Intercultural Interview: Japanese and Mexican-American cultures

Although I have now lived in the United States for almost eight years, I still consider myself one hundred percent Japanese as I truly believe that still all my beliefs, values and norms were created, shaped and maintained by my having lived in that culture for seventeen-and-a-half years. For this assignment I interviewed a co-worker of mine, Daniel, and he told me he strongly believes it to be accurate when he calls himself Mexican-American as he was born in Mexico and came to the United States legally (this was very important for him to tell me) when he began his last year of middle school and so he has a combination of where he thinks his main beliefs, values and norms came from: some from Mexico, some from the U.S. We spoke on two separate occasions about values and norms. The values we spoke about were the importance of religion (as we see it) in our cultures, and the importance of females (coincidentally, both of us have two sisters) maintaining their virginity until marriage. The norms we spoke about were: acceptable times to telephone friends, “proper” hygiene, and what we eat as “normal” for breakfast.

As a Japanese person, I was raised with both Buddhist and Shinto religious customs, as I attended the only funeral I have ever gone to, for my grandfather, with a Buddhist priest conducting the funeral, but we always attended a Shinto temple to pray at New Year’s time. My sister, when she got married to a Japanese man in Kyoto, got married in a church, even though I do
not believe either she or her husband is Christian and in our house we grew up with a Christmas tree in December. For us, and I think for many Japanese I know, the church and the tree are symbols we feel comfortable with, but not with the same deep religious symbolism that the tree or the church itself represents for many in the West. We feel comfortable having a number of religions included in and influencing our culture. Although Daniel was born a Catholic into a very Catholic family where many in his family went to church every day, as a young man he has not been inside a church or prayed for many years, yet he still considers himself very Catholic. He thinks that neither the Mexican part of him nor the American part of him would feel comfortable “mixing” religions or parts of religions, as he believes we do in Japan. Related to religion for Daniel, is the concept of girls “keeping their virginity until marriage,” although boys do not have this same issue in Daniel’s opinion. Daniel says that now this is not the same importance as it was for his parents’ generation and especially not like it was in his grandparents’ generation. He told me he would feel it very important for the woman he marries to be a virgin, or to be able to lie with great skill so he would believe so. He said he has had sex with a number of girls and he knows it is not “fair,” but that is a value of his Mexican side of his culture as he sees it. As a Japanese, I do not think “virginity” for either women or men has a great deal of importance, at least not in my generation and certainly not for me and my group of friends or relatives my age who I know. I also do not think that the idea of virginity is as “tied into” either Shintoism or Buddhism as it may be with Christianity.
Daniel once got angry with me when I telephoned him around 11:30 p.m. one night. As a Japanese person I consider this very normal as most young people I know stay up late into the morning and we often telephone each other, especially good friends. Daniel told me that neither the Mexican part of him nor the American part considers it polite behavior to telephone after 10:00 p.m. although he has never seen this written down anywhere and he has never really been told this, he just believes it to be more polite if you do not telephone after ten o’clock. This is especially true when he is in Mexico visiting relatives because, as he believes, so many people get up so early there to go to work.

As a Japanese I wash and rinse myself completely before I take a traditional Japanese bath, which is very hot and used to relax oneself, not to clean oneself, as you bring no soap with you into the bath. In the U.S. and in Japan I also take a shower at least once a day and I do not wear shoes in the house, because that is considered “dirty.” I also wear special plastic slippers when I go to use the toilet. When I use the toilet I wash my hands a very long time with both soap and hot water. Daniel says that for him as a Mexican-American, taking a shower every day is important, but it is not important to take off his shoes in the house or to wash his hands as long as I do after he has used the toilet. He believes I am too worried about germs and I think he is not enough worried about germs. We both think that our individual beliefs came from our cultural “upbringing.”

A traditional breakfast for me is miso soup (a fermented soybean-based soup), grilled fish and rice with pickled green vegetables and green tea, although
since I have been in the U.S. I have adapted to what I see many U.S. American friends eat – eggs, toast and strong coffee. I also like pancakes and the sweet maple syrup very much now. Daniel eats both an American style breakfast or a Mexican style breakfast that he says always has tortillas (a flat corn flour type of thin bread), Mexican sausage (chorizo) and scrambled eggs with some sort of chili pepper in it. He also drinks coffee in the morning but with a sweet milk called evaporated milk (in a can!)

So, although Daniel and I are very good friends, we notice we do have many similarities, but many more differences. The good thing is we don’t care about these differences as we recognize them and respect that we are different because of our cultures and that is not only o.k., that is what makes our friendship interesting for both of us because we both are learning from each other all the time.