

## The Magic of a Simple Question

*"Where are you from?"* If I had lived in Japan my entire life, I might not have been asked this question, but because of my father's job, I spent a year living in the USA where I answered this question many times. It may come as a surprise, but I made a lot of friends through this question. This magic question became my own personal magnet connecting me to more people than I could have imagined.

I went to a local public school in Baltimore. I remember the first day that I rode on the school bus. I decided to sit alone and kept my head down. However, the one moment that I raised my face, "please sit next to me," a girl said with a warm, friendly tone. She gave me the window seat where she sat. The first question she asked was, "Where are you from?". I could answer with confidence. She smiled, which made me smile. I immediately felt like I had found my footing.

At school, I made many friends of different races, languages, cultural habits, and more. I learned the importance of understanding them through many encounters. I'd like to think that I wasn't prejudiced, but, upon reflection, I realized that I had felt socially

distant from them. However, the friends I met didn't judge people on their appearance. I marveled at how they would often talk positively, without hesitation. They tried to get to know the other person by first asking "Where are you from?" This is an easy question which anyone can answer. For me, it used to take me a long time to gather my thoughts before talking to people whom I met for the first time. Through friends, I learned that the most obvious questions are the most effective as the first step in communicating. Maybe we can talk about our home countries, special native products, and their relationships to Japan. With that in mind, wouldn't it be fun to learn about other countries?

My friends in the USA were quick and natural at finding another person's good qualities and being generous with compliments. It made me realize that we first need to acknowledge the other person. They had the extraordinary power to make people smile. I think this is a characteristic that we should emulate. There are many countries that have severe problems in the world, but by trying to understand people without prejudice; we can learn to understand them, their culture, and their religion.

It's important to look around the world, but we can also focus our energies locally. Last year, I moved to Tokyo, but I have a different accent because I was raised in Fukui. At first, I was embarrassed to express my differences, but then, my new friends asked me "where are you from?" That was when I could reveal my true self, and I found myself talking about my hometown more, and began to beam with pride and confidence.

Please consider the spirit of "Where are you from?" when we communicate with new friends. Let's try to understand other people. I encourage everyone to make an effort to search for positive attributes in others instead of negative attributes.

People are born with many differences. Fostering a spirit of respect for each other will lead to the creation of a bullying-free society and a peaceful world. We can feel much joy and learn more about the world by getting to know people. I think that the heart that accepts differences and acknowledges people is the heart of compassion, one of the most positive qualities I've seen in others.

Through my experience, I learned the courage of talking to people by asking "where are you from?" without hesitation or prejudice. I also learned the importance of trying to understand others, getting to know each other after acknowledging differences but

moving beyond any judgement based only on appearance. Making new friends in a foreign country was an unforgettable experience where I was able to gain valuable, irreplaceable perspectives. I'll never forget how it all started with the simplest of questions; "where are you from?" [686 words]