

Work it Out

I learned many things during my year abroad in New Zealand: how to speak English, how to play touch rugby, and how to cook. More than these things though the most important skill I gained while overseas was learning how to 'work it out' when I had difficulties with another person.

In Japan I have an older sister and we would often fight and argue about the silliest things. Every time we fought, our mother would come and sort things out between us. In New Zealand however things were very different. My host mother was a believer in working things out for yourself and she would rarely interfere when I had an argument with my host sister, Julie. Julie and I would sometimes disagree, especially when I first arrived as a new member of their family.

It was strange for me but my host mother would make us work out our disagreements by talking, which was really tough for me at first! "If I am always fixing your problems then they aren't really fixed", she would tell us, so Julie and I had no choice but to 'work it out'. And you know what? Julie and I are now BFF, or 'best friends forever' and I know her better than anybody else in the world. I want to thank my lovely host mother for teaching me this wonderful skill, and even though I'm back in Japan now I am still going to 'work it out' whenever I have a problem.

Music is my Life

"Are you ever coming down for dinner?", my mother yells. "Right after this song is over!", I reply. This is a pretty common conversation in our house...you see, I'm totally and completely crazy about music. Morning, noon, and night I'm either playing or listening to some form of music, and I've been this way ever since I can remember.

When my mom was pregnant with me she would listen to classical music and I would dance in her tummy. After I was born the only thing that would put me to sleep was music, and by the time I was in kindergarten I could already play the piano and the harmonica. I'm 15 now and belong to the band club *and* the music club at school, and I think I have over a thousand songs on my computer that I constantly listen to.

I'm always asked if I want to be a musician but to be honest my dream is to *manage* other musicians and help them to achieve their dreams. This way I can be involved in various types of music and interact with different types of people. I plan to take a music management course in university once I graduate, and my parents seem to be supportive of my idea...though these days I think my mom just really wishes I would get to the dinner table on time. What can I say? Sometimes I need music more than I need food. Music is my life!

Cats or Dogs?

I had a really interesting conversation with my friend last Thursday. We were arguing over whether dogs or cats were better and discussing which made a better pet. I didn't realize she was such a 'dog person' though I guess I could have guessed because her family owns three little Cocker Spaniels.

"Cats don't really *do* anything", she said. "Well, they're independent, that's why", I replied. "And dogs kind of smell and always want attention", I added. "That's why I love them", she said. "My dogs *always* want to play when I get home from school...but my aunt's cat just hisses and tries to scratch me every time I see it". "Hmmm", I said, "well my cat is super-friendly but the neighbor's dog just makes a mess of their yard and barks all night". In the end we decided that she should keep her dogs and I'll stick with my cat.

I realized that different types of animals suit different types of people. Some people crave companionship and enjoy the playfulness of a dog while others prefer the quiet independence of a cat. Dogs might be more fun but they also require more care than a cat. When I mentioned all of this to my family that night my little brother gave his opinion: "Well you were both wrong; I think everybody knows that the best pets are iguanas!" We had a good laugh at that one.

Cats or dogs? It really depends on the person.

Renewable Energy

Fossil fuels like oil and coal are not going to last forever so we need to start thinking of other sources of renewable energy. In my school we have been researching alternative sources of energy and I'd like to tell you about some of them today.

Renewable energy comes from natural sources such as the sun, the wind, the tides, and the hot water inside the Earth, called geothermal power. Many houses now have solar panels which 'catch' the sun's energy and convert it into electricity. Maybe even your calculator has a small solar panel on it too. Wind 'farms' are areas with giant windmills whose huge blades move in the wind, turning gears inside and creating energy. There are similar machines that capture the power of the moving ocean tides and turn it into electricity, and some countries use the hot water within the Earth to create energy too.

Renewable energy is not perfect yet however. Solar panels are expensive, fairly heavy, and only work when it's sunny. Windmills are also expensive and can be noisy, and not every country has access to tides or geothermal power. However, research is continuing and renewable energy is becoming a more realistic and efficient option. Eventually fossil fuels will run out and we will need safer, cleaner sources of energy. I plan to keep studying these new methods and maybe someday I can be a scientist or engineer and get involved in bringing these new energies to people all over the world.

The Accidental Volunteer

In Canada last year our class had an optional course called Community Services. This course involved doing good works in the community...but without receiving any kind of payment in return. The whole idea seemed a bit strange to me so needless to say I didn't join that class. My friend, however, did.

Two weeks into the term my friend called me one Friday evening and said, "I really need a huge favor. I am sick and need somebody to take my place on the volunteer field trip tomorrow." "I don't know anything about volunteering", I argued. "Pleeeaaase!", she begged, "my place is reserved and they'll be expecting me...or at least somebody." After about twenty minutes of begging I finally gave in. But what did I know about volunteering?

Well, it turned out to be one of the best days of my life. In the morning we helped brush and feed stray cats and dogs at an animal shelter. I absolutely *love* animals so it didn't feel like 'work' at all. In the afternoon we helped serve meals at a seniors' center and they seemed so happy just to talk to us. I somehow ended up playing some songs on the big old piano they had in the common room for the seniors and many of them were crying with joy. It was so moving. I don't know how to describe it, but something changed inside me that day, and on the following Monday I also managed to join Community Services.

Movies vs. Books

As more and more popular books are being made into big Hollywood movies it raises the question of which is better, movies or books? I would have to say that I prefer books because, in my experience, the movie is never quite as good. Our imaginations can paint a much richer story than any director ever could, and with a book the experience can last as long as you decide. With a movie it's over in two hours. I also like the fact that you can carry a book around with you wherever you go.

I know some people think that movies are better because you don't have to think much; all the sights and sounds are supplied for you. You can just sit back and relax, and let the whole experience unfold before your eyes. I guess movies are also cool because you can go with all your friends. I understand all that but I still love to sit back and let my imagination run wild as I turn the pages of my favorite new novel.

To be honest though, I usually do both if I can. If I read a book I really like then I will often also go and see the movie and see what's the same and what's different. In some cases the story is *totally* different! How about you guys? What would you rather do? Sit back and relax with a good book or head down to the theater with your friends?

Rugby: Pride of a Nation

Japan has sumo and baseball. America has basketball and football. Canada has ice hockey and lacrosse. But in the small island nation of New Zealand the sport that lives in the heart of the people is rugby. Originally from England, the rules of rugby can be confusing at first, especially to those people who grew up watching American football, soccer, or hockey.

Perhaps the most unique rule is that you cannot throw the ball forward - you must instead throw the ball *back* to your own players while moving forward down the field. This is very different from most other field sports. Also different is the fact that you cannot check players who do not have the ball. And in rugby you can score points with your hands *or* your feet. All this makes for a very interesting and entertaining game.

In New Zealand, boys and girls start to play rugby from a very young age, and because the sport is so well-supported, the country is able to raise some of the world's most dominant players. There are many different leagues and tournaments where Kiwi rugby players can improve their skills and move up the ranks. New Zealand's national rugby team, the mighty All Blacks, have the best winning record of any professional sports team and are feared in every other rugby playing nation. The pride of an entire nation rides on the shoulders of these gigantic athletes and they rarely disappoint their many loyal fans.

Helping in English

It wasn't until I found myself suddenly playing 'emergency translator' that I truly realized the value of all my years of English study. It was a Sunday afternoon and as I walked through the crowded station I noticed a little boy crying. I could see he was not Japanese and there were already several people kneeling beside him trying to help. I walked closer and one of the ladies helping suddenly asked me if I spoke any English. "We don't know what he's saying", she said to me in Japanese. The little boy looked scared but I asked him who he was and if he was lost. "I'm Michael Brown and I can't find my mommy and daddy", he said. "It'll be okay Michael; we'll find them", I replied.

In the end, the station staff asked me to do an announcement over the speaker system in English asking the parents to come to the main office. Within seconds a desperate-looking couple came running up to the office and burst through the door. "You are a hero!", the parents told me as they hugged their son. "He somehow got away from us in the crowd and when we turned around he was gone," said the tearful mother. Now, I'm not sure if I'm really a *hero* but I can't describe how good it felt to be able to help those people...and I wouldn't have been able to do it if it weren't for my English skills.

Laughter is the Best Medicine

Everyone loves a good laugh but did you know that it's been scientifically proven that laughing can make you healthier? There have been many studies recently looking at the positive effects laughing can have on your body and mind. Laughing can increase your productivity, reduce pain, boost your energy, and even help cure certain illnesses. And laughing just feels good - who doesn't enjoy having a good laugh?

When we laugh our bodies produce hormones that calm the mind. We also breathe more oxygen when we laugh which is good for our hearts and brains. There are now some companies around the world that have their staff take 'laughing classes' which can relieve stress and also increase productivity. Laughter Yoga is also spreading across the world and is now practiced in over 60 countries. This practice combines yoga poses with laughing and members say that they feel happier and healthier because of it. You can even become a Laughter Therapist as several universities are now offering such courses. I think that sounds like a really fun job, don't you?

So the next time you are feeling down or a little bit stressed out, instead of reaching for the ice cream or just crawling into bed, why not try having a good laugh? Watch your favorite comedy, tell some funny jokes, or just be silly with your friends. It's fun, it's free, and you might just discover that laughter truly is the best medicine.

Good News

Have you ever noticed that most news these days is negative? Whether you're reading the daily newspaper or listening to the evening news it always seems like something bad has happened or is going to happen. Is this really the way the world is or are we only hearing part of the story? Now, I'm not sure if everything that we hear on the news is true or not, but I do think that for every bad thing that has happened there are probably 10 *good* things that have also happened. I think people should know about these stories too.

They say that people are naturally attracted to negative headlines, that it's 'human nature', but I believe that people love hearing positive stories too. Once people get used to it I think they would enjoy reading about the many wonderful things that happen each day in our world and that is why I want to create a 'positive news only' website.

My dream is to have a website that reports only good news, from positive agreements between countries to the lady down the street who found her lost cat. Right now it's only a dream but I'm already learning how to make a website and some of my friends have agreed to report for me. I think we need to hear the good in this world along with the bad. What do you think? Would you be interested in reading positive news? I'll let you know when my website is ready.

