

Dear All

As has been the case now for nearly two years the "from" in my subject line connotes a connection to letters we have been writing since our first encounter with Japan (just about exactly 20 years ago) without connoting an actual visit. Our bodies remain firmly rooted in the USA, with the exception of a brief jaunt over to the UK. Among other reasons, neither Japan's government nor the people there really want us to come.

I took a Japanese graduate student to a concert the other day, where we began discussing her impending return home. She leaves Dec. 4, her timing set by the mandatory, total quarantine which is still 14 days long. She wants to be free of restrictions by the time preparations for the New Years holiday begin. I would too. It is a simply marvelous time to be in Tokyo. These bento boxes show you the normal supply of dishes for proper New Years meal.



For most people in the USA it's likely that the last time they thought about Japan was during the Tokyo Olympics. Our Japanese friends didn't want those to happen either, fearing a dramatic uptick in Covid cases despite the government's promise that athletes and coaches would be controlled and tested and kept away from everyone. Seen from over here, those Olympics were in fact a kind of triumph both for those who participated

and for the rest of us, a sign that we could find our way to be together across national boundaries despite a world wide, raging illness. Whatever the overall success, Japan's Prime Minister Suga could not hold his position. Perhaps he didn't even want to stay on, having constantly been accused of putting the Japanese people at risk.

Though case numbers in Japan in 2021 have begun more closely to resemble those of other countries, the differences are still stark. In September with Delta still rampant many places Japan's case load and vaccination rate for the entire time AND for the previous 28 days were as follows:

Total Cases <b>1,682,068</b>	Total Deaths <b>17,273</b>	Total Vaccine Doses Administered <b>153,118,707</b>
28-Day Cases <b>357,164</b>	28-Day Deaths <b>1,566</b>	28-Day Vaccine Doses Administered <b>34,808,601</b>

Compare Japan with the 28 day numbers in the USA . Our population is less than three times the size of Japan's. Our case rate was more than 10 times. The death rate 30 times and the vaccination rate about half theirs.

Total Cases <b>42,305,552</b>	Total Deaths <b>676,747</b>	Total Vaccine Doses Administered <b>384,841,974</b>
28-Day Cases <b>4,255,541</b>	28-Day Deaths <b>45,829</b>	28-Day Vaccine Doses Administered <b>19,782,736</b>

These numbers come from the invaluable John's Hopkins website, collected Sept. 21 about 2 1/2 weeks after the end of the Paraolympics. Had disaster struck under Delta during the games Japan's numbers would have been very different.

We were in the UK during the Olympics and actually had fun watching them, a rather different experience I gather than was available in the USA. Our granddaughter Lyra (8) is old enough and athletic enough to have a genuine appreciation for many sports. Her fascination, and the new nations getting winning results, I see as vindication of the decision to modernize the sports represented — skateboarding anyone? In truth, during our earlier long stays in Berkeley I came to appreciate the tireless work and deep concentration required of the young people in Peace Park who had probably completely abandoned high school but were remarkably hardworking day after day in developing their chosen skill set.

Nishiya's win made history in Japan and across the world.



Momiji Nishiya makes history as Japan's youngest Olympic champion.

AFP via Getty Images

Not only did she become the youngest champion in the country's history, eclipsing Kyoka Iwasaki who won the 200-meter breaststroke at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics at age 14, she became the second-youngest Olympian worldwide.

Back to Asia today and what's happening on the large and small scale.

On the largest scale, Japan's government and probably its people are much more aware than most of us in the USA of China's increasingly militarized posture towards Taiwan. I too find it alarming though others whom I respect suggest that actions right now represent nothing more than a reminder that in time China will insist on reunification and therefore Taiwan should prepare itself to welcome China as overlord. Sometime. The persuasive part of this argument is that China has a very long time horizon unlike the USA. The less persuasive is that China has issues of its own and there's nothing like a little international adventurism to distract. For all sorts of reasons I hope but also guess, that this is a waiting game not a moment for action, but the whole problem makes me, the Japanese government and the Japanese people quite nervous.

In two rather different ways Japan and China have used the virus times to close their doors. So did Australia which until recently wouldn't even let vaccinated, overseas



Australians come home. We had powerful restrictions in the USA as well, much more than most people realize. My immediate family has been directly affected — Christmas plans for a whole family gathering have been derailed by the US Embassy in London finding it impossible to issue visas fast enough. Our daughter in law does have an appointment for a visa. For November. But that is November 2022. The New York Times reports over 700,000 people who could/should be working in the USA are unable to do so because they can neither renew nor get their first time visa. The USA won't even let tourists in in large numbers until November. Americans with US passports have been free to travel. Our diaspora has been free to come and go at will, but no-one else was welcome.

As I have said before Japanese culture and COVID management has activated its full array of shaming strategies to make people very scared of being seen as a COVID spreader. At least one colleague, in his polite and Japanese way has been consistently critical of this shaming:

"In Japan, almost all people wear the masks even in outside. I am believing that kind of action is too much. We see the homogeneity of Japanese society's response to crisis."

Our friend's words "too much" speak volumes very quietly. Most people we know would not say even that. Rather they work hard to avoid any chance of causing others pain, illness, difficulty. This posture is not all defensive. There is real kindness in that range of efforts. In more joyful times, that same kindness has taken us on wonderful expeditions, to stunning meals, to intriguing buildings, into the family web for New Year's celebrations. The image below features my cooking companion Tomoko working, having invited me to watch as she prepared the astonishingly lovely and delicious food on display in the picture at the top.



China, too, according to the Times yesterday, shames COVID spreaders. After a recent outbreak traced to a vacationing couple:

"The authorities have shuttered schools and tourist sites. Government websites have [detailed](#) every movement of the unlucky couple and their sprawling web of contacts, including what time they checked into hotels and on which floors of restaurants they sat. (for those who can read Chinese: [http://hc.jiangxi.gov.cn/art/2021/10/21/art\\_38267\\_3694795.html](http://hc.jiangxi.gov.cn/art/2021/10/21/art_38267_3694795.html))

China is the last hold out for the zero COVID approach, now abandoned in New Zealand, Australia and Singapore. New Zealand's population, approximately 5 million. China's well over 1 billion.



COVID has given Xi Jinping all the justification he needed to tighten control over the populous. China also faces more of a risk than most places should a major outbreak get underway, because it is now clear China's vaccines are not quite as effective as those created in Germany, the UK, USA and even perhaps Russia. Mongolia has been swamped by COVID despite having completed a reasonably effective vaccination program but with Chinese vaccines.

And what of South Korea?

They do their own thing. The word "Asia" is in quotes in the subject line as well because with respect to COVID even in NE Asia the four main powers (including both Koreas) have each carried out a distinctively different program. It looks as though with vaccinations South Korea may have replicated the speed with which they managed to set up digital track and trace at the outset. Not that Koreans were fast to begin vaccinating. They were very slow to get supplies. Having got them they seem to have poked into every arm simultaneously. Two doses judging by the number complete and the fact that they haven't done any vaccinations at all for the last four weeks. Or perhaps they have simply run out. I don't know which but I do know that once again their numbers distinctive, unlike anyone else. Not Japanese, not Chinese, not American and not North Korean. (it is of course possible that this is a data glitch. Either way, their charts suggest very very fast vaccination once it began. These numbers were copied yesterday, not mid. September).



Let me end on a personal note.

The transpacific cooking class I described in the my first COVID letter continues. The group has expanded. We now have two cooks in Japan, though one watches and doesn't teach. The teaching has spread out across the USA. Some lessons now originate in Rochester, New York, and there is heavy participation from Wisconsin, plus additional participants in the Bay Area.

COVID has so many awful sides that one may need reminding it has wonderful consequences too. We are close to grandchildren here in Berkeley in a way we would never have been without the COVID bubble. Likewise with our granddaughter in New York. Rob is playing host to her and Emily at our Co-op apartment building's Halloween this very night. Together our kids and I are hosting this street's pre-Halloween door-to-door gathering on Sunday. We've had several all family zooms such as would never have occurred before but now will likely continue. Rob and I, having been Zoom freeloaders for 18 months, finally signed on for our very own account this month. Earlier this fall we were participants in a conference on Zoom that managed to bring a global audience together that previously would most likely have been almost more or less entirely USONIAN.

AND YET. In person encounters matter hugely. As Zuckerberg and co rename themselves MetaUniverse they reveal quite clearly for anyone who still had lingering doubts that they wish to reduce human interaction to eyes, brains, ears with perhaps an occasional finger movement on a keyboard.

That is not a world I want to live in. If it doesn't appeal to you either here are three books. Two kept me enthralled — Pauli Murray's autobiography "*Song in a Weary Throat: Memoir of an American Pilgrimage*" and Sy Montgomery's "*Soul of an Octopus*." Nothing could be more bodily than these two. And for a more abstract and generalized view of our bodies as our thinking selves, check out Annie Murphy Paul's "*Extended Mind*."

Our bodily selves have been right at the center of the experience in these COVID years. Let's not allow the seductions of robots and Zoom to encourage us to forget that life requires bodies. Bodies can also let go of lives. No amount of space flight or Virtual Reality glasses will keep COVID away. That takes bodies and the right kind of social care. And oddly, the right kind of social care really varies profoundly from place to place. Me, I find I am an American. I want to decide for myself whether and when to get a Booster COVID shot. It happened yesterday. The NHS would have decided for me and chosen the date. Sometime in the future but not too far.

In Japan it might still take months for such a thing even to be possible. In the meanwhile, they will quarantine. Everyone. Everyone is safer if the doors to the outside remain closed. Tokugawa Japan seems to have reawakened.