

CET Japan, Fall 2023 | Renee Gonzales

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "General Audience going to Japan, Mental Illness in Japan."

Table for One: Grappling with the Feeling of Loneliness

Going abroad was always a dream for me to achieve, even more so when I began studying Japanese. The intensive style of CET Japan was the style of learning that I needed to build a strong foundation, which many of my Japanese professors agreed with. I prepared to explain my non-binary/Queer Identity, being Mexican American, and my mental illness, but something that I was never prepared for was a deep feeling of loneliness, of not fitting in with the group. I had many things happen that made me feel small, feel like I was so forgettable. I allowed those feelings to amplify my depression and anxiety to the point of crying to the Resident Directors. Until I realized, through these dark feelings, that doing things alone is not such a horrible thing.

Before I dive deeper into the feeling of loneliness and how I 'remedied' it, I had many fun moments with various groups of people, those experiences I loved. They bring a smile to my face, thinking of the care people had for one another. The joy I had sharing a meal, an experience, a story with other people. Those are times I loved, but the feeling of loneliness was something that never truly left me.

In Japan, I had a ritual for doing things alone. I would pick the location of my choice, get a drink from a coffee shop, go to the location, and then get either lunch or dinner to round it all out. I would have my earbuds in during the various train rides, listening to music and allowing myself to enjoy the world around me—the people on the train and the streets. I did things to the sound of my own drum.

One experience that'll stick with me was this small bar in Nipponbashi. It was after the Death Note Exhibition, I was looking for my meal of choice and I stumbled across this place that had a large sign that said 'Tacos'. Because I kept talking to friends and sensei about the Mexican food my family and I would make, I have been really missing that food. So I hesitated, wondering if at 12 pm a bar was the best place to be. But then, I bit the bullet and stepped inside. The place was small and cozy, with friends of the owner sitting at the bar. I quickly ordered. Then, the fun began. The owner began speaking with me. Asking me questions in Japanese and letting me make my mistakes. If I misunderstood a question with my answer, he would wait for me to finish before asking it in English. We laughed; there were connections (me being Mexican American, him living in California for a long time) and moments of learning. Even though the Tacos were not the greatest, I still said they were delicious. Why? Because the fun and experience brought me so much joy. It was a flavor I needed after that time. It gave me a chance to practice in a real-life setting without my anxiety daunting over my shoulders and continued to solidify the fun I can have alone.

Sometimes, that isn't always enough. Sometimes, we just need that human connection to feel whole in the moment. For me, I constantly was in touch with my friends in the States. Being an avid TTRPG player, I still kept up with my games even with the terrifying 13/15-hour time difference. Giving me a ritual to climb out of bed, log in to my laptop, and laugh with joy. If I wasn't playing games, I was constantly keeping my closest friends updated on both the good and the bad. Sending various pictures of my adventures or begging them, "If I mention going to [BLANK] again, please stop me," usually as a way to protect my wallet. It wasn't a one-way street, as they would do the same for me. Keep me up to date with fun, silly messages and their experiences. Even some professors of mine would reach out to me, checking in on my status and the fun I was having. With those moments, it made me feel whole. I was still able to connect with people I had left in the States.

Finding joy in the moments I spent alone helped me learn to love Japan even more. Feeling that I had control over myself and what I did. Learning the confidence to do things just for myself is what allowed me to put aside those dark moments of tears to instead enjoy the world around me. For those who are reading this, I promise you'll be able to experience those moments with or without a large group of people standing with you because Japan is a great place to ask for a table for one.