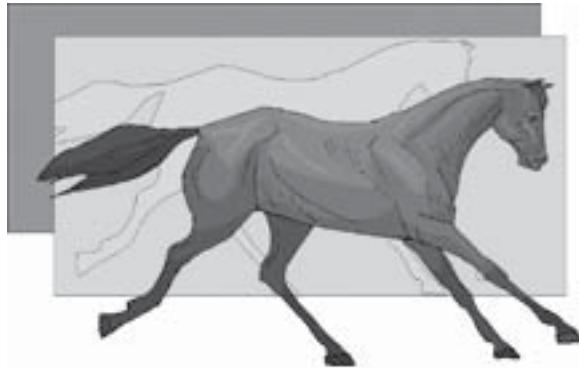


1990



Uma 午

Year of the Horse

Social, talented, independent, honest, quick-thinking

THOUGHTS FROM JAPAN

January 30, 1990

Happy New Year! Or *Akemashite Omedetoo Gozaimasu!* (ahkee-mahsh-tay oh-med-eh-toe go-zyee-moss-ooh).

Seeing in the Japanese New Year was fascinating. New Year's is the single most important holiday here. Its religious and social significance equals our American Christmas. The Japanese are busy the last few weeks of the year cleaning in every way imaginable. Every corner, nook and cranny gets dusted and cleaned. Debts and obligations are settled. Any torn, broken or expired items are thrown away. Special decorations of pine, bamboo and straw, *kadomatsu*, are placed in pairs at front doors, shop entrances and factory and school gates. Even cars get a special decoration. On New Year's Eve, work ceases and each person greets the New Year with everything clean, fresh and in order. At midnight, 108 temple bells begin to peal, each bell wiping away a human sin or evil. As the *joya no kané* bells toll, the Japanese eat *soba*, long buckwheat noodles, to symbolize long life.

In the wee hours of January 1, or sometime later in the day, most Japanese go to a shrine to pray for a good year, dressed in their best clothes or *kimono*. In holiday tribute, most stores are closed from December 31 until at least January 3, sometimes January 7 in the old tradition. On New Year's Day afternoon, we walked to *Meiji Jingu*, the beautiful, serene shrine where the emperor and royal family worship. As

we entered the park-like outer grounds, we flowed along with hundreds of people. The flow grew tighter and denser as we got closer, and 30 feet from the shrine, it was impossible to move a micro-inch in any direction. This was worse than the subway pusher cram-jam. Claustrophobia set in. I didn't know whether I would faint or scream; no matter, I had to get out. We escaped the Japanese way: by saying "excuse me" in Japanese and making a chop-chop hand gesture to cut a path. People let us through, thank God. Afterwards, along with thousands of Japanese, we bought a *hamaya*, a wooden arrow with bells, and an *ema*, a wooden tag with the 1990 zodiac sign, the horse. The *hamaya* and *ema* are displayed in the home all year and will be exchanged for new ones next year. The old *hamaya* and *ema* are cremated to ensure no old evils come into a new year.

On January 2, an NML colleague's family invited us for *Osechi-ryoori*, a special New Year's dinner. The family included her two sisters, their husbands, and children aged 20, 17, and 11. We were nervous because our colleague wouldn't be there to translate; she would be at her mother's. It was also our first time in any Japanese home. We memorized the Japanese New Year greeting, and just in case, I wrote it on my palm in ink. When we entered, all seven of the family bowed and wished us "Happy New Year" in Japanese, then shook our hands and said "Happy New Year" in English. We said our Japanese greeting. I peeked at my palm to make sure we'd said it correctly, but the ink had smeared.

The house had been renovated eight years prior and boasted central heating, still unusual in much of Japan. The main floor had a sitting room with a *tatami*/reed mat floor, color television in one corner, computer in opposite corner, and the special *tokonoma* alcove for flowers, a scroll or religious statues. In the center of the room, a low table held the special New Year's *toso*/spiced saké, *mikan*/tangerines, and *mochi*/doughy rice cakes. Adjacent was the dining room with a Western-style table and one wall of built-in cupboards and shelves. A powder room and small kitchen completed the first floor. Although it was compact, the living-dining area was pleasant, with many pictures painted by our hostess and a profusion of pretty plants.

We ate and drank for six hours. *Osechi* means one by one. I quit

counting the *osechi* courses after five. Each course arrived on a special, beautiful dish. Most of the courses were cold, prepared before New Year's Day to give the women time to enjoy family and friends. Among the many foods we enjoyed were sea bream for long life, herring roe for fertility, red and white fish cakes for prosperity, rice kernels for a rich harvest, black beans for health and cooked chestnuts for wealth. As if those weren't enough, we also ate crab, prawns, lobster, flounder, squid, chicken grilled in soy, cooked seaweed and turnips, noodles and boiled vegetables. We drank warm *saké*, followed by hot Chinese black tea, then hot Japanese green tea. We spoke as much Japanese as we could. They spoke as much English as they knew. All of us pointed, gestured and used dictionaries. There wasn't a single time in the six hours that we felt stymied by language. After the main courses, the kids played computer games and *karuta*, traditional card games, while the adults continued to eat, talk, drink, talk and talk some more. Some holiday practices are the same everywhere.

We had a wonderful time, honored to have been invited. It is unusual for foreigners to be invited to Japanese homes. The average home here is tiny compared to Western homes, and there is seldom room to entertain many people, especially people almost twice as large as the Japanese. More important, the Japanese home is a sanctuary for family and close friends. Imagine inviting two foreigners who don't speak English into your home to share Christmas dinner. The Japanese New Year is a quiet, introspective time to be shared with those they love most. Although we missed those near and dear to us, we have had some excellent experiences, such as this one, in our new land. We had the best of both worlds.



Both Steve and I were thrilled to hear from so many people over the holidays. We were surprised—and grateful—at how many people took the time and trouble to write us here. A letter in the mailbox any day of the year is truly a gift.

We have been in Tokyo almost five months. The time has flown. We

feel comfortable getting around, going places, and exploring as much as time, money and energy permit. We both continue to study Japanese two days a week and have seen much improvement. We have shed our initial embarrassment at making mistakes and use our Japanese as much as possible. Our interest in the language, customs and people has resulted in many good experiences.

Living on foreign soil helps us think about people and life in a new light. Basic human values are important everywhere in the world. No matter where we are, what matters most are people. The caring of family and friends cannot be measured in minutes, miles or dollars. We have each other. We have a place in the world family. I have always believed that each of us can make a difference in the world, and living overseas confirms it. What each of us does every day matters in our own lives—but it also has a rippling influence in our neighborhoods, our towns and cities, our country, and ultimately, the globe.

JAPANESE AESTHETICS



Kongoobu-ji Temple Gardens at Kooya-san, where rock and raked sand symbolize earth, mountains, sea and life.



A small sand garden at *Daitoku-ji Temple* in Kyoto uses Zen essence to show truth of the universe, positive/negative, male/female, heaven/earth (above left). Even a simple temple path at *Daitoku-ji* is a work of art (above right).



The Japanese excel with landscape stroll gardens, such as *Shukkei-en Garden* in Hiroshima.



Matsushima, a crop of rock islets covered with ancient sea-gnarled pines, is revered and admired for its singular natural beauty. This panorama, one of Japan's most famous views, is a favorite for meditation.