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As any student who has studied abroad knows, once you return home you will be asked again and again, “How was [insert country of choice]?” And, again, as any student who has studied abroad knows, there is no short answer. After many poor and stammering attempts to condense 1/21 of my life into a few sentences, I have finally come up with this: studying abroad in Japan has been exactly what I needed, but in none of the ways I expected.

One thing I knew I needed was to, simply put, get out. Get out of America; get away from the only world that I knew of. Studying abroad and living abroad has a funny way of both introducing a culture and people entirely new, and revealing much about the culture and the people one has left. I knew that I needed perspective, and that is exactly what I got. I remember writing in my first essay for this scholarship that my interests in Japan were neither superficial nor stereotypical; certainly, my time in Japan has proven to me again and again how important it is not to generalize or assume. Mizuho, one of my best friends I made at Waseda University, constantly surprised me by how she is at once a product of her culture and yet, at the same time, at odds with it. I have gained a humility that comes with having to relearn that my thoughts, opinions and self are all products of my environment. I cannot, in such a large and varied world, live with only one perspective, and this is a lesson that I will take with me for the rest of my life.

One concrete plan that has been borne from this trip is a research project I am currently working on. Halfway through my time in Tokyo I applied for an independent research scholarship, which I received! The purpose of my project is to observe and quantify the relationship between politicized history textbook content and Japanese national identity. In addition to being an incredible process, I have found that this project has prompted me to start discussing similar topics (e.g. wartime history, current events) with my friends and host family. In each conversation, not only did I improve my Japanese, I gained greater insight into the mentality and worldview of the Japanese people I am close to.

I have a deep love and respect for the city and country that has shown me great hospitality, and I hope to be able to reciprocate in kind. As of now, I cannot say that I know how my relationship with Japan will continue in the near future; however, what I do know is that I plan to continue to develop and nurture this relationship whether it is in my professional or personal life. Possible future paths I am considering are applying for both the JET Program and Princeton in Asia, and continuing my current research project as a graduate or PhD student.

Finally, I would like to thank those at the Tanaka & Green Scholarship Program for helping make my study abroad experience so wonderful. This past year has been life changing, and I am so incredibly grateful.