To everyone reading this, and especially to those reading this who are currently considering applying for international exchange, this opportunity in my life has made me realize the importance of making the "first move." Nobody exists in the world who can make the "first move" for me, and the decision rests with my own initiative. Many situations arise here in Japan where I must make the "first move," and I'm sure that such situations will continue to appear for the rest of my life in Japan and on this Earth. I've grown so much already in ways I could never imagine, and I eagerly await what the future will bring.

Stefan