When you see this, "？マジで、すごーい！" what do you think? Imagine you are in a conversation where people are using a language that you do not know. Imagine your family and your best friends are far away from you. Imagine that you are alone, and that there is an ocean between you and the people you know. What would you think? Would you not be afraid and discouraged? You never have the feeling of being "at home." Inside you think, "It is not me!!" This is what I experienced when I first came to the United States to improve my English skills as an exchange student from Japan last August. I was so scared and felt like I had a heavy stone in my heart. I nearly cry whenever I remember this feeling.

Not only the language but also the cultural differences made the stone heavier. I did not know if my behaviors or ways of talking were rude for American people because I did not know American cultures very well. I kept thinking "I really want to talk to them, but I'm sure I will bother them because of my poor English skills." American and Japanese cultures are totally different. I will give you one small example. When somebody says "Thank you" to you, how do you reply? In Japanese language, we often say "No, no! That is all right" instead of saying "You're welcome." We have a term for "You're welcome", but if we say it, it is meant to express that we did something good for someone else. We tend to be so humble, so we do not want to imply "I did something good for you, so you should appreciate me!" Therefore, I kept saying "No, that's all right" as a reply to "Thank you" in my conversations in English. However, I realized that nobody in the United States uses this phrase. Of course, this is only one example and I can see many other cultural differences not only in conversations but also in how people behave.

Because of these difficulties, I was sometimes too scared to get involved in some

activities or conversations with American people. It was like making a dive into deep water. "I wish I could be really cheerful like I used to be in Japan." I tried to push myself hard to talk with other people. Even though I sometimes felt embarrassed because of my English skills, eventually making a dive turned out to be good. Thanks to the diversity in UNCC, I got to know more people and cultures from many other countries, and most importantly, I made good relationships with them, which enriched my life. The more I tried to make a dive, the more I got used to do it. At the same time, the heavy stone in my heart got smaller and smoother like stones in rivers.

Honestly, I was surprised at everything that was different, but I realized I had also been generalizing American people only according to what I saw when I first came here. I thought I was ready to see a different world, but my heart was stuck in Japan. My mind was closed because I could not even accept the differences. However, I just kept trying to make a dive into water and got to know more people. Then, I realized that generalizing people is impossible and unnecessary. The world is too complex to define people only according to where they are from or their cultures. People are individuals. I know it is natural and almost everybody knows that. However, how many of you have ever generalized people by saying "American people are, or Japanese people are….."? I did it before until I completely understand that people are individuals.

Of course, everybody has cultural norms. I have them too, but every Japanese person is different. I want other people to see me as myself, not just another Japanese person. It is natural that there are differences between countries and I will not judge people based on those differences. After I realized this, I started to feel free and interact with people in the same way I did in Japan. I did not judge people based on where they lived. When I could not understand their cultures or behaviors, I asked them what they

meant. Asking such a question was sometimes embarrassing to do, but it cleared my questions or doubts towards people and their cultures. I cannot count how many times I did this.

Staying in America made me realize a natural, but important fact through firsthand experiences. We never know what kind of person someone is until we talk to them. I do not talk to their counties, but I do talk to individuals.

I have also learned to have appreciation for everything I have. At first, I just thought I should appreciate my family and friends back in Japan because I realized the importance of them when I had a hard time in America. As time passed, I also became able to appreciate this experience and people I met here.

Staying in America was not easy at all. I needed encouragement to make a dive. The heavy stone hurt me and made me so nervous, but "Just give it a shot!" As a result, the stone got smaller and smoother. Now I am getting stronger and my mind is more open. It is really easy to forget the natural fact that we cannot define people only based on their nationality, especially when we are in totally different worlds because we try to protect ourselves. I will not forget that feeling of how I struggled and will not forget to appreciate everything I have and what I learned here at UNCC. Also, I will see people as themselves, as individuals, and how they are. Thank you.