

Dear All

About a year ago I wrote several of these letters and then silence. No trips to Asia of course. I still haven't been, at least not in an airplane, though the connections remain strong.

Our Berkeley neighborhood gingko sent me back to Japan this afternoon, setting the timing of this particular letter.

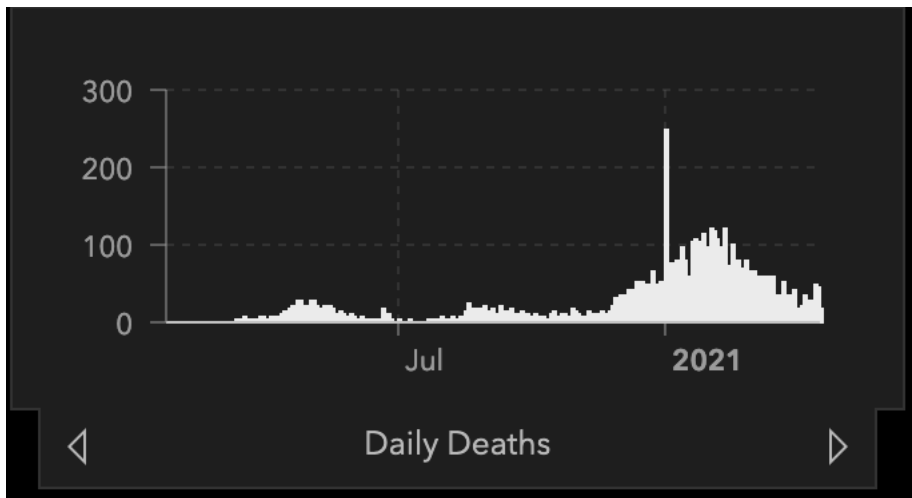
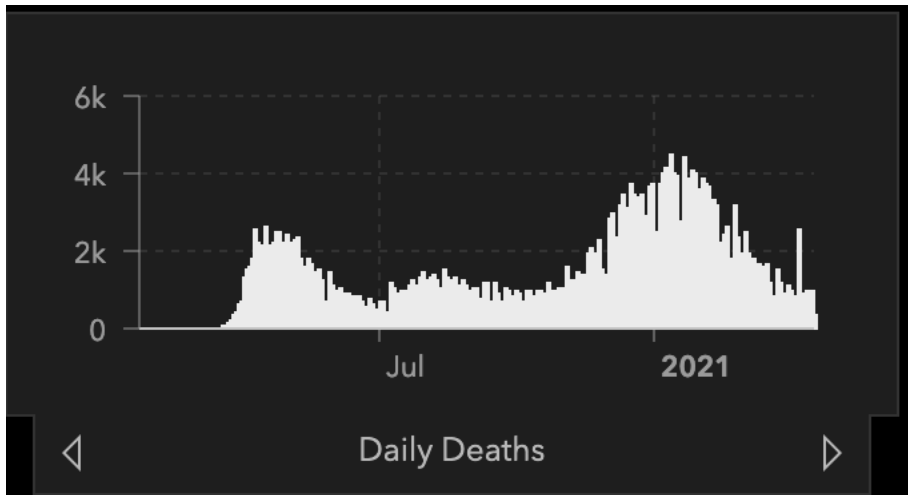


We have view of it through our bedroom window. The sky may be quintessential California but on our first visit to Japan we learned to see the beginning of young leaves as a season all in its own right. So a Gasho to the ginkgo's reminder that another year has gone by and here's a fresh new beginning. Another Gasho to Hannah Arendt whose assertion that natality — the fact that each of us was new born, never born before — matters at least as much if not more than our inevitable mortality. And a smile of delight at two new babes arriving this spring, thanks to the sisters of Monica, our daughter-in-law.

There have been so many deaths this year. Over a year ago when I wrote the first of my COVID letters, Japan seemed to be taking a quite distinct path through the COVID crisis, facing only a comparatively minuscule number of deaths. Proportionately

speaking, and since last summer in comparison to the USA that is still true. Our death rate is dropping now, perhaps even as low as 700 a day but we have rarely known fewer than 1000 Americans dying every single day in recent months, while in Japan there have been only a couple of weeks when they even faced deaths breaking the "100 a day" barrier. We have lost over 500,000 people. They with over 1/3 our population have lost less than 10,000. It is a remarkable fact though the country rarely makes the AMAZING COVID handling lists with Taiwan and New Zealand.

US Deaths daily count  
Japanese deaths daily count



Enough about Japanese exceptionalism in COVID case loads. By now this story is pretty widely acknowledged and the explanations are varied but not way out of line with other kinds of Japanese traditions.

What is surprising is that, despite these very low current death rates and case loads, Japan is facing severe international scrutiny.

Scrutiny because the Japanese government and its Olympic committee are still planning to host the 2020 (now the 2021) international Olympics. This August, in melting humidity and overpowering heat, athletes from around the world are still planning to arrive in Tokyo, actually all over Japan given their scattered venues, as the cry goes out: Let the Games begin.

Again by comparison this is an exceptional Olympics because, although athletes are supposed to come, the audience will not. No international ticket holders will be allowed into the country. I haven't heard whether Japanese people will be allowed to attend in person, but foreigners for sure are excluded.

An image crossed my mind. Perhaps we should call these the Tokugawa Olympics instead of the Tokyo Olympics. Tokugawa were the governing Shogun family who for 250 years, from around 1600 excluded all foreigners from Japan. All, but a small band of Dutch and Chinese traders allowed to anchor off the coast at Nagasaki, and the occasional official embassy from neighboring Korea. In Japanese history books these years are called "The Great Peace" not because they stayed out of international conflict, but because they brought to a complete halt their centuries of intra-Japan warfare between the families in the nobility. The Samurai? In medieval times they were the combatant warriors, retainers allied with a specific noble family. In the Great Peace they found themselves unemployed; some took up crafts and others just got lazy.

Many Japanese thoroughly dislike the prospect of these Olympics, partly for economic reasons, but also because the arrival of the athletes will break this recent one year of Peace. In the last few weeks, in the UK, Brits have been told they shouldn't plan summer holidays in France or Spain. Essential travel only. It's been a headline issue for quite a few days raising more than a little ire among the general public. Japan has faced the opposite, the prospect of international flights arriving leaves many in the country more than a little concerned.

## ON ANOTHER MATTER



In Japan as here in the USA, for most of us the last year has asked people to learn how to fill our time in new ways. My closest friend, a woman who loves international travel and speaks gracious English, was mourning no longer teaching her “in home” cooking classes in Tokyo. Visitors would come from all over once or twice a week and learn how to make gyoza or ramen or, in my case, home made miso. Without thinking I suggested she could teach me over zoom and thus began a splendid and gently growing inter time-zone cooking class. We began as three, doing one class of Japanese cooking. At the end Bob, the third, suggested he could teach a central European meal. Then I added a British menu and so without a set plan, we began teaching and learning how to cook together every 4-6 weeks. In time the group added a professional desert cook based in Buffalo, Bob’s sister and mother in Wisconsin and another Japanese cook in Tokyo. This coming week we’re back in Japan. Fried Tofu among other delicacies.

My great triumph was to learn to make and then teach others how to make British pork pies. Tomoko loves them, learned to love them during the years her husband’s

architectural firm assigned them to London, and I love them too. Having spent a good deal of time during this COVID year catching up on the Great British Bakeoff, I felt able to learn to make them and our local butcher here in Berkeley sells the lard which is pretty important for the pastry. So, I taught Pork (and vegetarian and chicken) Pies and Rob's favorite, a chocolate mousse.

My moods in the last few weeks had begun to resemble the roller-coaster ride I first got a sense of the year we were trying to move out of our long time Olympia lives. We thought back then that one year of constant riding was plenty and then came COVID. For the most part I have found these times more tedious than dramatic but as COVID Year One came to an end I began to wonder about myself. It turns out that allowing the nomad a little time checking out airfares and possible destinations helped ground me. Then in the email an acceptance for an online conference, my presentation to be on Japan and COVID, and then today the Gingko spoke up.

This human world will never "return to normal" of that I am pretty clear. But that doesn't mean it cannot be beautiful. On Thursday I'll go to the Tokyo Fish Market (yes that's its name) to buy locally made fresh tofu and fish and peas and on Friday night I'll go back to Tokyo via zoom. An ex student of mine, a real tech whiz of the ethical kind, now works at Zoom. I found myself telling him a few days ago that when it comes time to tally how these times became rich as well as difficult, the fact that Tomoko kept teaching and we all kept learning will be one small strand of the newly woven web of life ahead.

Good wishes to everyone

Helena