

*“Atatamemashō-ka?”*

On my first weekend in Japan, I could only guess what the cashier at Circle K was asking me on that October afternoon. It was 2009, I had just arrived to spend a year abroad in the Kanazawa University Student Exchange Program, and I was sheepishly attempting to buy a bento box for lunch.

*“Hai!”* I stammered, nodding and smiling since that seemed like a reasonable thing to do.

When I arrived in Kanazawa, I found myself in awe of the abundant environment I discovered on campus, from the vending machines with their confident-sounding drinks like Premium Boss coffee and CC Lemon with its 99 lemons' worth of Vitamin C in a single can, to the enormous yellow spiders that seemed ready to pounce at any moment from their perches on the fences and bushes. The damp air of the Japan Sea was thick with new smells that kept away the jet lag.

*“Dōzo,”* said the friendly cashier after warming my lunch, sliding it across the counter to me. I had no idea that a warm bento was even a possibility.

Earlier that year I felt myself at the mercy of happenstance, having experienced some personal challenges with family and relationships, and without a clear life plan I had fallen into depression and grown anxiously cognizant of my own coming of age, feeling handicapped by negative experiences, unready, and adrift. Medication only made me more anxious, and I realized that my condition was not chemical but psychological and circumstantial. At the age of 20 I longed to become an adult on my own terms, and I thought that by putting myself in a completely fresh space I could take control of my destiny and get inspired. I had no map to tell me where I was going, but my internal compass told me that with a new perspective there was a chance to develop my own personhood by getting out of the environment I had been born into in order to take an active role in creating myself.

Before that October I had never been to Japan. I had no Japanese friends or family, and aside from Nintendo games, I had grown up with little exposure to Japanese cultural products. Yet thanks to a university class called Introduction to Japanese Culture that improbably made things like the samurai code of ethics relevant to American college kids by assigning in response to the reading material not research reports but individual diary entries, Japan had become a lens through which to consider myself. From that introduction, before I ever set foot in a Japanese language class or got on a plane I had a personal relationship with Japan.

Kanazawa at the time had no Shinkansen direct train access and it felt very far from Tokyo, so from my first days there I had the palpable freedom to start from near-zero in what felt like a parallel universe. As I learned how to ride the city bus, how to open an account with Hokuriku

Bank, how to register a Softbank flip phone with its TV receiver built-in, and how the atmosphere of the gardens at Kenroku-en changed with the seasons, I felt like a child discovering the world, yet with the faculties of an adult. I felt unburdened after a difficult year and released from uncertainty about what I wanted to do with my life. I found myself diving into Japanese daily life – with a nod and a smile. Singing with other international students at the Sturgis rock bar in Katamachi or with local Japanese students in the MeloMelo a cappella circle, traveling to Kyoto with a new Japanese girlfriend, hosting parties for new friends in my closet-sized dorm room, I felt free.

After that year in Kanazawa, I returned to the United States, then spent time living in Kyoto, met a woman there who would later become my wife, and went back and forth again before settling in Tokyo where I have lived since 2015. I came to Japan looking for a blank slate on which to write my own story, and I followed my compass to Kanazawa in an attempt to become more of a person than I was before. Then I kept returning to Japan because I was determined to have that experience mean something, and before I knew it I had grown comfortable.

That afternoon in early October when I enjoyed a warm lunch in Circle K was a tiny blip in my year at Kanazawa University, but it was a spark of inspiration, an early return on the investment in myself that I had made by flying across the world. Now after almost a decade of living in Japan I still discover new inspiration in Tokyo every day, but Kanazawa is my hometown, where I came of age.