

# 1. My Life

Andrew Steltzer, 2008-2009 Fulbright fellow studying Japan's English education at Kanazawa University up in Ishikawa-ken

- Currently live in Mie's Shima-shi
  - o Below Ise and Toba, was previously five smaller towns
  - o Small area but I live in Ugata, the most populated area
- Working as an ALT at two JHS and three elementary schools
  - o Not JET but private sector ALT
  - o ALTIA Central
- My usual day Mon – Fri
  - o Mon, Tue, Wed, Fri – bigger junior high school, walk to school in the morning with students, track practice after school
  - o Thurs – small junior high school, one class per grade, very fun/different class dynamic
- Weekends are usually free, but sometimes I'll have track events

# 2. Small Town Goodness

- For me what makes life really enjoyable is living in a small town
  - o I come from a very small town in Maine
    - NE US, 6,000 people, rural
- Scenery is obviously a part of this
  - o Walk to work is green, you can hear nature rather than cars and people
- More than the closeness to nature is the closeness to people
  - o After living in Japan for a while, a place that is very different from my home in many ways, I've found that what makes me feel comfortable, even at home, is not the location but the people around me
    - The 'family' that I make for myself
    - Growing up I thought I would only be able to live in the country side since I always thought big cities felt cold and lonely
    - I've learned it's the home that you make for yourself that's important and makes for a good life
- Quickly found that I was literally close to people around me
  - o Lived within shouting distance of 8 students

- Morning walk to school/evening walk home was usually with students
  - I speak pretty good Japanese and I figure part of an ALTs job is to get to know students, so outside school in particular I have no problems using all Japanese to just chat with my students
- Because I worked at all three local schools parents and students in the area almost all knew me or knew of me
  - In Jusco I was always saying hi to people
    - This is what makes life great for me
    - Where ever I go, there's someone to say hi to, someone who runs up to me saying "Andy, Andy!"
    - I know people who would bemoan the lack of privacy or the inability to escape their students even after school, but I love it
  - Even all the way in Ise, I've had students shout at me from cars as they pass by
    - Even had a student chase me down around new years while I was jogging to give me some fresh picked lemons from his grandfather's
    - Students at the pool grab their swim coach and explain who I am
    - It's this sort of stuff that starts to make me feel grounded someplace, when people reach out to you, even if it is just your wacky students
- I really like this stuff because one of my ideals in life is no matter where I live I'll have a 'neighborhood' to call home
  - Somewhere within a town that I can especially call my own, a place where I really belong on a personal level
  - Didn't have that much last year in Kanazawa
    - Considered it a small victory when I got my neighbors to say こんにちは back to me
  - Now though I really feel like I fit in where I live
    - I've gotten to know a lot of my neighbors and one family in particular often brings me food
      - Mother makes all kinds of sweets and extra sushi also tends to come my way
    - If it starts to rain and I haven't noticed the boy next door will go out on his veranda and shout to me

- One really cool thing was when my neighbor, the father of one of my students who I had never really met, stopped and gave me a ride home when I was walking home in the rain from the bank one day
    - I thanked him and he said “think nothing of it, we’re neighbors”
- Something else I’ve found I really enjoy is cooking
- Many people ask me if I had any big culture shocks when I came to Japan
- not many because I was prepared
- BUT the grocery store was a culture shock
  - Supposed to be a familiar daily place, but I was at a complete loss
    - Language and unfamiliar items
    - 20 varieties of miso, what the heck is a gobo, renkon?
  - All had to be learned from scratch
- Now I enjoy cooking and am much more familiar with things
  - Often make niku-jaga, tonjiru, yakizakana, saba no miso ni, iridoufu
- Also a good way to get to know people
  - Ask for cooking advice

### 3. Getting Involved and Being Open

- I’ve told people about how much I enjoy my life for the above reasons and my Japanese friends especially will say “oh, well that’s because you speak very good Japanese”
  - I think that is definitely part of it
    - People at the pool I go to light up when I say something to them in Japanese and they realize that I can speak with them
- **BUT THE KEY IS THAT I TRY TO SPEAK WITH THEM!**
- **Regardless of culture, people are people, no matter where you are**
  - When I studied abroad in Nagoya I became really close with the taiko group that I joined and my Japanese wasn’t spectacular by any means

- But I went with a big smile and my electronic dictionary in my pocket and managed to make some really close friends
      - Actually stayed at the leader's house last night and had dinner with a bunch of the members
    - Taiko is actually one of my favorite hobbies and wherever I am in Japan I try to join a local group
      - I'm a member of a small group in Shima that practices a few times a month
      - Not only great exercise but also a great way to get out and meet people
      - Again, all part of getting yourself out there and making that feeling of community for yourself
  - Most people in my neighborhood I've become close with because even those I don't know well or live a ways away from (people I see on my walk to Jusco) I'll still greet
    - Those nearby, I'll stop and talk with them, show them that I want to be a part of the community
    - Certainly language allows me to do this easier, but I personally think that even if my Japanese wasn't so great I could manage
- In getting to know people like this on a more personal level I find that they're often really curious about America or how my life is
  - As a Fulbrighter last year it was one of my duties I think to get to know people and really be a working part of cultural exchange
  - Even though I'm no longer Fulbright I still believe that making these international personal connections is really important
    - These people in the small towns may only get to know a handful of Americans in their lives and so my actions can actually have quite an impact on what they think of America
- Because I have such an impact, especially on young kids who may have never met/gotten to know a foreigner I need to check myself, my pride sometimes

## 4

I'm often told that I'm very Japanese because of the way I act or say things. Part of the time this is because I've learned how to interact in Japan and Japanese so it's intentional on my part to seem "Japanese" in the sense that I react appropriately to the situation. There are times, however, when I'm simply acting the way that I always act and I'll often tell people "no, Americans can act like this too, this is normal for me." Seems to be this idea that I'm either American and different or not very American and more Japanese when I'm the same. Why can't I be an American who just acts similarly? Again, I think it's just because people don't have much of an image of Americans besides stereotypes shown in the media or the one or two ALTs they've met. I think the key is that no matter how frustrating it might be for me personally to be repeatedly told I'm more Japanese than Japanese people I have to meet the comments and questions with friendliness and patience. If I seem frustrated or upset then that will become part of people's image of Americans.

Get angry with people saying "hola" to me or laugh a little and be happy that they at least tried to say something in a foreign language to me. Probably a lot of other people think that I'm Spanish, but don't bother to do anything about it. These people are trying to do something out of kindness.

When people ask me what I eat regularly they seemed shocked when I say I cook standard Japanese food; niku-jaga, iridoufu, yakizakana, nabe, etc... And they say again, wow that's so Japanese of you. I'm thinking in my head "well...I'm in Japan and the ingredients in Japan do lend themselves to Japanese cooking." But again, I hold back. If I put myself in their shoes and I had a Japanese friend living near me in America I might say a similar thing if he/she loved cooking steaks or thick chowders.

## 5. Challenges

- Size issues
  - o Being 191cm in Japan (6'3.5") can be a blessing and a curse
    - Crowds are never stifling for me and I'm wicked easy to find in a supermarket
    - Most seats on buses and doorways aren't built for my size
      - Doorways in my apartment are too low for me

- Besides general inconvenience it is pretty hard on my posture I think
  - Clothing, particularly pants and long sleeved shirts, is generally a no go
  - Shoes are also out
- Language
  - I've passed the JLPT 2 級 but there is still an enormous amount that I cannot read or understand
    - Usually I view this as a welcome challenge, a way to learn
      - Every day I come home knowing how to use another word or phrase
    - But there are times when I'm tired that I just wish I could easily and naturally read through things without requiring so much brain power
- Work
  - I'm only the assistant
    - Despite my deep interest and more than your typical level of knowledge (for an ALT) there are times when I just have to do what I'm asked to do
    - This is my job as the ALT, to support the teacher to the best of my ability
- Rewarding side of work
  - I spent a lot of time last year looking at the pressures and expectations being put on elementary school teachers who will soon have to teach English
    - Some not well prepared and many just don't have confidence in ability to teach English
  - My personal goal is to help these teachers have the confidence to teach English
    - I think an ALT should support teachers as much as students
    - I've offered to teach mini class room English lessons to elementary school teachers after school
      - Been really fun
  - This is extremely satisfying for me because I'm actually helping out one of the areas I thought needed help, one of the areas I thought as a native speaker of English I could put my abilities and interests to best use