

Gendai Nogyo November
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It's 6 am you're probably still sleeping. I hear the deer out in the forest calling to one another. Birds are greeting the morning with song. Ducks on the pond are making their semi-annual visit before continuing on their journey. Winter will soon be here. Today's letter I wanted to write about "Bono chan" and our search for whether we belonged together and if so where will we find a place to belong. Before I get into that you will perhaps wonder where did the name "Bono" come from? Your grandmother's real name is Aki. When I first arrived in Japan I was intrigued by the sport of Sumo wrestling. It was an interesting sport to me. It wasn't always the biggest and the strongest wrestler that wins. Mainoumi was a quick small wrestler who often won by just getting out of the way of the initial attack and then pushing the big wrestler out of the ring from behind. There was one wrestler though that was big and his name was Akebono. He shared no physical qualities with your grandmother. He was over 2 meters tall and weighted 215 kilos but his ring name Akebono was close to Aki's so I started to call her "Akibono" and the name just stuck. I digress.

Relationships are complicated at the best of times. What made our relationship even more complicated was a difference in our language and cultures. Words are one way that we communicate with each other. I didn't know any Japanese and Akiko knew limited English. I think we learned fairly early in our relationship that there can be a difference between what I think Akiko said and what she meant. Communication was a slow process but this slow process led to understanding. We got to know each other. We learned what we each care about. Bono since being a young child wanted to be a farmer. I too had a deep passion for agriculture. Bono wanted to share God's love for the world with others and so did I. But even though we understood one another and we shared similar passions for agriculture and even a similar religious upbringing in the Mennonite Church was that enough to think about committing our lives together when our homes are nearly 9,000 kms apart?

In the Fall of 1992 Bono returned to Japan and I left Canada and headed back to Nebraska. Canada was no longer my home. I had no idea what it would be like when I got there. I had memories of my home and the people who influenced my life who lived there. But I had also had profound experiences in Canada transforming the way in which I thought about the food system and community life. On top of all of this was I couldn't forget about Akiko. I knew I wanted to have a family, I wanted to be part of a community, and I wanted a place to belong. Would it be possible for our stories to come together and share in a common journey? I didn't bother just sitting back wondering. I acted. I had come back to my hometown because I wanted to be a part of a community. My parents gave me a house to live in on one of their farms. I continued to write letters to Akiko and in March of 1993 I came to Japan to visit her. I stayed with Akiko's family for six months and we were trainees on a farm not too far from her home. During this time Akiko and I had many discussions about our future together. I loved Akiko but I felt it was more important for me to go home and be part of the community I was a born into. Akiko shook my hand and with tears in her eyes she wished me well thinking that this was the end of our relationship. I didn't want our relationship to end but I knew deep inside of me that I needed to go back and I wanted Akiko to be a part of that journey together. I had no idea what it would be like to be back in my home town. What I did know was that I wanted our family to be rooted in a place and a community of people we shared life with. I promised Akiko that we would discern together a new path if this was not a good place for us to live.

We were married in Sapporo in January of 1994 and in the Spring of that year we started the first CSA farm in Nebraska. Our farm was called Just Vegetables. The name was inspired by Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for

justice, for they will be filled.” Justice is a big word. It means treating people fairly and doing what is right. The promise is that God will take care of us. We grew 30 varieties of vegetables surrounded by corn fields. No one in our area grew vegetables. The surrounding farms were huge and spray planes flew overhead during the summer. We had around 30 members for our CSA and we traveled to the farmer’s market in Lincoln once a week. We enjoyed working together and just being together. We noticed, however, that people do not eat many varieties of vegetables and they do not eat at home very much either. People in my hometown didn’t share their lives together in the same way that I remembered growing up. Farm sizes had gotten much bigger and there was less need for people’s help because machines do all of the work. Economic logic and technology had more influence on how my community lived their lives than did the religious teachings that had informed this community since its foundation. I began to grow cynical and I didn’t like it because it does no good for myself or for others.

In August of that first year “Nai Nai”, your great grandmother, visited us and shared news that the Mennonite Churches in Sapporo were looking for farmland to start a Christian community in Hokkaido. We began to wonder whether we belonged in Henderson. So we began to explore different options that fall after the season ended. We met Norman and Ruth Kraus who had been missionaries in Japan and we talked about the possibility of coming to Japan for 5 years to help get Menno Village started. Norman told us, “if you go to Japan for five years, nothing will happen. If you go, you have to commit yourself for 10 years.” We thought and we prayed. We wrote a letter to the churches in Sapporo and they extended us an invitation. By the end of November we said our goodbyes to my parents and headed back to Japan.

As we travelled back to Japan Akiko was pregnant with our first child. That child was your father. Coming to Japan I could not speak the language but I trusted that God was going before Bono chan and I and bringing us to a land to which we could belong much like God leading the Hebrew slaves in the wilderness in the hope of reaching the promised land. What will things be like here? I had no idea. In many ways it was like starting life all over again with the additional challenge of not being able to read, write or speak the Japanese. What I have learned is that there is no perfect place to live and life is not a dress rehearsal. I’ll share with you somethings about our early days at Menno Village next time. Would you like to come over to play?