

## My Japan Journey - Episode 6 Kasia Lynch: A Life Amongst Cultures

[Music]

Kasia Lynch 0:05

I think that if you have an open mind, if you're okay with challenges and realizing that those challenges are gonna get you to that next step in life closer to your goal, I think as long as you're open to that, you'll have a successful time regardless of where you go and regardless of what age you are and what experience you're trying to do.

Yuko Handa 0:31

A single moment of curiosity can lead to unexpected opportunities, some ending in a lifelong involvement with Japan. Our conversation partners all have a unique Japan journey to tell, one that's steeped in connections that have enriched their lives and altered them in deep, meaningful ways. Join us in their Japan journey and be inspired to embrace what's unfamiliar. Your next single moment of curiosity could lead you to possibilities you've never dreamed of.

[Music]

This is My Japan Journey. I'm Yuko Handa from the Japan Society of Boston.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 1:19

Kasia, welcome to our podcast.

Kasia Lynch 1:22

Thank you so much for having me. This is extremely exciting.

Yuko Handa 1:26

Kasia Lynch is the founder of Ikigai<sup>1</sup> Connections. So Kasia, tell us, where did your Japan journey start, but also let us know a little bit about Ikigai Connections?

Kasia Lynch 1:37

Thank you for asking. I never really had an interest in Japan until middle school, when some students from the high school came and said, "You have to try this new language!" And to me, I was just like, "What is that? Let's try it!" So I did. And then my junior year, somebody had to go to Japan for a semester, and nobody wanted to go. So my teacher and my dad got together and they made me go.

And it was in the middle of Shiga-*ken*,<sup>2</sup> in the middle of countryside. I had to take two bicycles to get to school, plus a train in the middle. And it was just like, "Where am I?" So it was a very shocking

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<sup>1</sup> 生き甲斐. Reason for living.

<sup>2</sup> 県. Prefecture

experience for a 17 year old girl. But after four months, I came back to Michigan and realized, you know, that was a life-changing experience and my life will just-- it has to be centered around Japan.

So I decided to study it in Boston University. And after that, actually during that, I went to Kyoto for one year, my junior year, on the KCJS<sup>3</sup> program, and it was in Kyoto so, as you can imagine, Kyoto is just beautiful. So I fell in love even more with Japan and I decided I have to come back.

So I went back to BU, graduated, and decided to apply for the MEXT scholarship, the *monbukagakusho*,<sup>4</sup> and I was thankfully accepted and was sent to a school that I didn't really know much about. It's a women's university in Tokyo and I was like, "Tokyo, no! It's a big city, I can't go there. I want to go back to Kyoto!" But I loved it. I actually ended up staying in Tokyo for six years. And it is probably my favorite city in the world, mostly because I'm an A-*gata*.<sup>5</sup> I like things that are on time, like trains. I like, you know, orderly fashion, you know, people walking on the right side of the street, like that kind of stuff was just...made my life so much easier. I made a lot of friends. And to this day, I still use Japanese and my Japanese business culture knowledge in everything I do.

After Tokyo, I actually decided to-- I lived in Poland and Italy and then back home in Michigan working at Japanese companies. And since 2018 I started my own company, which is Ikigai Connections. And here I share my experience and my advice to anybody else who wants to use Japanese language and culture in their job. So I connect with the younger me all the time. And I keep giving them, you know, ideas, things that they can do.

So many people want to go to Japan and work there or live there, study there. But a lot of people also may not want to actually live there, they just want to use their language skills. So I focus on that for people who want to do that. And although I have a job board that's focused on Japanese jobs in the United States, I also have a lot of resources for people who want to find their Japanese job in any country: India, England, or, you know, Canada, Poland! So I connect with those people as well, too. And it's been a lovely ride up till now, so I just look forward to seeing what happens next.

Yuko Handa 4:34

So Kasia, take us back to that moment in high school. When you were in middle school, somebody from high school says, "Hey, you should check out this language." Right? Was there anything else besides the "Wow, that's an interesting language" that kind of attracted you to? Or was it just pure, in certain ways, serendipity?

Kasia Lynch 4:54

It was a little bit of serendipity, but I knew that my high school offered Spanish, French, and German. So I decided French would be kind of nice, because I also speak Polish. My family is from Poland. So I was born and raised in America, but I speak Polish with a very strong American accent. But I always liked

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<sup>3</sup> KCJS: Kyoto Consortium for Japanese Studies.

<sup>4</sup> 文部科学省. The *monbukagakusho* scholarship, formerly known as the *monbusho* scholarship, is an academic scholarship offered by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

<sup>5</sup> 型. Type, i.e., Type A personality.

languages and trying to figure out how the languages work. So I knew I wanted to do some kind of language, but the top one going into high school was French, but then they said Japanese and I was like, "Ooh! They have characters. What are these characters? They have three alphabets. What's going on here?" So I think the challenge is what made me want to just check it out and see. And the rest is history!

Yuko Handa 5:33

Very interesting, isn't it? Because it wasn't-- in certain ways, it wasn't intentional.

Kasia Lynch 5:39

Correct.

Yuko Handa 5:39

It really was just kind of pure chance.

Kasia Lynch 5:42

And I never had Japanese food before then. I never knew about anime or manga, it wasn't very big at the time. I never knew anything about Japan. I didn't even know anything about Asia! And I had only known a little bit about Europe because of my trips to Poland to visit distant family members there, but I never really knew much about the world and that there are other cultures, there's other religions, there's other ways of doing things. So it was kind of serendipitous.

Yuko Handa 6:08

So there's Kasia, highschooler Kasia in Michigan, right? Taking or having been exposed to this language called Japanese. But then your father and your teacher kind of collaborate and send you to Shiga of all places. Tell us, what was it like? From that moment you landed in Narita. Was this your first? This was your first time in Asia?

Kasia Lynch 6:35

Yes. And it was my first time on an airplane by myself. And, you know, this is before internet and phones, cell phones. So you just kind of get to the airport and you think that someone's going to come pick you up. You don't know what they look like, you don't know what their names are, you can't even speak the language.

I remember leaving and my *sensei*<sup>6</sup> told me, "You should probably start writing in a journal." And I said, "Oh, I'm not gonna write in a journal. What does that do? Like, that's strange." But I actually remember opening up the notebook, a simple notebook, on the airplane thinking, "This is really weird. But here I go to Japan." And that journal ended up being a lifesaver for my entire trip, because it was not easy.

It was a huge culture shock, you know, "What am I eating? I can't understand what people are telling me. And why do I have to wear this really long skirt and ride my bike in it? And why don't they turn the heat on in the school until November 1st? I'm cold!"

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<sup>6</sup> 先生. Teacher.

But at the end of the day, it was wonderful people, my host family was just wonderful. They taught me Japanese words, one at a time. They were there for me. They talked to me even though we didn't understand each other, but there was some kind of communication. My teachers were amazing. They gave me experiences that I've never thought I had to have when I was in Japan. And just the students that I met, I'm still friends with them to this day. And actually two of them are entrepreneurs, so we have a connection there.

There was two foreigners in that school at the time. One was a gentleman from Costa Rica and it was me with long blonde hair. So I definitely stuck out and people would just look at me and I would never know what they were saying. I'd be walking in the streets and, again, this is in the middle of nowhere, so little children across the street would point and scream at me and I didn't know if they were scared or what, so it was very shocking. But I remember, you know, calling my parents on Sunday nights and saying, "This is so hard, please let me go home. I want to go home sooner. This-- I don't know what I'm doing here."

But over time, after a few months, it became something that I realized it made me stronger. I just learned about the world, if that makes any sense. You know, as a 17 year old kid you're just like, "What's out there?" And here it was just this kind of a very harsh but wonderful way to experience what's out there. And I think ever since then, I haven't been the same.

I came back home to Michigan to my, you know, smallish suburban town, and I don't know if I could relate with people talking about just what we have going on in Michigan, which was my life before I left for Japan. But then I was just like, "Wow, there's so much more! There's other American states, there's other countries, there's other cultures, like, I just have to know more." And that started this insatiable desire to learn about other things.

Yuko Handa 9:08

Now, how long were you there in high school?

Kasia Lynch 9:12

That was four months.

Yuko Handa 9:13

Just four months? Just four months that kind of opens you up and changes you?

Kasia Lynch 9:18

Yes, it was a very long four months at the time.

Yuko Handa 9:21

But again, I hear you but I have to also say there are plenty of high school kids who go to Japan, or maybe other places in the world, and say, "I hated it. I don't want to do anything to do with it. I'm very happily home and that was just bad." I hear you say it opened you up, but there must have been something in Kasia to start with. You must have had a little tiny seed of, you know, loving adventure Kasia.

Kasia Lynch 9:54

Yeah, and I think it's because of my parents, because, and I haven't actually talked about this much, this is my first time saying this out loud, but my parents escaped from communism and they came to America with very little language, money, possessions, and they started from scratch. And they've worked so hard. They always instilled in us, the three daughters, that, you know, you can work hard to go towards your dreams. And also it's important to have dreams.

And also the whole, like, international thing? I think they really helped me with that, because I wasn't just your typical American student. I had this, you know, Polish identity as well that I was scared to kind of show. And then when I went to Japan, I think it kind of gave me permission to embrace being different. And even after all my years of living overseas, because total it was eight in Japan, two in Poland, one in Italy, and then back home to Michigan. But all that time, I've just been just realizing that I'm never actually just an American in America, I have my Polish and Japanese connections. And then in Poland, I'm Polish but, like, wherever I walked, people could tell I was not Polish fully. And then in Japan, I would obviously stick out, so I think that all kind of converged to make me really appreciate multicultural identities and just that global idea. So I think that's where it kind of came from.

Yuko Handa 11:21

Take us back to your college days. You come back from Japan. Kasia is already a little bit changed.

Kasia Lynch 11:27

Yes.

Yuko Handa 11:28

And then you go to college. I mean, Michigan to Massachusetts, you know, BU, that in itself also must have been a little bit of a change, no?

Kasia Lynch 11:38

Absolutely. Because I was very introverted and shy, quiet in high school and in college I was able to embrace a new kind of, like, "Hey, nobody knows me here. Nobody's from Michigan in this area and I can just start afresh at age 18. I can become the person I really want to be." So I was experimenting with lots of things and I-- my little good girl personality, I kind of left that in Michigan and I pierced my nose the first, like, weekend I was in Boston, just because I wanted to! And I took the T to, I think it was Arlmont, and I've never taken public transportation in my life! And here's this 18 year old doing this to go to find a tattoo shop that would give nose piercings, like that was crazy in itself. And then I, you know, I just kind of, like, chopped my hair and I used, like, heavy dark makeup and I just looked a little different. But I was experimenting. I wanted to see what I liked.

BU, they still pride themselves on representing all the countries of the world. So I met people from so many different countries and I learned about different religions and I went to different, like, you know, food tasting events. And I met friends who were like that too, so they introduced me to their culture and it was almost like traveling internationally in Boston. And I think I was given permission to just kind of explore and that's what I really appreciate about living in Boston.

And then my junior year, I was able to apply for that year abroad in Kyoto. And that just further made me realize how important it is to keep learning and to keep seeing what's out there. And I really wanted to share all that with my friends and just say, "Hey, this is how-- this is what *ozoni*<sup>7</sup> is!" And people, they weren't sure what that was at first. Or I learned how to make *zenzai*<sup>8</sup> from my Kyoto host family. And that's, you know, you take, you boil these red beans and you add a bunch of sugar and my friends were like, "What are you doing?" But I just was called to really share these international experiences. I think it was great to have that kind of freedom to do that in Boston.

Yuko Handa 13:34

But Kasia I'm a little bit curious. So, BU. You could have still, for instance, taken more interest in Poland. Or you could have gone and taken Greek. Or you could have, I don't know, I'm just making this up, but you could have become more interested in dance. But something kept you with Japan. What was that? Was it the "It shocked me enough when I was in high school" to figure out?

Kasia Lynch 14:01

There's two things and one of them is the... I think it's *kanji*.<sup>9</sup> I have kind of a pictographic memory and I love puzzles. So for me to look at *kanji*, it was very much a puzzle to figure out what the heck these characters mean. And the more strokes, the better! I needed to figure out what made up the top left side and the bottom right side. I tried to learn Hangul, the Korean written alphabet, and I couldn't because there weren't enough characters. It was just a couple of straight lines and circles and I was like, "This is not difficult enough." I, for some reason, was really driven to learn *kanji* and to just take these tests to make sure that I passed them. So I really like practicing.

And the second thing I think was the people. I have had the most amazing experiences in Japan. I've had people who opened up their homes to me. They've really taken me under their wing. Maybe they appreciated the fact that I appreciated them so much, so it just kind of built this mutual appreciation. And I would learn one word, "*Arigatou*,"<sup>10</sup> and they'd be like *pachi pachi pachi pachi pachi*.<sup>11</sup> And then I would learn "*Arigatou gozaimasu*,"<sup>12</sup> oh my gosh, then they would just be celebrating that. And then "*Arigatou gozaimashita!*"<sup>13</sup> So every time I learned a new phrase, these crazy people were celebrating me and I just felt like a superhero.

Even walking the streets of, you know, the countryside of Kyoto or Shiga, as well as I was living partly in Kobe and some in Saitama, which were not in the cities. And these people would just come up to me, they'd want to talk with me, so I felt like a hero. And I think that's what might have, like, created that kind of love for Japan. And it never ended. Like, even in Tokyo, I would go to the Starbucks on the way to work every day, it was right next door. And on my last day I was like, "Oh, *osewa ni narimashita*."<sup>14</sup> They

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<sup>7</sup> お雑煮. Soup containing rice cakes and vegetables, New Year's dish.

<sup>8</sup> 善哉. Red bean soup made with adzuki beans.

<sup>9</sup> 漢字. The logographic characters from Chinese script which form a major part of the Japanese writing system along with the Japanese syllabic scripts *hiragana* and *katakana*.

<sup>10</sup> ありがとう. Thank you (abbreviation).

<sup>11</sup> パチ. Clapping (onomatopoeic word).

<sup>12</sup> ありがとうございます. Thank you (polite).

<sup>13</sup> ありがとうございました. Thank you (polite, used for past actions).

<sup>14</sup> お世話になりました. To receive favor, to be taken care of (used to express gratitude).

gave me free coffee, they signed the cup for me. Even leaving the airport was just-- I was amazed at this customer service and people were always wonderful. It was just these amazing people from the first day to the end. And I think it's just this connection I have, so I've always appreciated that.

Yuko Handa 15:58

And I think there is a little bit of the, you know, customer service or *omotenashi*<sup>15</sup> feeling. I don't know if it's unique to Japan, but it's definitely present in Japan, right?

Kasia Lynch 16:09

Oh yeah.

Yuko Handa 16:09

When I fly home, I fly on a Japanese airline. And the reason why I do that is because the moment I get in, I do feel like I'm taken care of. The *omotenashi* is there, right? Maybe it derives a little bit from tea ceremony, of *ichigo ichie*,<sup>16</sup> right? Like, you meet someone and it might be two hours, it might be even 30 minutes that you know this person, but you treat them like they are your lifelong friend. I think that is a little bit of what I think I'm hearing a little from you.

On top of, I'm sure you were just a really interesting person for people to connect with. But I think there is a little bit of that, you know, just that *omotenashi* feeling. The-- people do care, right, about the other so much, which can be a fantastic thing, and it also can be a tough thing for some Japanese, right? Because it's always the other first, always the other first. As an American person, you can see both, right? The beauty of that and also the limitations of that for an individual.

[Music]

Yuko Handa 17:21

Kasia-san, take us back to when you were in Tokyo. You said you first went to Shiga and then you spent a year in Kyoto. And then your *monbusho*<sup>17</sup> *monbukagakusho* scholarship sends you to Tokyo and you go, "Noooooo!" But then you end up actually liking Tokyo. Kyoto is a big city, but nothing compared to Tokyo. Tokyo, even at that point, I'm sure it was a lot more international than, say, Shiga for instance. What was your-- I know you ended up liking it, but like your gut first reaction when you first started living in Tokyo?

Kasia Lynch 18:03

Well, the first time I actually visited Tokyo was on a weekend trip with my friend from Osaka and I was living in Kyoto at the time. And I remember going to Shibuya and standing in the intersection, the one that's in all the movies and TV, you know, the famous pictures, and being like, "What is this??" and just like climbing, like, panicking that there's all these people. And my friend from Osaka, who's used to big cities, she was also freaking out. So that weekend I was just like, "Oh, I don't know about this city."

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<sup>15</sup> おもてなし. Hospitality, service.

<sup>16</sup> 一期一会. A once-in-a-lifetime encounter (and therefore should be appreciated as such).

<sup>17</sup> 文部省. See footnote 4.

So then I was sent there. I first started in Saitama, which is just, it was an hour north on the Saikyo-sen.<sup>18</sup> What happened was is that we were sent to Saitama University for a six month language program. So we were still kind of in the middle of nowhere, you know, it was like a long 45 minute walk from the main Saikyo line train station, so it was kind of out there. And we started experimenting with the bigger cities like Omiya and maybe Ikebukuro and I think it was a slow and gradual interest in the big city of Tokyo. Because, after the six months in Saitama, they sent me to the girls' dorm in, just outside of Ikebukuro. So Ikebukuro is in the very northwest corner of Tokyo.

So that's when it started getting a little crazy. And I moved into my little tiny room and set up and I went to school and I had to take two main train stations to get to the school. And I was just like, "Wow, this is pretty intense." On top of it, my-- one of my friends from Serbia, she rode her bike to school. So she said, "You should get your bike and we can ride together." So riding a bike through the cities of Tokyo is not something I recommend for everybody, because you have to be courageous. And also, I didn't wear a helmet at the time. So now I'm like, "I should have had better insurance!"

But now, you know, I learned so much about, like, just getting places, getting all around Tokyo, and I really learned to appreciate it, especially the public transportation. And so during school I mainly biked. Tokyo is so big, but like, it was also so easy to get anywhere. So I appreciated meeting my friends in Shibuya or, you know, even Tokyo-eki<sup>19</sup> and just having, you know, experiencing new restaurants and new cafes. So that was always fun for me. So, like, my friends and I would just go to these random places and we would explore Tokyo through food, through karaoke especially, that's a whole other topic that I absolutely love. And I just realized how much Tokyo has to offer.

If you go to the bigger parts like the Shibuya and the Shinjuku you'll see that there's lights on all the time and it was very loud but it was very-- people were respectful. In the apartment that I lived in, people were always respectful of the noise and, and just, I just-- there's so much about Tokyo that I absolutely love. Like everybody knows how to take their garbage out properly and I learned how to recycle. Everything seems to run so nicely, you know, on time and oh, I love it. Love it.

Yuko Handa 20:45

I think you did mention that you love order, right? And there's definitely order. People follow them to some extent. So I think I do see, even in the *sukuranburu kousaten*<sup>20</sup> in Shibuya, right? There's a certain rule that people follow, an almost unspoken rule, right? And I have to admit the only people who don't play that are the visitors, which of course they're not going to know because they don't live there. So then in the end, Shibuya *no*<sup>21</sup> *sukuranburu kousaten* does get a little bit chaotic, because there's people who follow the orders and then there's the visitors who don't know the order, so I think I can see how kind of interesting that can be.

Kasia Lynch 21:25

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<sup>18</sup> 埼京線. The Saikyo railway line.

<sup>19</sup> 駅. Train station.

<sup>20</sup> スクランブル交差点. Scramble intersection: intersection allowing pedestrians to cross simultaneously in any direction.

<sup>21</sup> の. Particle indicating possession, i.e., Shibuya's scramble intersection.



Yes, and I wanted to become a Tokyo-*jin*<sup>22</sup> so badly. I wanted to, like, be a Tokyoite, right? And I remember even, like, you know, taking the morning rush hour to work or whatever. I'd be going and I'd be like, you know the escalators? You have to walk on one side, and now you can't walk, you shouldn't be walking at all, but you stand on one side, you walk on the other, and I remember, like, running into other people being like, "Uh! They must be from Osaka. They don't know how to stand properly on the escalator in Tokyo!" And I just felt like I was a Tokyo person.

And it was a wild trip, in a sense, because I obviously don't look like I'm from Tokyo, but everything about the city, the lifestyle, the appreciation for others, I think the respect, like you said, this unspoken, like, rule? People would just follow it, except if you weren't from there. So it was, yeah, it was really interesting.

Yuko Handa 22:08

And I also love that you highlight even within Japan, I mean there's commonality throughout Japan, and then there's real strong distinctions, right? Like Osaka and Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo. I mean, it's very different. And I'm sure Shiga is very different too. It's interesting you mentioned, yes, I think the rules have changed. But I think the side that they used to walk on was different in Osaka versus Tokyo. So I remember getting in trouble in the Kansai area because I'm from Tokyo and I was standing on the wrong side, right? Little things like that I think are things that you find out when you live there versus when you travel there.

Kasia Lynch 22:53

Absolutely.

Yuko Handa 22:54

So, Kasia-san, can you think of other things that you've noticed living there versus just traveling there?

Kasia Lynch 23:04

I deal mostly with business right now with my company, so even thinking about, like, business interactions in the office, there's so much more that you can get out of actually living and working in Japan versus just a business trip that you take to Japan and you have like a week working with your Japanese counterparts. So that was one thing that was really big to me. I found that a relationship takes time to build trust, takes time to get there, and the longer you know somebody, the easier it is to get, to gain that trust. And sometimes you need that icebreaker.

So in Japan with the company I worked at, in the beginning, you know, I felt very much out of place. There was only about 60 people. I was the only non-Japanese person there. I remember I didn't really know what to do, who to be with except for the two people that were at my little island of desks. And then the first company outing, we went to some restaurant, an *izakaya*.<sup>23</sup> We had some food and, you know, everybody's doing *kanpai*<sup>24</sup> with their little shots of beer. And then the party started and then you start making friends. And I'm not saying you have to get drunk to make friends, it's just that whole atmosphere

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<sup>22</sup> 人. Person.

<sup>23</sup> 居酒屋. Japanese-style pub.

<sup>24</sup> 乾杯. Cheers.

of being together and sharing food together and then going to your *nijikai*<sup>25</sup> or your *sanjikai*,<sup>26</sup> your next-- your second party or third party, and usually that includes karaoke, so that's where the relationships were formed.

And I realized that's like the first time I talked with my *buchou*,<sup>27</sup> my manager, and I was like, "Oh, my goodness." This person who I thought was just so far away to tal--, I would never talk to him, I was so afraid of him, I got closer at karaoke and at these dinners. And then I would come back to the office on Monday and it was as if it never happened! You didn't talk about it, but now you knew that that person liked this particular song or liked to talk about this at these *izakaya*. And so the next time it happened again, it just, like, brought you even closer.

So you have to have these experiences, you have to realize there's a particular way you act at work and a particular way you act outside of work. And I just-- I think that that's something that I would never have picked up on if I didn't live in Japan long enough. It's just so important for business relationships.

So then when I was working overseas, outside of Japan, working with Japanese people, I remembered that and I was always trying to find ways to kind of, like, break the ice a little bit so that you can get to know somebody. Because, you know, you're emailing your Japanese counterpart all day, and, or you're having some Zoom calls or *terebi kaigi*<sup>28</sup> and you don't really know that person. It's just hard to do business if you're not really, like, connected. But once you make that connection, then you both realize, "Oh, the other person is also human. We're both just trying to do our jobs, see how we can work together to collaborate," and it just makes things so much smoother.

So that's why I talk about karaoke in a joking sense, but it really is a great way to break the ice, bring you closer, and then after every one of those kinds of, like, icebreakers, I find that relationships always improved.

Yuko Handa 25:58

It's very interesting you mentioned that because even writing emails, right, are a little different. And to your point, for instance, when I'm writing emails to somebody from Japan, or from somebody from Japan is writing emails to me, there's always a very long *maeoki*<sup>29</sup> or introduction. "Oh the, you know, cherry blossoms are very beautiful today in Tokyo. I was just walking through Shinjuku-*gyoen*.<sup>30</sup> I wonder what the flowers are like in Boston," versus when you are writing an email with your American colleagues or your counterparts, it's really to the point, right?

Kasia Lynch 26:38

Right.

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<sup>25</sup> 二次会. After-party, second party of the night.

<sup>26</sup> 三次会. After-after-party, third party of the night.

<sup>27</sup> 部長. Head of a section or department.

<sup>28</sup> テレビ会議. Teleconference, video conferencing.

<sup>29</sup> 前置き. Preface, introduction.

<sup>30</sup> 御苑. Imperial garden.

Yuko Handa 26:38

"I'm writing this because I want you to submit this report."

Kasia Lynch 26:41

Right.

Yuko Handa 26:41

In certain ways, you know, American way's a lot more efficient, it's a lot faster, it's a lot more to the point. But even on emails in Japan, you're supposed to create this connection or this relationship. And when you come too sort of abrupt, as in "give me this" in an email, it actually is probably detrimental to the relationship. So it's very interesting you picked that up.

Kasia Lynch 27:07

I found that when I came back home to Michigan, after my time in Japan, I realized that I think the reverse culture shock was worse because I wasn't expecting myself to think in that same Japanese way. So then I would be getting the emails: "Hey. Hey, comma, let's do this." Or, "Join me here." I'm like, "What? How can you just, like, be so abrupt like that?" So I felt that opposite-ness.

And now I try to balance both of them together because I realized the American way of, like, you know, like this example of writing email, is so much different than the Japanese way. And I kind of go in the middle and I try to adjust it depending on who I'm connecting with, but yeah. So it can be very different and it can really mess with your mind if you're kind of in the middle trying to figure out who you are in this whole relationship.

Yuko Handa 27:55

But isn't it wonderful when you actually get to that point where you can see both? And then when you can switch from one to the other?

Kasia Lynch 28:03

Yes.

Yuko Handa 28:04

Doesn't that totally open up your world?

Kasia Lynch 28:07

Absolutely. And I think a lot of my friends who-- when we had the same experiences in Tokyo, you come back home and then you start bowing when you're on the phone, right? And you start covering-- like, I went to a women's university, so I'd cover my mouth all the time when I was chewing and or giggling! I'd just have to cover my mouth. And it was just all these things I came back acting different.

And although the very first-- I would say that my first reaction to that was "Oh, no, who the heck am I? Why am I doing this? I'm so weird." Now I look back and I'm like, "You know what? You're right. This is really interesting how I can be both depending on, like, what language I'm talking to." So my voice will sound different when I'm speaking in Japanese. My mannerisms are different when I speak in Japanese.

And I am really thankful that I can do that, but sometimes in the beginning I was like, "What is happening?"

Yuko Handa 29:00

I think it's very healthy. And I went through that, too. It's very healthy to go through that sort of identity crisis, right? "Who am I?" Until you get to a point where you say, "That's all me. That's all me." And once you are able to embrace that, then it's like, "Wow!" Endless opportunity.

Kasia Lynch 29:20

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Yuko Handa 29:24

Kasia, I always ask at the end of our interviews: what would you say to people who's actually just starting their Japan journey, or people in Japan who's just starting their US journey? Are there certain must-dos or must-sees?

Kasia Lynch 29:42

I think that if you have an open mind, if you're okay with challenges and realizing that those challenges are gonna get you to that next step in life, closer to your goal, I think as long as you're open to that, you'll have a successful time regardless of where you go and regardless of what age you are and what experience you're trying to do.

You know, unfortunately, I've met some people who, like you mentioned at the beginning of this call, they tried an overseas experience, whether it was just a short trip or longer, and they came out hating it! And I completely understand that there's, I mean, there's so many factors to go into why a person would like or not like a situation, that's fine. But if you have even an inkling of learning what it's like to be overseas? Keep in mind it's gonna be tough as heck, but that just makes you stronger and I think it makes you more interesting and it makes you realize just how much the world has to offer.

So, let's say you had a terrible experience in one country, maybe it's a different culture that would speak to you better, maybe it's a different part of that country that you want to go to because, you know, like even in Japan, Tokyo is wildly different from my first experience of Shiga.

Think outside the box, try new things, go have fun! Whether you're coming to the United States from Japan or going to Japan from the United States, or any other country, it doesn't matter. Just have fun and just try new things, because if you don't try new things and if you just stay in your bubble, it's kind of lonely. You don't get to meet new people that might take you to a different, you know, restaurant, or try a different food, or meet another person that could change your life in a way. And so just go crazy, have fun, safely, but don't be afraid and just realize it's gonna be tough.

Yuko Handa 31:23

Last but not least, if you can redo this whole thing, would you still find yourself in Shiga?

Kasia Lynch 31:30

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. I wouldn't change a single thing.

Yuko Handa 31:34

And do you think you would still travel on the T to Allston? Not Allston...

Kasia Lynch 31:41

Yes!

Yuko Handa 31:42

And get your nose pierced?

Kasia Lynch 31:44

Absolutely. Absolutely. I would do everything all over again.

Yuko Handa 31:48

Thank you so much. Thank you so much, Kasia. This was a beautiful, beautiful Japan journey story.

Kasia Lynch 31:55

I really appreciated this opportunity. And like I mentioned before, I'm such a fan of your podcast. I think this is exactly what the world needs. So, like you mentioned in the description, it doesn't have to be just about Japan, but just-- this is a great way for us to experience other people's journeys, and so thank you for putting it together and I look forward to hearing more of them!

[Music]

Japan Society Boston 32:18

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