

A Story a Week ...

... from woodblock printmaker David Bull

Getting Better

This is one story from the 'Summer Suite' - a collection of stories written during the summer of 1994, when our family spent a month staying at the home of my late father-in-law, in a small village in Mie Prefecture.

I've been here in Japan long enough now that it is possible for me to notice changes taking place in this society. During the first couple of years here, everything was fresh and new to me, and my only basis for comparison was between Canada and Japan. But I've gradually grown accustomed to things here, and can now see some differences between the Japan of eight years ago when I arrived, and the Japan of the present.

During our first summer-time trip down to Grandad's country village, I was quite shocked at the amount of garbage I saw in the river where we swam every day, surrounded by the crowds of sun-browned elementary school kids. I don't say this to reinforce your perception of Canada as a wonderful, green, clean country, for there are certainly no shortage of beer cans in the rivers there too, but that this beautiful swimming area right in the centre of the village should be so spoiled with junk, was quite a disappointment for me.

We didn't say anything to those kids, and we didn't chastise, but one day, after a week or so of swimming surrounded by garbage, we went back to the house, grabbed some large plastic bags, came back to the river, and started filling them up with trash. We noticed three kinds of reactions from the kids playing in the river. Most of them either didn't notice what we were doing, or simply ignored us. Another group, just a few, stared and pointed at us, and made some "Henna gaijin" type of comments. But a third group, also just a few, started to help, collecting stuff and bringing it to help fill our bags.

From then on, we made this a regular habit, and always returned from swimming trips carrying bags of assorted garbage, and I suppose the village gradually got used to our behaviour. Year after year, there was always lots to pick up. The garbage was mostly made up of a few standard items: styrofoam noodle cups and plastic snack food packages thrown away by the little kids, coffee, beer cans, and cigarette packages from their fathers, and third (and most disturbing) large plastic sacks that had contained agricultural chemicals, obviously discarded by farmers whose plots bordered the river.

I've been using 'past tense' verbs, but now let's switch to the present. How is the river now? Well, as all but brand-new arrivals in Japan know, the situation has improved markedly. In recent years the amount of garbage we bring home from the river has greatly decreased, and we no longer automatically take the plastic bags with us when we go swimming. It's not perfect by any means. The first type of garbage is still to be seen here and there, but the second is quite rare, and I haven't seen any of the third at all for a number of years now. Please don't think that I'm trying to take any credit for this improvement. We're only in the village for a few weeks in any given year, and this gradual cleaning-up of Japan is a much wider phenomenon than just this one little river pool.

I understand that the Tokyo Olympics back in the 60's was a major turning point. Friends tell me that the Tama River near my home in Hamura was an absolute garbage heap before that time, being heaped with old cars, tires, furniture, household garbage, and all manner of junk. But a new ethic has gradually replaced the

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old one, following that initial stimulus of wanting to show a clean face to the international visitors. The old cars have been replaced by cherry trees, and the area is now the 'pride and joy' of Hamura.

And of course, that's why they keep it clean, because it has been transformed from 'soto' to 'uchi', from something 'outside' that belonged to no one, to something 'inside' that belongs to someone, in this case, the city people. The next step is obvious ... to enlarge this viewpoint to include in the 'uchi' classification, not only one's own village or town, but each road, river and mountain in Japan. And then further, to every square inch of this entire planet. This process is well under way. Let's all do what we can to give it a boost.

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