

## An Eye-Opener for Me

I believe we all have experiences that completely change the way we see and think about the world around us. For me, the watershed was when I was in the 5th grade during Christmas season during an elementary school in New York when we decided to decorate our classroom with Christmas trees and to have a Secret Santa gift exchange. This was one of the critical moments where I became aware of a different culture when introduced to a Jewish girl, Rebecca, in our class. It was she who opened my eyes.

As a Jewish person, she celebrated not Christmas but Hanukkah. To address her religious beliefs, our teacher promptly decided to embellish our classroom with both Christmas and Hanukkah decorations, and to give her a present on the last day of Hanukkah instead of doing Secret Santa.

While my classmates liked the mixture of the ornaments, I struggled to understand the reason why we couldn't celebrate Christmas as a whole class, and became somehow disinclined to talk to Rebecca because I felt she had altered the Christmas event towards an unfamiliar direction.

With my parents' advice, my struggle came to a sudden end with my basic research of the U.S. I learned that the U.S. is diverse in religions and cultures, as the country has accepted immigrants from all over the world. According to a recent Gallup poll, approximately three-quarters of

Americans identify with a Christian faith, and about 6% with a non-Christian faith including Judaism, Islam, and others. Conversely, I had never noticed any religious or cultural differences at school, or within my local community while I lived in Japan. In my opinion, this is mainly because Japanese people in general don't have strong religious faith in Buddhism or Shintoism and are, in general, more ethnically and culturally homogeneous than other developed countries. From the research, I presumed that our teacher already knew how to handle the situation through her similar experiences in the past because of her time living in a multi-cultural environment like the U.S.

After the Christmas season, we had another small event in spring called "Passover", which is also a Jewish tradition. I did some research on Passover beforehand and decided, despite my anxiety, to talk to Rebecca about this. When speaking to her, she was first surprised at my knowledge about the event, then looked glad to be recognized for her faith, before finally providing me with detailed information about the occasion including what she ate at dinner and its importance for her family. In turn, she suddenly inquired about cultural events in Japan. I elaborated on my favorite events such as doing a gift exchange at Christmas and throwing Halloween parties with humorous costumes. She listened to my explanation with an interested look and then told me that I was so open to accept other cultures' events and love them as my own.

Rebecca's keen insights were definitely an eye-opener for me. As she accurately pointed out, I and probably most Japanese people already have a strong cultural foundation, so we can introduce new elements of different cultures into our own and treat them as if they were inherited from our own ancestors. After the Passover, Rebecca and I suddenly were closer and became good friends. On top of that, I now feel no fear in encountering differences not only between cultures and religions, but in the unique thoughts and ideas which I often find among my classmates, even after moving back to Japan, because I noticed that all I have to do is enjoy unfamiliar things around me.

Through these experiences, I realized the key to understanding and communicating with others is a solid foundation of tolerance and respect, which we all have the capacity to learn and foster. In the near future, I would like to study abroad and obtain a job at an international organization to make the most of my English skills and indulge my curiosity about the world. Although there may be a variety of conflicts when studying and working overseas, I am confident of overcoming them with an attitude of tolerance and respect, and of interacting with more people around me at the same time. [699 words]