

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

What We Can Learn from Japanese Culture Right Now

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, July 18th, 2018

My Japanese friend told me her dad's theory on exercise. I find it fascinating and I would like to believe it very much — really, there's no reason not to believe it. Her dad says proper breathing is the only exercise you need. You don't need cardio or weight training. Just breathe right, breathe deep, concentrate on breathing — which is very much in line with Buddhism — and you'll be in good shape.

To me, this is synonymous with Japanese culture. In Japan there's a right way to do everything. When dining with a companion, you don't pour your own sake, you pour each other's sake. When eating noodles, you slurp them loudly to show enjoyment. When you order sushi and you consider the establishment worthy of your respect, you eat everything on your plate — to do otherwise is to be disrespectful.

Respect for each other, etiquette, custom — they're not at the top of our list right now in America.

What else? Ah yes, Sakura season, which is one of the “[little things](#)” [that make Japan great](#). Early in the year, as spring sunlight touches the groves of cherry blossom trees, the cherry blossoms bloom and the entire country celebrates. The official festival, Sakura matsuri, is in April. The sakura hanami tradition, which goes back for centuries, is simply a picnic beneath the cherry blossoms. During Sakura season, all of Japan is mindful of something gorgeous, peaceful, and transient. Cherry blossoms, much like human lives, only last for so long on the tree, and then they drift like snowflakes to the ground. Each year new Sakura are born as the blazing sun begets creation. Two weeks later, the Sakura die. The Earth continues on its path around the sun.



Here in America, our national celebration is Independence Day, a day for appreciating our independence, and, uh, blowing stuff up. That says a lot about our love of gratuitous violence.

To be fair, America's best cultural exponents are celebrators of diversity, open-mindedness, and critical thinking. Think Kendrick Lamar (who recently won the [Pulitzer for music](#)), Childish Gambino's “[This Is America](#),” and [Claudia Rankine](#), whose *Citizen: An American Lyric* won the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry. Lamar exemplifies the confessional nature of the modern American lyric while managing to be referential and microcosmic all at once. Rankine and Childish Gambino's works of genius offer brilliant representations of what it is to be black in America. If you think about it, to be a black artist in America is to be a foil for America's cultural and political identity.

Despite the polarization and binary thinking inherent in our politics, America is a patchwork quilt, a nation that celebrates St. Patrick's Day, Oktoberfest, and [National Just Because Day](#) all within the span of a single year.

Many of our academic institutions do their best to help students understand cultural plurality and cultivate an appreciation of diverse perspectives. ASU's [Penelope Adams Moon](#) helps her students see through different lenses, and she's excited about how online education opens the discussion to people with "vastly different backgrounds and at different stages in life, [...] new and different types of students, students whose voices have, to a large extent, been absent from graduate education [...]"

Democratic diversity is the strong point of American culture, and with that, you would hope to see us respecting each other.

You can't appreciate diverse perspectives without respecting the people behind the perspectives.

In Japan, people bow to each other. In America, you learn to have manners, but as [Cailee Davis](#) points out, "Americans today are taught polite behaviors but not the respect behind said actions." She says we teach kids "*how* to act without teaching them the importance of and reason *why*." To me, this rings true. Just look at Twitter or Reddit on any given day and you'll see a fundamental breakdown of respect. Just look at our [president's lack of respect for the #TakeAKnee movement](#). I bring up Trump because he's our country's primary representative to the world. At the very least, he should respect players' right to protest police mistreatment of African Americans. Just look at his lack of respect on countless other occasions, such as when he made a [Pocahontas joke](#) about Elizabeth Warren at a ceremony honoring Navajo vets.

Cailee Davis identifies the reason for respect: we're equal as humans. This extends to politics, culture, and the time we spend on our pursuits. I don't have to like your work of art, but I respect you for taking the time to create it.

Without even trying, my Japanese friend Rumi is teaching me to respect her culture. Being her friend and making an effort to understand her rationale and perspective helps me understand the culture she comes from. At its heart, Japanese culture is about the rationality of respecting customs and traditions, as well as individuals. If you're looking to deepen your understanding of Japanese language and customs, checking out the [best apps for learning Japanese](#) can be a great way to start. America may be a cultural hotspot, but we could benefit from a little r-e-s-p-e-c-t.

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