

MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, July 2023

—Voices of the WGO? Staff and Members of the Volunteer Guide Seminar—

Summer Singalong

When it comes to cross cultural understanding, you might regard it as purely an international issue, but it can also pertain to any situation when you and anybody with a different background or sense of values try to understand one another.

I grew up in Seiyo city in Ehime. This countryside community was the first society to which I was exposed. My family and neighbors influenced not only how my values were formed but also how I perceive the world. And although I left home at the age of 18, I still hear about what happens there from time to time.

One thing that I've noticed is that talking with my mother, who is now in her 80s, can sometimes feel like an exchange between two very different cultures. For example, the small community in which she lives, like most Japanese communities, has customs and traditions that can't be explained away by reason or logic.

In Japan people usually give money to relatives and friends on ceremonial occasions, such as weddings and funerals. Country folk follow this custom with their neighbors too. The other day, a lumber mill near my mother's house burned down. Nobody was hurt in the fire, but the building was a complete loss. The disaster was unprecedented in her community, so a next-door neighbor decided that he would give the mill owner condolence money. Several neighbors also decided to do this as well, and my mother agreed with the amount of money to be given to the mill owner. All the neighbors visited him together to present him with the money. She said, "Everybody is going to do this, so I should do it too." Neighbors in these small communities care about how they are regarded by others and value obligation.

Living in the countryside isn't always relaxing. Neighbors often watch closely each other's behavior. They gossip frequently and hesitate to welcome strangers because of various biases endemic to small communities.

More and more houses in her neighborhood have been abandoned. One of the run-down houses is now inhabited by palm civet, a catlike animal that destroys farmland in the village.

City Hall tries many ways to stop the town's steady process of depopulation, and one of their projects is to make available empty houses for rent. But families of former residents aren't so open to this, because they don't want any trouble that might arise with newcomers. Mom says "I'm afraid of having unknown people living near me. What if they can't get along with us?"

For my mother, living in the countryside is life itself. Even though there are few supermarkets and clinics nearby, she doesn't want to leave the community. I said to her, "Sometime soon, you can move to Matsuyama." She answered, "If I do, who will look after our ancestors' graves?"

"My sister and I moved away from our hometown, got married and now have different family names. Mom still feels responsible as caretaker of our family's cemetery plot. I feel guilty that I didn't keep my father's family name, but at any rate, whenever I go back to hometown, I visit the grave. Mom told me that if one of my children could continue visiting the grave, she'd be so relieved.

When your ideas differ too much from others', you may become narrow minded and shut your ears to others' thoughts and opinions. Or you can try to harmonize with those whose values are superficially different from your own.

Japanese people are probably good at this. However, I think such an attitude might be difficult when cultural differences are also factored into the equation.

What we can do is to listen to each other, admit differences, and talk in order to arrive at better understanding.

(Miwa N.)

A big circle-hug!

Finally, for the first time in three years, we held a live performance.

One Sunday afternoon last month, led by our music director, we had the honor of being the closing act of a piano recital.

Later that night on social media, I shared the photos with a friend of mine who now lives in Montreal.

We met at a concert while she was working as an Assistant Language Teacher in Ozu. I quite often remember her piano performance of "Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence" especially since Ryuichi Sakamoto, a great Japanese musician and composer of the piece, passed away last March. This sad news reminded me of her sensitive touch while playing this popular tune on stage.

On our last chat, she gave me the unexpected news that she would return to Japan on business next year. How nice to have the sort of lively chats in person as we used to have!

For over a decade, I've been taking voice lessons twice a month. Because Covid-19 made any sort of one-on-one lesson difficult, I signed up for remote lessons with a small group. I needed an opportunity to not only use my voice, but to stay in touch with good friends as well.

Even though the epidemic is no longer interfering with social gatherings, I feel more comfortable with these stay-at-home lessons with the same familiar faces.

For the last three years, the number of our choir members has been steadily increasing. And I think the reason why more people are coming to join us and sing with us is because we are now more assured that we are going back to the normal life we had before the epidemic.

I have been appointed Kanji, the organizer of the after-concert party, and so I'm looking for a restaurant to accommodate our group.

Trust me, guys! I can do this.

(Kazuyo Kajiwara)