Dear Ayame, December, 2024
Raymond Epp
December 7, 2024

Dear Ayame,

I am sitting at the guest house of the seminary I studied at18 years ago. Your dad was here during that time and studied at the elementary school here. Many good memories. I'm still looking for a penguin which you requested before I left Hokkaido for this trip. I wanted to tell you a little bit about what it was like when Bono chan and I first arrived to Japan to begin our lives at Menno Village.

Menno Village was created before we had even arrived. Mennonite Church members had agreed to purchase the land and had given it a name hoping to start a community of retired people and the handicapped. By the time we arrived nearly all of the original memberswho supported the project dropped away. They feared losing all of their money because they had no hope in the future of farming in Japan. Bonochan and I had no money but two families decided to provide the financial backing to support the beginning of Menno Village. We decided that we wanted to create a farm in which we would be modeling a new way of farming that: invited young people to learn about ecological agriculture and connected city people with the source of their food. It would be a place that practiced hospitality. We would invite anyone to sit down and share food with us.

I vividly remember the first day that we visited the farm. It was a cold late November day 30 years ago. Snow lightly covered the ground. Tufts of winter wheat poked through the snow cover. It was a bleak day. I had this feeling that something awful had happened on this farm only to learn a few years later that the Obachan had committed suicide by drinking a pesticide earlier that fall. Debts and the thoughts of being severed from place drove her to dispair.

Through that first winter I spent many days fixing up the house repairing the rotted floors and broken walls. Members of the church in Sapporo came on weekends to clean and to paint. It was a fun time working together and sharing onegiri at lunch. One day in late February while working alone in the house I heard a knock at the door. Who could that be? I don't know anyone. Two older Japanese men stood outside as I opened the door. They were smiling and the older of the two said in English, "Hello. Nice to meet you." I had no idea who they were but they said, "Come." So I went with them. They lived just two houses away from Menno Village. Nakano Tsutomo san was the oldest of the two. He had been an agricultural trainee in California in the early 1950's and still remembered English from his youth. They quizzed me about what I thought about Japan and my thinking about farming and butsudan. Having met their approval Tsutomo san offered me some advice, "If you have come to Japan just to farm like everyone else does in Japan you may as well go back to America. I want you to do something different and interesting. "Wow", I thought to myself. That is not the way most Japanese people think. Conformity, I thought, was the norm. We had an interest in connecting people through food, creating relationships and caring for the soil. Would this qualify in doing something interesting? We thought we wuld give it a try. But learning how to farm in a new country is a big challenge. We are grateful for the farmers in our neighborhood. Without them our beginnings at Menno Village would have been ver different.

Nakano Yuji san is the farmer next door neighbor. When we first arrived he called all of the neighborhood farmers together to create a support group for me. Kondo san became my potato sensei, Uesaka san was assigned to be my rice growing sensei and Yamazaki san, well, I was told just to watch him because he had this amazing seense of timing. He knew when it was the right time to till his fields and he together with his wife were an amazing team. I observed and learned from their ability to accomplish an incredible amount of work with

seemingly minimal effort. They were highly organized and their farm looked like a well tended garden. Masuda san had this uncanny ability to know when we would be covering our greenhouses with plastic. He mysteriously showed up and lent a hand and then just slipped away just like he had come.
Your daddy was born that first year. I still remember holding him in my arms for the first time. The first words that came from my mouth were the words of Jesus, “Peace be with you”. It is a greeting between members that is often repeated in Christian worship. I wished for my son to grow up being surrounded by the presence of God’s peace. We thought long and hard about a name and we gave him the name Kazutomo. I like that name. He spent alot of time with us as a child and by the time he was two he could name the vegetables that he saw growing in the field.

It was rather a strange time being in Japan. I was, I think, the first foreign farmer in Naganuma. I couldn’t speak the language hardly at all. I was too tall to hide in a crowd and my brown hair and blue eyes made it all too obvious I was not Japanese. I received attention for what people could see and what was different; my height, my hair color and my eyes. I didn’t want that. I wanted to be known and I wanted Menno Village to be known rather for what all people need and long for; love, meaningful work, a place to belong. Bono chan was a wonderful partner in that regard and also members of the church who joined us in the early years to host visitors and volunteers sharing food around our table. I was putting my roots into the ground; this place was becoming home.

Ayame chan, as you grow up you may be like a dandelion seed that floats in the wind or you may be like the seed of natane that falls driectly to the ground when the pod shatters. Whether you drift far from home or you choose to stay near to Menno Village my hope and prayer is that you will find love and be a loving person, that you will find meaningful work, and a community to belong. Life really is meaningless without these.