

An American Adventure

I met Yuka Gordon at the Metro Boston Recovery Learning Community (MBRLC) on February 26, 2014. I had come to ask Yuka how mental health healing was viewed in Japan and whether her culture had helped or hindered her recovery (or both). Yuka is now the Director of Quality Management at MBRLC, a position she has held for two and half years. She started working as a volunteer at MBRLC in 2008, and was hired as a Marketing Manager in 2009. The primary responsibilities of her current job are to oversee day-to-day operations of MBRLC, a peer-driven and multi-partner initiative charged with providing a wide variety of peer-to peer services.

Yuka had clearly thought about how to explain some aspects of Japanese culture that had impact on mental health recovery. “In the U.S., when people are older, they can go back to school or change jobs.” She informed me that options are more limited in Japan. “In Japan, if you get into an ‘Ivy League’ College, you can get a good job. If you do not get in, this affects everything—even whether you can get a good husband! I went to a mediocre college—the result wasn’t really good.”

The reason goes back to Yuka’s childhood. “As a child, I had Attention Deficit Disorder. They blamed me, they said it was my fault.” Yuka grew up in a family of high-achievers: “I have a family full of doctors and lawyers. My brother got into a very good ‘Ivy League’ college.” Yuka feels that she has had depression for her entire life, and that her difficulty “measuring up to” the series of high achievements expected of her may be partly the cause. She commented, “In Japan, we feel like we don’t have any second chance.” If one is older than twenty-eight, one might as well not apply to college. “You have to be really young to get good jobs, because there is age discrimination. If you are over thirty-seven, you are too old.” Yuka observes that this leads to financial problems, which contribute to the high rate of suicide.

Yuka recalled some details of her early life that she heard from others. “I was always observing, sitting, being quiet, not active. At four or five years old, I stayed in the house. I started to play the piano at age two. My mother was a piano teacher. I taught myself by watching her teach. When I was very young, I read books like the encyclopedia. When I went to Kindergarten, they gave me an IQ test. I did not want to get the answer wrong, so I would say, ‘I don’t know.’ If it was a silhouette of a dog and they asked me what it was, I didn’t know if it was a Collie or a German Shepard, so I would say, ‘I don’t know.’” Yuka was labeled “Below Average.” At home, Yuka had similar problems. “I was confused about how I should please my parents. No one gave me any instructions, I kept being not sure.”

At this point, Yuka gave an interesting reflection on Japanese society: “Japanese people have a homogenous personality, everyone is so similar. Probably more similar than Chinese people. With no threat to be occupied, we were secluded on an island for thousands of years. Without saying words we understand each other, through body language or facial expression. I was not good at getting communication. I didn’t understand and could not ask.”

“I was the oldest. I was not supposed to whine or complain, I was supposed to take care of my younger brother. My parents told me, ‘Don’t cry, or you will be laughed at. People will look at you, laugh, talk about you.’ There was a lot of gossip. They didn’t tell you why you shouldn’t do something.”

“I had many jobs. I started out as a musician. I went from piano to organ, and teaching organ. I played at weddings. It was not a lasting job. In school, my major was economics, I studied business. The trend in weddings became to have a live band, not an organist, and I thought I might lose my job. I started studying linguistics. I became a Japanese language teacher. In the 1980s, many people came to Japan to study the Japanese language. I had a lot of work because of my business major. I could out-compete people whose major was linguistics or literature. In the late 1980’s, the market crashed. Language schools and small colleges went bankrupt.

“I decided to come to the United States, for an adventure. I did not speak English. I was an English-[as-a]-Second-Language student to the United States at Boston University. I was not young enough to learn easily. I fell in love with this country in 1989 to the 1990s. I tutored students in Japanese. I did really well and I had translation jobs. This would never have happened in my country—here, opportunity was everywhere. During this time, I got married. Trying to work with companies with Japanese business, however, I hit the wall. The degrees I got in Japan were not considered enough, and I had had no business experience, no jobs.

“I had a huge depression. I did not want to do anything. My husband took me to a psychiatrist. I learned there was nothing wrong with seeing a psychiatrist. It was a huge help. I calmed down. I learned that some people get better. I learned about depression medications, and reading books was really helpful. It made me calm down and hope that I could do something different. It took a couple of years. To prepare to get a job, I needed computer skills. I went into a program that taught customer service and computer skills. The other students were mostly Americans who wanted to get off Welfare. I was excited and happy to be in a program with Americans.

“I got an entry-level job doing data-entry. I started to learn how American businesses work, and get used to the job. There was a lot of office gossip. There were many immigrants there who had language barriers, some very educated. It was very hard from there to get up to management or executive. There was a huge wages gap between the top-earners and the people on the bottom. Not so in Japan. The wage gap is smaller and this may be why people are treated more equally. Many businesses are family-type business. They can have a party together. Not like in this company, where the executives would have luxurious meetings on Cape Cod.

“I was the only Japanese worker there. I knew a Japanese businessman who was coming to do business with my company, so I asked, maybe something I can help with? I was given some interpreting to do. I was invited to executive meetings as an interpreter. I know Japanese business, its purposes and motivations. There were Japanese congressmen along with the Japanese businessmen. The company I worked for sold a certain kind of insurance. In Japan, everything is insured together, so this was a huge change for me. The insurance is good and you can get any treatment. At the meeting I was treated like a data-entry person. When they were

having their fancy lunches, I was told to go back to the data-entry department. I had a bad feeling about the Japanese visitors and talked with some executives about it. My concern was ignored. I became depressed because of what it meant to be treated like a data-entry person.

“My psychiatrist at the time was from Harvard. His way of handling clients was not the best, but the meds worked. He didn’t ask about personal history; no history, just medication, and he would ask what’s going on in your life *now*. I stayed with him for several years. Then the medication stopped working. We tried different things. My brain got numb by medication. I was not quite happy. I had no network to find a new psychiatrist. I researched where I could find a support group and was told I must call Mt. Auburn Hospital. It was too much pressure on me to ask the question in English. In continuing my research, I found the Boston Resource Center (BRC). That was six years ago.

“During that depression I did not work for seven years. My parents were sick, which contributed to a serious depression. I would travel to Japan for three months, then come back to the U.S. for three months, then back to Japan...I didn’t tell my family about my depression *at all*. I was not close to my parents. At one point I told them I was taking medication for depression. My mother thought it was like taking street drugs but legal. They had a very negative reaction and kept saying it was ‘Not good for your health.’ If I don’t take it I could live to be 100 as a zombie.”

Although parts of Yuka’s story were difficult for her, I was struck by how often she had been able to reinvent herself as a worker, and how many mental health resources she had been able to find for herself. In her current job she feels she brings some important traits from her culture: to be patient, to be a good listener. Yuka added that it is important to be assertive in America, “If you don’t speak up, people won’t do anything for you.” She feels fortunate to have found the BRC, and they are fortunate to have found her.