

There are many stereotypes about Japan in America, some that are true and some that aren't true. One stereotype that I have generally found to be true is that Japan is a very efficient and a convenient place to live. Unlike in the US, it is easy to get around by bicycle and train in Japan, and I don't find it at all necessary to have a car. Even when it's raining, there are umbrella racks at the entrances to office buildings and stores, and I don't have to worry about someone stealing my umbrella. If I left my umbrella at the door of a building at home, I wouldn't expect to see it there when I got back.

For the most part, coming to Japan introduced a lot of new conveniences to my life. Even sorting the trash, which I do find inconvenient, really is a good thing because it makes recycling easier to do. The one inconvenience that I really can't understand is the bank. When my brother moved back to the US after living in Japan for two years, he called me one night, asking where the closest ATM, or cash machine, was in our neighborhood. He sounded concerned, and when I told him there was one nearby, he asked if it would be open at 8 a.m. when he was leaving. I couldn't believe he asked such a ridiculous question. "Of course it will be open!" I told him, and teased him for not having more common sense.

Now, I understand. In Japan the banks are open so infrequently, and even the cash machines have limited hours. It makes no sense to me that the bank would only be open during the hours when most people have to go to work. How can this be, in the country of convenience and efficiency? Now, I have gotten used to the unusual bank hours because luckily there is a bank in the Prefectural Office building where I work on Wednesday mornings.

In America, most ATMs are open 24 hours, and banks are always open on Saturdays. I used to even think that it was inconvenient that they closed mid-afternoon on those days. This weekend, I was listening to National Public Radio news on the internet, and I heard a story about how many American banks are now opening their doors on Sundays as well as Saturdays, to make it even more convenient for people with busy jobs to do their banking. What an idea! I have gotten used to Japanese-style banking and I can usually make it to the ATM before it closes so that I don't find myself on Sunday afternoon with an empty wallet. Still, listening to the news and being reminded of the American way made me a little more nostalgic for the 24-hour conveniences at home.