

MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, February 2025

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

Run, Eat, Drink

Why a marathon in February? Why in the coldest season?

The school where I work, the kids run around the yard during their short break in the mornings. They report to their teacher how many laps they take each day. Since December, all the students have been in practice for a school marathon event this month.

In my whole life, I've come across four marathon lovers.

Aaron was my husband's boss long ago. An epidemiologist and enthusiastic runner, he jogged every morning before working in his vegetable garden. This was his routine, even in freezing Minnesota, during the six hours of winter daylight.

Peter, a Greek-American and a photographer/film director, didn't run himself. Instead, he traveled back and forth between Hollywood and Matsuyama, and proudly told me about the history of the Olympics and the Ancient Greek Marathon.

Theo, a Greek CEO with connections in Mongolia, Russia and the rest of Europe also tackles running with a passion. He completed the Shikoku pilgrimage and will set off on the 230km multi-stage ultra-marathon for 6 days across Uzbekistan in April.

Yasue, a friend of mine, participated in the Okayama Marathon last November and the Castle Run on New Year's morning as well.

She didn't win the lottery to participate in the Ehime Marathon which will be held on Feb 9, instead, she'll be working with the city racing committee as a volunteer.

Sad to say, but none of our family runs at all. My husband enjoys watching the *Ekiden*, in which university students tackle a long-distance road relay over two days. For him, it's not New Year's without Hakone Ekiden. Our daughter doesn't run either, however, she'll be involved in the event as a volunteer ER doctor at the first-aid station.

Here's hoping all 10,000 athletes will enjoy and finish the 42.195 km race safely!

(Kay)

I once saw a commercial for KDDI featuring the then wildly popular boy band "Arashi" but soundtracked by Sex Pistol bassist Sid Vicious's punk cover of "My Way".

Western-style rock star behavior including violence, drug abuse, public drunkenness and even relatively minor traffic citations, is simply not tolerated in Japan. At all.

Sid, on the other hand, was by all accounts a troubled young man who very probably killed his girlfriend and then overdosed on heroin provided by his mother.

KDDI is a cellphone service provider, by the way. All this either constitutes business as usual or the end of history as we know it. I'm not sure which.

But public drunkenness in Japan, as long as you're not a celebrity and thus expected to be a role model for every single person in the country, getting hammered generally comes down on the side of business as usual.

The other night, I was waiting for an elevator. It was taking a while to reach the ground floor.

Finally, the doors opened, and out staggered three office workers with one struggling to carry a fourth, a woman, on his back.

It couldn't have been later than, say, 9PM.

They must have gotten an early start.

But then *nomihodai*, which translates as "drink as much as you can because you only have two hours before they throw you out of the restaurant", is the Japanese equivalent of a Las Vegas smorgasbord. Only guests are filling up on alcohol instead of buffalo wings and cheese fries.

Attend an after work *nomikai* drinking party and have whatever myths you hold dear about Japan and Japanese behavior instantly dispelled.

Initially, you'll notice how, following the opening toast, the noise level in the room suddenly leaps up past pain threshold. Within thirty minutes, everyone starts shouting even though they are sitting opposite one another.

If a member of upper management is present, throw frantic sounding laughter into the mix whenever the boss says something jolly.

All this makes conversation at other tables well nigh impossible.

Soon, the men will be wearing their neckties as headbands, and you'll wonder how that shy, quiet woman from the personnel department ever got the reputation of being either quiet or shy.

Which reminds me, many years ago in Iwate prefecture, I attended a welcoming party for new staff of which I was one. As we went about finding our seats, coworkers warned me.

"You don't want to sit next to Fumi-Chan. "

Fumi seemed to me like a pleasant enough, if rather shy and serious, young woman.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Trust me. It's not a good idea," was the reply.

Then everyone immediately proceeded to maneuver around the table in such a way that the only seat left vacant for me was right alongside Fumi. Fumi glanced over at me and looked stricken.

An hour and two or three tumblers of all-you-can-drink sake later, Ms. Fumi had climbed onto my lap and was howling, "I have no boyfriend, and I am lonely!"

No one seemed particularly surprised by this.

In fact, as I was told later, no one was really sure if she was actually drunk or not.

She had, after all, recently broken up with her boyfriend and probably wanted to let off a little emotional steam.

In the West, a man (at least) is judged by his ability to hold his liquor and conduct himself nominally as a gentleman.

Whereas in Japan, one's ability to ride a stolen bicycle down a stairwell with a coworker sitting on the handlebars is prerequisite to enjoying public drinking.

And because drunken behavior is essential to enjoying public drinking, whether one is actually drunk or not is unimportant.

Thinking about this too long, will probably drive me to drinking.

You're buying.

(Editor)

I'm very interested in food, from daily meals to more exotic dishes.

Wild game, deer and boar, is nature's gift, and delicacies such as live octopus and fish prostate always go well with alcohol.

Do you think it took courage for me to eat frog for the first time? Nope. It was tasty.

A satisfying mealtime always brings joy to life. I didn't always have such a good appetite.

When I was in first grade, I had a tough time eating the school lunches that were provided, so much so, that I sometimes refused to go to school.

I was just an energetic kid but without much of an appetite. The other students had already finished eating and playing. Afterwards they cleaned the classroom, but I had to sit at my desk and finish my lunch with a spoon.

The female teacher was in her 40s and extremely strict.

"You are small, so you should eat well. I'm saying this thinking about your future."

One day, she dragged to the nursery school from which I had recently graduated.

"You can't finish your school lunch, so go back to nursery school. You have no right to stay in primary school."

I was embarrassed, and when the nursery teacher saw me curled up by the shoe box clutching a piece of bread, I turned my back.

No matter how hard I tried to eat, I couldn't finish it. I finally threw the tasteless, dry "koppe pan" into the creek running alongside the school and went back to class.

This happened to me several times.

I was ashamed that I had to lie that I had finished my lunch in order to go back to class, and in that moment, I felt my heart becoming twisted. School lunch dishes were often terrible.

"Yakisoba" noodles were soggy and fuzzy. When I tried to force down the bland noodles, I gagged, and they came back up.

My teacher demanded that I eat my mess, so I pinched my nose and carried the vomit into my mouth. I vomited again. Some boys shouted, "It stinks!"

My heart was deeply hurt.

That winter, the teacher was absent from school for one day in order to attend a meeting or something. I felt light because I wasn't forced to eat lunch. But the next day was worse than ever.

"Did anyone leave their school lunches yesterday? Raise your hand, honestly. "

There were other students besides me who hadn't eaten lunch, and none of us were allowed to put our hands down for the remaining forty-five minutes of class.

My arm went numb. Other children screamed.

When I couldn't hold my arm up any longer and put my hand down, she came to me with an angry expression, grabbed my hand and yanked it up in the air again.

I can't forget her cruel treatment even now.

She never realized how scared I felt at lunchtime, or how painful the experience had been.

I was shunned and labeled a black sheep simply because I couldn't eat fast enough.

When I look back on my early school days, I realize such abuse of students by teachers was an everyday occurrence.

Corporal punishment in classes, violence, harassment as part of extracurricular activities and excessive discipline of students were part of school life.

It's one thing to guide your students for the better and quite another to subject them to selfish, irrational demands to achieve certain educational ideals. To scold or hurt a student just because the student is unable to meet those demands is wrong. But some teachers didn't realize that.

I hope there aren't any teachers like that in Japan today. If there are, they must be dismissed and in some cases arrested for child abuse.

No matter how small a child is, he or she has an established sense of self and inherent dignity.

Japanese people have a high sense of discipline and emphasize group behavior, both important

parts of our culture.

However, is the dignity of individuals sufficiently protected?

(Miwa N.)