Dear Jake,

I know by now you’re somewhat sick of reading the words “Dear Jake.” In fact, this very moment you have a drawer stacked with letters you’ve received from friends on your last day at international school, all starting with the same two words: “Dear Jake”. I know how dubious you are of these letters, of all the broken promises to keep in touch, the professed tragedy of parting ways that seems to only ever affect your life and not theirs. I also know that you won’t care to admit it to others, but you’ve made a habit of perusing these letters at night, when you’re feeling particularly homesick and in need of comfort. You know they’re not genuine, but you still look to them for comfort and company. Well, let me add just one more letter to that pile. But this letter, I swear, is genuine.

You might be wondering who I am and why I know these things about you, but the question of my identity is of little relevance (for simplicity’s sake, you might consider me as something of a deity, if a cynical atheist such as yourself is capable of doing so). What matters is that I know you, I know what you’ve been through, and I know what lies ahead of you. And honored with this privileged position of knowing you, I wanted to say a few things that I believe may benefit you to hear.

Let me start by addressing the confusion you are feeling right now. It’s been 3 weeks since you transferred from a wealthy international school to an almost bankrupt Japanese high school. The disparity in the two environments is disorienting and you are justified in feeling alone and afraid. At first you were hopeful. You thought that what was separating you and your peers was cultural and all you needed was time to acclimate. However, after several run-ins with your classmates and conflicts with the faculty, by now your optimism is gradually fading and being replaced by resignation. I apologize for beginning this letter on such a dismal note, but you are correct in your foreboding. Time is not going to improve your situation and you are never going to fit in to your new environment. The reason for this, though, is not cultural; at least not in the way that you think. But before I explain this, allow me to take a few moments to draw you an outline of who you are in order for you to better understand your current struggles.

Now, in discussing one’s identity perhaps the most important place to start is their environment. Your environment, as you know, is a very comfortable one. Born under two college graduate parents in a comfortably middle-class home, for your whole life you’ve known relative stability. There have been a few brief moments of financial uncertainty and frugality prior to now, experiences that made you stand out in your former school, but now at 14 years old your family is perhaps the most secure it has ever been. Your father is enjoying success in his business and your mother is, as always, focused on you and your siblings, aiding your education and constantly giving you her full attention. You used to think this arrangement you had was quite normal. And it certainly was before you transferred. However, now you’re just finding out that there are many out there living under vastly different conditions who do not have the kind of benefits you take for granted. Remember Nunota? You’ll soon find out that he lives in a state funded apartment complex with just his mother. How about Momoka? Her parents are currently going through divorce and she has to spend all her time outside of school working to sustain their living. You dislike both of them and you’re not going to start liking them any time soon. You’re convinced that the problem is their personalities. They seem so ignorant and disrespectful to you and to others, and perhaps this is true. It’s important to keep in mind when appraising others, however, that humans are in large part a product of their environment. We’ll revisit this later.

Anyways, to steer the conversation back to you, you are of a middle-class upbringing, and this isn’t just because of your family’s financial wealth. Your bilingualism and your high academic ability are also indicators of your social class. The truth is, your good study habits, ability to teach yourself, and self-control are not innate faculties but learning competencies (qualities that enable voluntary learning) that you picked up from the environment you were raised in. You’ve never shown interest in your future, so I doubt you’d show interest now, but these learning competencies, along with the rest of the environmental factors shaping your identity, are going to significantly impact your life ahead.

Now I’m going to let you in on what’s in store ahead of you. I hate to break your rebel heart, but despite your present nonconformist stance, you are going to compromise your position and end up attending university. It’ll start in high school, where you will outperform your peers in academics and gain attention from the faculty for your academic prowess. The high expectations from your teachers will gradually be communicated to your parents and cause them to form high expectations as well. At first, this will be stressful. You will struggle with everyone’s sudden interest in what you do with your future and for a while you will even reject the academic track in protest to what you view as authoritarian manipulation by your parents and teachers to enter the highly competitive world of academia. However, in the end you will concede and throw yourself into *juken* and come out successful, gaining admissions from esteemed universities and ultimately choosing to attend the School of Political Science and Economics at Waseda University.

You won’t stop there. Once in Waseda, you will continue to feel pressure from your parents to accomplish great things and again you will find yourself unable to fight them. This pressure to make a name for yourself will lead you to apply for a slot in a highly selective study abroad program where you will spend a year abroad studying at an elite institution in the U.S. Fortunately, your effort pans out and it becomes decided that you will spend a year abroad at the University of Chicago, preparing you for what can only be further success in the future. You won’t know exactly where to go from there, but what you will know is with an impressive resume and a track record of success, you are at a considerable advantage and will not settle for a modest living.

So, are you excited for the success that awaits you? Probably not. You’re probably disappointed that you sold out. But you must also be wondering, how was it all possible? And before you convince yourself that it was your natural qualities and hard work that afforded you such success, which you are wont to do, let’s trace your steps leading up to university and see if your success really is well deserved.

I already mentioned that a major contributor to your success is teacher and parent expectations, but why did they expect so much from you? The answer is not because of your intelligence (though even if it were, like I said earlier, a large part of intelligence comes from learning competencies which are characteristic of the middle class), but from other sources that your teachers took as indicators of merit. For example, you find it extremely difficult to communicate with your fellow students from class. This is because everything they say is based on mutual experience and is highly contextual, prohibiting you, an outsider, from understanding the content of what they communicate. Even when you ask for them to explain it, the majority of them are incapable of doing so, just like how they are incapable of writing an essay or stating their opinion in class. Conversely, you speak in terms that are open and understandable to everyone and you enjoy having elaborate conversations where you express and exchange your personal views in an intelligible manner with others. Now don’t misunderstand this as a sign of your intellectual superiority, for you couldn’t be further from the truth. This is a sociological phenomenon. The language you employ is called elaborated code whereas the language your peers employ is called restricted code. The difference in parlance originates from differences in socioeconomic standing. You have been raised in an environment that values abstract thought and comprehensive communication while your peers have been raised in environments where communication is only held between close individuals with a common frame of reference. What you chalk down to difference in intelligence and cultural background is really a difference in socioeconomic class. In academic settings, for obvious reasons, elaborated code is preferred, making your use of elaborated code a merit that informs teachers’ opinions of you and contributes to higher expectations.

Another source of high teacher expectations is cultural capital. Cultural capital is actually a concept you are already slightly familiar with, having skimmed through *Distinction* by Pierre Bourdieu. The irony is that the very fact that you have already read this book is a testament to the abundance of cultural capital you have been blessed with. Your knowledge of famous works of literature, philosophers, famous works of art have garnered you much respect from the adults in your life. The countless books in your house and the periodic trips you take to the library have benefited you on multiple occasions. Pair with these your middle class mannerisms and sensibilities (such as deference towards elders and deftness in negotiating with authority), and you can begin to understand why your teachers perceived you as special and encouraged you in your pursuit of academics. Once again this has nothing to do with your mind and everything to do with the amalgam of social conditions surrounding you.

Now we know the sources of your teacher expectations, we can set out to examine how these expectations influenced your decisions. Before senior year you had no interest in *juken* or higher education in general. In fact, you were against the notion of higher education and wished to pursue an alternate route upon graduation. What changed that? For one, it was the individual teachers who sat you down on numerous occasions to talk to you about your future, strongly advising you to study for entrance exams and take a stab at an elite school. It was also your peers who glorified you for your excellence in academics relative to them and assumed you would enter an elite institution and find success there. Finally, it was your parents, specifically your mother, who was informed by teachers about your potential and took it upon herself to ensure that that was the path you selected. Your parents practice a form of parenting that is called concerted cultivation which is defined by active involvement by the parent in the child’s life in order to facilitate a more favorable outcome for the child. In this case, your parents talked to you a lot about school, always informing themselves on what was going on and monitoring your activities within school to ensure that you were headed in the right direction. Your mother in particular would pay frequent visits to the school and befriend the faculty, ensuring that you received special attention and support from teachers. On an aggregate level your school culture does not promote *juken*, but the individual level influences were enough to trump the school culture and set you apart from the rest of the school.

It might feel weird to hear but you never, not once, made an active decision concerning your educational trajectory in your life. You didn’t choose whether to participate in *juken* or not. You didn’t choose which universities you would apply to. And you didn’t decide for yourself what to make of your university experience. Everything was decided by your environment and by your immediate society. Now, going back, do you think Nunota and Momoka will be provided these same options? Do you think they will find as much success as you, make as much money as you, and entertain as many privileges as you do? The answer is no, they will not. It is not you that is special, Jake, and you need to understand this. What’s special are the cards you were dealt, and a society where your hand (or the arbitrary social conditions you are born into) determines your success is a society plagued with unforgiveable inequality.

I want to end on a few words of advice. By now you’ve probably figured it out, but the person writing to you is yourself, from 5 years in the future. Reflecting on my experiences that have brought me to this point, I still do not know what kind of educational choices would have been best for me. But I do know one thing. What you take for granted, what I used to take for granted and still do to an extent, is something that I am very blessed to have. It is opportunity for success and upward social mobility that many would die for. Furthermore, I used to be under the terribly mistaken notion that somehow, I was entitled to it. I was not. I didn’t deserve any of this. This could have easily happened to someone else had we drawn different lots at birth. But it was me that ended up being fortunate enough to have all of this handed to me, and I’m finally able to recognize the value of that. So, Jake, I don’t know what you should do with your educational choices. However, I do want you to think it through and value every opportunity that is comes your way. For every opportunity given to you is an opportunity a fellow human is robbed of, and I want you to show respect to these people whose sacrifices are the foundations for your success by not carelessly throwing away any of your opportunities.

I also want to remind you that though you may feel alienated and alone, do not turn spiteful. Always understand that there is backstory, a bigger picture to why people act the way they act. Be understanding, always.

I wish you the best in your endeavors. Good luck kiddo. Give ‘em hell.

Sincerely,

Jake Underland