



## Greenhouse People

The other evening, Sadako and I went for dinner at a friend's house. A couple of times a year they invite us over, along with a few other regular couples, and we spend a pleasant evening around the table, eating the tasty dishes the ladies have prepared, hearing bits of news about what each of us has been up to in the intervening months, and generally just enjoying a relaxed conversation together.

We're all of a similar age, and after many years of meeting like this have come to know each other pretty well, so the conversations don't usually involve many exchanges of strong opinion. It wasn't always like that; when I first started enjoying these evenings, getting on for twenty years ago, no matter what topic came up they were always asking me for my opinion on it, and I was always eager to reply along the lines of "Oh no, we don't do it like that .... we ..."

It seems though, that I must have been reasonable in my criticisms of Japanese society, because they always kept inviting me back, and in any case, they all now have quite extensive experience of overseas travel, so I am not the interesting 'window on the west' to them that I once was.

But there are still plenty of differences to explore, and the other evening, an interesting one came up. The talk had turned to our daily routines - exercising, sleeping, and such - and one of the men mentioned that his alarm was set to 'just before six', which he then amended to 'exactly 5:55, actually ...' Some others then chimed in with their own similar data, and it became apparent that most of the people around the table had quite tightly structured lives. One man woke early in the morning, prepared breakfast for his wife, then dropped her off at the station; another took his 'constitutional' around town at the same time every evening, and so on and so forth.

Somebody asked me what time I got up in the morning, and I had to reply that it varies from day to day. Our conversation then moved on to other things, but I couldn't help mentally relating that topic to something we had touched on earlier. We had been chatting about fruits and vegetables being grown in greenhouses, and I realized that there was a clear analogy here to our personal habits.

I said that my waking time varies, and this seems to follow a roughly seasonal pattern. In summer, I am up quite early - certainly by six - usually have a short afternoon nap in my warm room, then head to bed around midnight. But if you were to check in mid-winter, you would see that I am still up somewhat later than that each night, get up quite a bit later in the morning - perhaps around eight - and don't take a nap. My friends on the other hand, keep to a consistent routine throughout the year. Y-san's alarm clock is permanently set at 5:55.

My home is unheated, and I vividly feel the seasons all the time. On a winter evening, it is difficult to climb out of my warm 'kotatsu' to head for a chilly bed, and then just as difficult in the morning to get out of the now-warm bed. Taking a nap in this cold house is also impractical. But my friends are living in 'greenhouses', and feel no such influences on their habits. In winter they turn the heat up; in summer they switch on their air conditioners; and their alarm clocks stay turned to the same setting throughout the year.

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(I have to admit of course, that the fact some of them have 'regular' jobs certainly has an influence on their schedules. In my case, nobody is demanding that I be present in my workshop at the same time every morning!)

When I told them about this idea, and called them hausu ningen (people growing up in a greenhouse), we all laughed at the joke, but I do wonder if this is something we should be concerned about. Although it does seem that human beings are very adaptable, and can learn to live in tightly regulated 'greenhouse' environments, do you think we perhaps lose some of our 'delicious taste' by doing so?

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