

Intercultural Samplers (1)

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In 1999, under the program subsidized by the Ministry of Japan, I had the opportunity to study at Portland State University (PSU) for one year. Later I requested and received an extension of my stay until March of 2001. PSU is a State University located in the center of Portland, Oregon.

Portland, the sister city of Sapporo, is the biggest city in Oregon with a population of more than one million and six hundred thousand, and is famous for its beautiful roses. Every year, in June, it celebrates the rose festival with large parades and floats covered entirely with flowers, leaves or seeds.

For my residence, I chose the small town of Newberg with a population of about 18,000. Newberg is located about 25 miles (40km) southwest of Portland on US highway 99W. Mountains are surrounding the community, and numerous rivers and forests are within easy driving distance. This offers fishing and hunting opportunities for everyone. The relaxed pace and friendly people in the community welcome visitors from out of town.

The topics of this essay are based on my observation during the stay in Oregon. I will obtain some samplers regarding intercultural communication between the western and Japanese cultures. In the study of intercultural communication, it is important to live in the culture you are interested in, and experience the ways of living by talking to the people, observing what they are doing, and in your being involved in their community.

1. Buying a car and automobile insurance:

One of the most important things when starting your life in the States is to get your own transportation. If you live in a dormitory close to the school, you may not need your own car, but if you want to live away from the school, you may need one since the public transportation in Oregon may not be as convenient as Sapporo or Otaru in Japan.

It is always a good idea to reserve a rent-a-car at the airport before you leave Japan. Since I knew I was going to live in Newberg, about 40km away from Portland, I made a reservation for the rent-a-car before I left Japan. I rented a full sized car for three days but later extended the lease an additional two days. This enabled me to take advantage of the special five day weekly rate. It was a better deal than renting the same car for only three days at the daily rate.

I could not afford to keep the car for more than a week, so I decided to buy a used car. It was not difficult for me to buy a car since I had a friend, Margaret who knew a good dealer in the town. If you know a key person, it is very helpful for the negotiation of any business deal. I think the same thing applies anyplace, either in Japan or the States. One thing that

troubled me was the fact I found that I needed the Oregon driver's license in order to drive my own car. According to an insurance company, I could not buy an automobile insurance for the car unless I had the local driver's license.

To obtain a driver's license, a written and actual driving test is required at the DMV (the Division of Motor Vehicle). Because I used to drive when I previously lived in Oregon, they could trace my last license number on the computer. This fortunately exempted me from having to take the driving test. If I had had to take the driving test, I would have needed the rent-a-car for another couple weeks or so. According to Margaret, there is usually a two week waiting period to take a driving test after you pass the written one. I spent the weekend to prepare for the written test and took it on the following Monday. The written test was administered on the computer screen. You can take the test in English, Spanish, or Chinese, but not Japanese. Fortunately, I passed the test and was issued my license on the same date.

I didn't want to lose any time, so I visited the Ford dealer with Margaret. I bought a 1991 Ford Taurus, and went to Allstate insurance company to buy an automobile insurance policy. After the insurance company checked all the history of my previous insurance, and driving records in the States, they gave me a discount rate because I had been using the same company more than ten years without a major accident.

When you want to buy a car in Oregon, it is important to remember that you cannot drive your own car with the international driver's license issued in Japan. You need a local driver's license in order to get your car insured. It is also important to know that you should have all of your previous insurance records (policy numbers etc.) with you. This will expedite the procedure at the insurance company, and you may get a better premium rate.

2. Thanking people:

In any language, one of the most beautiful expressions is the words that show appreciation. There are, however, some differences in situations that require an expression of thanks in each culture. Here, I would like to introduce some of the situations I observed while living in Oregon.

In general, people thank someone for a gift, for a favor, for an offer of help, and when leaving a party or social gathering. To me, one of the interesting things is to thank for a compliment. As we usually have a hard time to find an exact word in Japanese for compliment, there are some differences in giving and receiving a compliment between the States and Japan. When you receive a compliment in the States, whether on your clothing, your family, or anything else, it is appropriate to say thank you and to make a comment on the thing being complimented.

During my stay in Newberg, I lived in a senior court where 80% of the residents were over 55 years of age, and most of whom were retired. On Saturdays, we had a social gathering called, "a coffee club." There were always about 10 people who attended the coffee club. One of my neighbors, John, was about 70 years old and retired from the Air

Force a long time ago. One Saturday morning at the coffee club, he brought a mug (cup) on which the word “veterans” was engraved. Since it looked very interesting to me, I said, “That’s a nice mug you have, John.” Then, he said with a big smile, “Oh, thanks, I just got it last Veteran’s Day.” And then he started talking about his experiences in the Air Force and his memory about Japan right after the War. My compliment became a nice ice-breaker between John and me, and we became really good friends from that time on. I thought his way of thanking me for the compliment was important. John received the compliment by saying “thank you,” followed by positive comments to continue our conversation.

Another situation that I found interesting was thanking for services, such as being waited on in a restaurant. In a restaurant, the waiter or waitress thanks the customer when the order is taken. This is the same in Japan, but I don’t see many examples in Japan where the customer thanks the waiter or waitress as each course is placed on the table. It is common in the States to express appreciation for any services in a restaurant such as refilling up coffee or water, as well as when they bring food to the table. Whenever I got served in a restaurant, I said, “Thank you” to the waiter or waitress. Then they would respond, “You’re welcome” and without fail a warm smile would be given to me from them.