

A gaijin living in Japan (written in 1993) by Martha Ogasawara

This morning at breakfast I had one of those flashes that hit me now and then. Our breakfast was a typical one – rice, miso soup, nori, tsukemono and fish. We had a friend visiting and the three of us were sitting on the floor around the table drinking green tea and talking about an upcoming party we were having. It was going to be a 月見 – a moon-viewing party. My husband was going to make the 行灯 – paper lanterns with candles inside to light the yard and a friend who was good at calligraphy was going to write some appropriate haiku about the moon on the outside of them. My ikebana teacher was going to do a big arrangement of the 7 fall flowers and another friend was going to perform a special tea ceremony that's done just at moon-viewings. During the tea ceremony, I and two other friends were going to play the koto and shamisen as background music. The party is going to be held next week and we were finalizing the details. I was debating whether or not to wear my yukata.

Anyway, to get back to the sudden flash, every now and then, for no special reason, it's like there's a third person in my mind who looks down at me and says, "What am I doing here, and how did I end up living like this? Why am I eating fish for breakfast and sitting on the floor?" It's not a judgmental sort of thing, but more one of surprise. Back in high school, if someone had told me that I would end up marrying a Japanese and spending the rest of my life in Japan, I would have just laughed. I didn't even know where Japan was.

It wasn't until I went to Earlham College that I became interested in Japan. Even so, I majored in Japanese studies not so much because of a profound interest in things Japanese, but more because after spending my junior year at Waseda University and accumulating all those Japan-related credits, it was the only major I could complete in 4 years.

I've now lived in Japan for 17 years. In a few more years, I'll have lived half my life in Japan and half my life in the U.S.. We live in a traditional-style house – no chairs or beds, and eat mostly Japanese food. Almost all of my friends are Japanese and except when I'm teaching, I seldom speak English. I take lessons in koto, shamisen, ikebana and pen shuji. I'm not saying all this to brag, just to give an idea of my lifestyle. This has not all been done to try and prove anything. It's all something I take for granted, and I can go for long periods without even remembering that I'm a "gaijin" (foreigner).

However, people around me always seem to be totally amazed, as if I've accomplished some unbelievable feat by living a normal Japanese life. That's something that I have trouble understanding. Why would I come to Japan and live an American lifestyle? What's the point? True, I didn't come to Japan because of some undying love for things Japanese. I came because the person I ended up marrying is Japanese. But since I'm here, I may as well adapt.

And it's not as if everything I do is traditionally Japanese. I'm very involved in square dancing, and what's more American than that? I didn't take it up to reaffirm my American roots though. I just like to dance.

Still, when I go back to the U.S. to visit, I realize how much I have changed. It's nothing very obvious, like mixing up my r's and l's (although the first few days back, people do give me a hard time about my slightly stilted English 😊). It's more a question of values, of the way I perceive things. I catch myself looking at things like an outsider. When I tell people that I live in Japan, they inevitably ask, "What for?". And I'm never sure what to tell them. It's not for a reason, Japan is my home.