I have no idea why, but living in Japan felt so natural to me that when I returned to Miami, I felt strangely desolate. Every time a friend or family member asked “How does it feel to be home?” I couldn’t help but think that I had just left home, rather than came home. Perhaps it was the simplicity of my life, or how logical everything has seemed, but studying in Japan was incredibly natural to me. From the wide sidewalks to the clean schools, in comparison to the hustle and bustle of Miami, it was simply a better way to live.

Surprisingly though, the best way I learned about the Japanese lifestyle was not through my classes or seminars, but by biking around Osaka and Rinku Town. Honestly, I loved biking around Osaka more than anything else during the trip. I biked through suburbs and alleyways, past schools and apartment buildings, and even past a rice field. I saw so much, from the narrow townhouses to a public swimming pool to a shed full of dried onions. Most of all, the streets in Osaka were so lovely. The streets of a city, from my experience, can tell a lot about the city itself, and in Osaka the streets I biked along were perfect. They were wide and clean, with not a speck of litter or trash, and were even divided into pedestrian and bicycle lanes. Every street was marked by special yellow bricks with indentations to inform the blind of street changes. I never saw a single crack or pothole in the street. Even the city itself was so clean and pristine I was amazed by how safe I felt.

I suppose this would seem rather strange, but my favorite activity in Japan other than biking was simply observing everything I came across. The trip to Iwate, in particular, surprised me. I had expected to see the land ravaged, the towns without buildings and water everywhere like some sort of modern Atlantis. Instead, the skies were clear, the ground was green with grass and the few buildings I saw seemed perfectly normal. Unlike Osaka and Kyoto, which were such enormous cities, Iwate was quiet and peaceful. I met an old woman who taught us how to make sweets, and I learned about the agriculture of Japan, which I didn’t even know existed. In all actuality, as a place, I preferred rural Iwate to busy Osaka. I wish I could have learned about the crops growing in the pastures we passed by, and how the farmers lived from day to day as well as the city folk. Japan’s cities may be its most noticeable feature, but what few people realize is that there is so much life that is thriving and growing in the countryside. Unfortunately, it is also this unknown aspect of Japan that has been devastated the most in natural disasters.

I visited Japan as part of a program created in memoriam of a disaster and the deaths that followed. But what was most incredible was the Japan I saw and experienced was thriving even still. Only subtle clues gave away the true situation; the air conditioners were always off, no matter how scorching the heat was, going outside became forbidden as a typhoon approached and at every festival there was a booth to send donations to the Tohoku region. The Japanese people, unlike most others, are incredibly resilient. I get the sense that, no matter what were to happen, and no matter how long recovery would take, in the end Japan would rise stronger than before. I only hope that if there is a next time, I can aid in that recovery.