



My Turn!

Before I moved to Japan I read many books about Japanese society and culture, and was particularly interested in their descriptions of typical family and community life. I read about how the pre-war situation with the very strict *tonari-gumi* organizations had evolved into the much more loose *chonai-kai* that operate in most districts these days.

When I arrived here with my family and we moved into an apartment in Hamura, in the western outskirts of Tokyo, we joined the community association. I thought that it was important to do so, because I was a little bit apprehensive that - as a foreigner - I would be considered an 'outsider' in the neighbourhood. That didn't happen at all; there were many new apartment buildings in the area, and thus many new residents. I suppose that the long-time residents of the town, the ones who owned the land on which our apartments were built, thought of us newcomers as 'outsiders', but of course that didn't bother any of us.

During the fifteen years that I lived there, our family took part in many activities organized by the community association - digging for sweet potatoes, enjoying sports day, and pounding rice cakes at new year, just to mention a few.

Five years ago, when I moved to the house I purchased in Ome, the next town, I was asked by one of my new neighbours if I wished to join the community association. I wasn't quite sure whether I should or not; I certainly wasn't worried about being an 'outsider' any more, and with my children now 'flown away', there didn't seem much point to it.

But I didn't want to seem unfriendly, and was also a bit afraid that - because I live alone these days - I would end up having no communication at all with the neighbours. So I agreed to become a member, even though I knew that I wouldn't be joining them to dig for sweet potatoes every fall!

Ome is a much older town than Hamura and there are far fewer apartments in the area. This means that most of the residents have known each other for a long time, indeed since they were children in many cases. Living in such a place is a fairly new experience for me; for practically my entire life, I have lived in 'new' communities, and when I was a child we once moved into a new home while the whole neighbourhood was still under construction!

So of course all my neighbours know all the gossip and 'secrets' of the community, while I know nothing. This suits me fine, as I'm not a very gregarious type, and my participation in community activities so far has been limited to helping pull the decorated carts around town on festival days, and joining in the annual 'big cleanup day' that comes every spring.

Late in March though, my neighbour came over to talk one evening - a visit I had been anticipating. He explained to me that his turn as 'block leader' was coming to an end at the end of the month, and ... yes ... I was next in line. So in due course, I received from him the clipboard we use to circulate the community notices, along with the *kamban* - the name plate - that proclaims my status, and which now hangs outside my front door.

I'm still not quite sure exactly what this job will entail during the course of the year, but I hope that if there is anything important in the job, somebody will let me know what to do!

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