Two Sides of a Coin

"We've been hosting a French exchange student for the past few weeks," my host mother told me in Japanese on the first day of my homestay, "and he's planning to go to a restaurant in Dotonbori today. Won't you come with us? My English teacher from Georgia will be there as well, and I'm sure they'd love to have you." I agreed, and that was how I found myself huddled inside the second floor of a small, bar-like restaurant, eating *kushikatsu* (fried food on a stick) for dinner with my host mother and two other foreigners. My host mother had made the event sound normal and perfectly coincidental at the time, but looking back, I realize that it must have been carefully planned to make me feel welcome; Dotonbori was one of the most ethnically diverse parts of the city, and with two foreigners there to share their own experiences with me, I felt very much at home. My host family's consideration and hospitality amazed me, and I was surprised by how much value they placed on what it meant to be family. Unlike its American counterpart, Japanese families were much more serious and tight-knit; each family member had a set role and responsibility depending on their age and gender.

During my three-week stay, I stayed in a modest temple with the *Yoshihara* family, one of the increasingly fewer families who maintained a semi-traditional Japanese lifestyle in modern Japan. The family came from a line of Buddhist priests, and each family member was required to help with some part of their business, ranging from funeral services to packaging the annual gifts given to customers during the *Obon* festival. Interestingly enough, the responsibilities split among their children were a lot different than what I would usually expect in modern families. Instead of having it evenly split among siblings or mostly assigned to the firstborn child, Ikuyo, most of the responsibilities fell upon the oldest son, Tetsuya. Of the four children, Tetsuya was the only one who dealt with the temple's customers on a daily basis, and he was also slated to inherit the temple as the

next priest. In fact, during *Obon*, an annual Buddhist event that emphasized honoring one's ancestors, I often found him leaving at around eight in the morning to visit his customers at their homes and perform services at their family altars. On those days, he had always returned later than nine at night, as he had meticulously visited each customer, gotten to know them on a personal level, and finally chanted his sutras at their altars. Compared to the numerous duties Tetsuya had, his other siblings had much simpler chores: his older sister Ikuyo was in charge of packaging and sending the annual thank-you gifts, his younger brother Takuya drove his father and Tetsuya around to their workplaces, and his younger sister Masayo merely had to wait at home for any visitors if the rest of the family was out doing business. Despite the unequal share of responsibilities, however, each member had an important role in smoothly managing their temple, and their pride clearly showed when each of them took their jobs seriously and without complaint.

Although the family rarely spent time together due to the numerous tasks each member had, this did not stop the *Yoshihara*'s from enjoying and treasuring the short moments of relaxation they had together. As an American, I had expected for my host siblings to choose to spend their free time with their friends, or just somewhere away from home like most young American adults. While they did have the occasional outings and sometimes spent the night elsewhere with their friends, I did not expect to find out that they preferred to stay home and watch television with their parents. They seemed to like television not just because of its entertaining variety shows or comedies, but also because it promoted family interaction and provided easy conversation starters that anyone could partake in. I was amazed to see how much thought they put into even the simple act of watching television, and how much they valued a comfortable, relaxing atmosphere between each other as a family. In addition, whenever one of them returned home, even for a short break between jobs, they always brought home gifts or food to share with their family as if it was a natural thing to do. And to them, it was natural; the *Yoshihara*'s always kept each other in mind, and every action they made

reinforced the fact that to them family was important -- not just the serious side of it, but also the consideration and warmth that comes with it.

I once asked my host mother about the history behind their temple, and how my host family managed to make time to eat together at the end of each day despite their busy lives. I wanted to know how they could work so dedicatedly towards their temple and exactly where their pride came from. Especially in this day and age, I knew that a traditional family like this -- with a family business and a direct connection to Buddhism -- was rare, and my host mother understood how important the question was to me as someone unused to the workings of her family. Rather than just giving me a short answer about her own personal feelings, which is what I was expecting, she instead chose to tell me that the temple itself was a symbol of pride for their family, as it was rebuilt singlehandedly by her husband's grandfather in the wake of World War II. Although she didn't mention anything else, the answer itself really encompassed how important family heritage was in Japanese culture: rather than giving me her own opinions, she instead emphasized that her family's pride came from their modest beginnings and the strength their ancestors had to get to where they were now. I was honestly impressed and humbled by how open she was to share what I considered a private matter and to even agree to letting me write about it in my report. Over my three weeks, I experienced a whole different world, and although at times it was shocking, I really felt as if I belonged with this family; their honest feelings, consideration, and hospitality has always made me feel welcome, and I am extremely grateful for receiving such a wonderful opportunity.