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Frequently Asked Questions: Who Am I?

Everyone has a set of questions that is asked to them when they meet new people. It's just how conversations flow. I've moved around a lot and have met a lot of new people, so I know the drill. However, it's not as simple as people might think.

"What's your name?"

The most basic of questions, right?

My name is Ken. There. Easy answer.

"Is that short for Kenneth?"

Shoot. I thought the question had already ended. No. It's not short for Kenneth. Ok, I finished my name. But wait. That ignores the fact that my name used to be Kentaroo. Although my grandparents called me that, I didn't know it was my legal name until I found my birth certificate as a teenager looking through my papers. My parents changed my name when I was five. That leads into the next question.

"Where are you from?"

Ok. This one is a piece of cake right? Surely I know where I'm from. Well, not so fast. Do you want to know where I was born? I do know that answer. Nago, Japan, on the island of Okinawa. Is that where I'm from? Hmm. I don't know. I only lived there until I was six. Okinawa that is. I split my time between three different towns and who knows how many residencies.

How about Arkansas? That's where I went to high school. That's where I learned to drive. That's where I got my first kiss. I built part of my house and contracted walking pneumonia from working outside on Christmas Day. Surely those things have to count. That is where I have spent the most amount of years: seven. But, again, that was split between two different towns and four different residencies.

Those answers also leave out the other places. Illinois, where I first saw snow and fell in love with basketball via Michael Jordan. Florida, where I cut my foot on a rock in a spring and had to receive my first three stitches. I saw an alligator in that spring, and my George Costanza job has been a herpetologist ever since. Then, there's Indiana where I was rejected from the middle school basketball team, so I turned to Pokémon cards. There's also Oregon where I graduated college, and my tongue graduated to craft brews. How about Ghana, where I published my first news story and got mugged for the first time? Or Vermont, where I completed my first year of national service through AmeriCorps VISTA?

I don't know. They pick out the fact that I was born in Japan.

"Do you speak Japanese?"

Finally! A yes or no question. No, unfortunately I don't speak Japanese. There. Easy answer.

But you lived there until you were six. Damn. That's right. I did. I

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learned Japanese along with English. I was fluent until I was 10ish. Mom stopped speaking it in the house because we were living in the U.S. and it was more important for her to practice English. I watch home movies of myself in Japan. On my fifth birthday, I'm speaking Japanese. I don't know what I'm saying. I can't understand my five-year-old self. I can't speak to my grandparents. They don't know English.

But I took two years of Japanese in college. The ability came back right away didn't it? No. In my fourth semester I got a "C." That's right. A "C." In a language I completely controlled at the age of five, the same age when I performed a dance with paper leaves at my preschool's sports day. But when I went back to visit Japan when I was 22, I knew enough to hail a cab to get to a fashion show where my aunt was volunteering. I didn't know enough to figure out that was my destination. I thought I was going to the tug-of-war festival. So do I speak Japanese? I don't know. Not really.

"What do I do?"

For a living? I just finished my job with the American Red Cross. Except I didn't really work for the Red Cross. I was contracted out to the organization through AmeriCorps. What's AmeriCorps? A domestic version of the Peace Corps, I say. And I did two years of it. But it wasn't a job. I wasn't allowed to call it that. I was a volunteer. I had to say I was serving. But I got paid, so how could I be a volunteer? I don't know. That's just how it was in the Corps.

"Who am I?"

No one asks this outright. They think it. Who is this person? Why can't he answer the questions cleanly?

It's true. My answers don't fit into a nice, neat little box. Literally. It's not just people who ask me these questions. Standardized tests, forms, applications. They all want to know too. What do I check inside the boxes? I guess whatever I feel like that day. It's confusing to answer these questions.

If I could trade my long-winded explanations for cropped closure, would I? No way. I may not know exactly who I am, but when other people ask, they certainly find out.