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Published in *The Christian Science Monitor* December 8, 2004

1153 words.

How I found my way home

I looked around the crowded market in confusion. People whizzed by me on bicycles, some with umbrellas attached to their handlebars to shield them from the sun. Parking lots nearby were packed with shining forests of more bicycles, crammed as close together as possible. A heavy, wet blanket of summer heat was draped over the open market, where I could smell the strong, oily scent of fish and see little shops filled with cakes, fruit, and bright clothing. The shopkeepers looked at me with friendly smiles, but I could not understand their rapid speech.

I had arrived in Japan about a week before, after being hired as an English teacher on a Japanese exchange and teaching program.

"You're going to Japan, and you don't speak Japanese?" a friend had asked. "Oh, well, I'm sure a lot of people there speak English."

"You can communicate using gestures," someone else said.

I felt optimistic, too. But a few days into my Japan experience, I had found that hardly anyone in this busy section of the Osaka prefecture seemed to speak English. Gestures didn't translate well, either.

When I was introduced to a bunch of new people at a party at my host family's house, I wondered why they all seemed to be talking about their noses. And when the woman I was staying with called my name, she appeared to be shooing me away.

I constantly felt confused. Soon, I learned that it is customary in Japan to point to one's nose instead of to the chest when introducing oneself. When beckoning someone, one turns one's hand palm down instead of palm up.

I could see this was just the beginning of the many lessons in communication I would need to learn. Also, it seemed foreigners were still a rare sight in this part of the city, and people stared at me openly. Though I had wanted to come here for years, some days I wondered what I had been thinking.

Today was one of those days. Soon I would move out of my host family's house into my own apartment. My Japanese

supervisor had given me an assignment: "Go to Hanazono on Sunday and find the way to your new apartment," she said, not realizing how difficult it was for me to find my way around. I could ask for directions in Japanese, but I couldn't understand the answer and couldn't read the map.

I showed the address, which my supervisor had written in Japanese, to a shopkeeper. He gave me directions, but the only thing I understood was that he was pointing straight ahead.

I formed a plan. I would stop at every few shops and ask for directions again. If enough people pointed, maybe I would eventually get there.

At one bakery, the young man stepped outside in his apron to show me where to go. He took the time to draw me a map while we stood on the doorstep, causing the automatic door to bang spasmodically back and forth as we talked. He explained as he drew, but I didn't catch many words. He drew a strange shape in the middle of the map. I sensed that this was important, so I pointed to it. After he tried many words, he finally said, "Temp-ah." So I set off to look for the temple.

As I walked, people made comments to each other about me, and small children hid behind fences, then called, practicing their English, "Hello, hello!" after I was safely out of sight. I was amused by the children, but their reaction made me feel lost and out of place again.

I turned down a narrow, stony street that squeezed between small tile-roof houses. Soon it forked, and I didn't know which way to go. Right in front of me was a small shrine with flowers.

As I stared through the leaves of the vast trees behind the shrine, I saw a large building with quiet, stony paths and flower-decked recesses. Surely it must be the temple on the hand-drawn map. I felt a quiet sense of victory, as if I were figuring out a puzzle.

After I had gone around the temple, I found a street with apartment buildings crowded together, but while the numbers on the buildings were close to the one I was looking for, my own new building didn't seem to be on that street. It seemed I wasn't going to find it on my own after all.

As I looked around wearily, a slender young woman with long flowing hair darted out of an apartment, towing a chubby girl about 2 years old. She started to get on her bicycle.

"Sumimasen (excuse me)," I called. She turned and said, "Hai (yes)." I asked in Japanese for the way to my building, and she said she didn't know, but asked me to wait. She went back into her apartment. I was left on the doorstep with the little girl,

who stood sturdily, gazing up at me. She wore a pink dress and sun hat and clutched an inflatable toy dog almost as big as she was.

She seemed totally unafraid, not shy or startled by my foreign appearance as the older children had been. I realized that she was probably too young to even see me as a foreigner. Her eyes sparkled. "Konnichiwa," she said, in a voice that sounded as chubby as her face.

"Konnichiwa," I responded, and suddenly, after days of feeling alienated and lost, I felt that I could live in Japan.

The young mother emerged with a map. The child climbed into a small seat on the back of the bike, and together, the little family graciously escorted me all the way to my apartment building a few streets away.

The mother gestured to the building and turned to go. The little girl waved and said, "Bye-bye."

I thanked them and stood gazing at the gray building, astonished that I had actually made it.

It began to rain, and I welcomed the cool drops of water after the thick heat. I felt reassured as I looked over my new neighborhood. I would have a home here, a home I liked: bright green rice fields, colorful laundry hanging on balconies, huge dragonflies, heavy gray clouds, warm rain, and the crack of a baseball bat from a nearby high school field.

On the way back, large tomato gardens and cats sleeping in doorways gave the place a cozy small-town feel, even though the streets and buildings were busy and crowded.

I lost my way back to the train station. Clearly, my difficulties in finding my way around Japan hadn't ended. However, I had seen my new home and had seen an example of the way my neighbors would treat me.

Perhaps I would get lost frequently this year, but I had already found the most important thing I had been seeking that day.