



OIDEYASU!

A SMILE OF FLOWERS THAT WARMS THE HEART

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Hawai'i Herald Columnist

The air is crisp and my cheeks and nose feel the chilly bite of a ripe autumn day. I am surrounded by the season's deep, fiery hues — reds, yellows, oranges and browns. This backdrop to the majestic temples of Kyōto is a wonder to behold, reminding onlookers of the pulsating life of the grand mountain gods who reside within the folds of its amber bosom.

In the neighborhood, strings of per-simmons hang in front of old wooden houses to dry. Dusk is setting and the cotton-candy pink is breathtakingly beautiful against the cool blue sky. Here and there, I hear kitchen knives running across cutting boards in disciplined cadence as housewives rush to prepare their evening meal. The aroma of grilled fish and sautéed onions awoken my senses as I cycle home.

I pass a small house and peer inside the open door. Colorful flowers of various sorts flank the entrance to what doubles as a flower shop and home. My neighbor, Kinue Masaki, sits at the doorsill to the main room, busily binding *kōjinmatsu*, an arrangement of pine branches and leaves of the evergreen *sakaki* tree (*Cleyera japonica*), which is considered sacred in the Japanese Shinto religion. I park my bicycle and go inside to purchase an assortment of flowers to place at my *genkan* (house entrance).

Masaki-san, a small-framed woman with a slightly curved back and a soft, pretty smile, greets me cheerfully. When she revealed her age during a conversation, I couldn't believe it. Her smile and expressions, so bright and jovial, made her look much younger than her actual 72 years of age. Masaki-san broke into a genuine show of happiness as she giggled at my compliment. "Maybe it's working with flowers for so long that makes me young," she said.

Masaki-san has been selling flowers for the past 40 years. Her first business was on the Ōmiya shopping street. "All you needed back then was a bucket to hold the flowers. There was no need for an actual shop, so the overhead was low. I had regular customers and passersby who bought assortments for the *butsudan* (ancestral altar) in their homes or for the family cemetery."

I watched in amazement at how deftly her fingers worked the rubber band around the pine and leaf stems as she chatted casually. "For the autumn season, this is one of my best sellers. Do you know what this is? Maybe you don't have something like this in America." She smiled again at my curious expression. "Now the weather has gotten colder and we have to use the gas or oil stoves. Before, and even now, there are lots of house fires. So we offer this *kōjinmatsu* arrangement to the kitchen god *Kōjin* and also to *Ofudo-san*, the god of fire. The green leaves are called *o-sakaki* and we put these in front of the small altars for the gods to protect our homes and businesses."

As she wrapped my simple pick of irises, a middle-aged woman reached for a pre-packed assortment of white chrysanthemums and carnations from a pale-blue bucket in front of the house. She hurriedly left 300 yen (\$3) on the small cushion-covered stool as she called out, "*Arigatō, Obasan!*" ("Thank you, Auntie!") and sped along on her bicycle. Masaki-san returned

her thanks and turned to me once again.

"Those that she bought are called *hotokesama-no-hana*, flowers for the buddhas or one's ancestors, like what I have in front of my altar for my husband and his parents." Opening the sliding door to her small room a bit wider, she pointed to the black-and-white pictures of the long-deceased hanging above the small altar.

Masaki-san looked up at the pictures. "My



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parents-in-law and my husband ran a student cafeteria in this house. I wanted to help with the family income and so I started selling flowers on the street with a few buckets and a stool. When my husband died more than sixteen years ago, I decided to sell the flowers from the house. Before, there were a lot of shoppers on the main Ōmiya street, but now it is quite empty due to the big shopping center near the station. But still I managed to raise all three of my children while selling flowers full-time."

Masaki-san wiped her small hands on her apron and then handed me my flowers. She smiled once again, revealing her dimples.

From the moment I first met Masaki-san, her effervescent smile made me feel welcome in my new neighborhood in Kyōto. Oftentimes when I passed by her home/shop, I would see customers sitting on the cushioned stool, chatting about the day, the weather, mutual acquaintances . . . whatever was on their mind at the moment. Masaki-san listened most of the time, nodding her head, responding with her trademark smile as she slowly made her bouquet arrangements or washed out buckets or swept the small shop. It seemed that customers came to her not only to purchase flowers, but to find comfort in her gentle demeanor.

I find myself stopping by often as well, to purchase flowers, of course, but also to sit on her

stool to chat. Masaki-san asks about my family and she tells me a bit about her three children and nine grandchildren. She asks me whether I tried the cucumber recipe that she had suggested as we both bought vegetables from the farmer's wife, who stops by once a week in front of Masaki-san's shop.

As we talk, I pick up a few stems that I think may go well in a new vase I bought at the monthly temple flea market. Sometimes I ask her to pick out the flowers and watch as she smiles at each blossom, as if asking which of them would like to go home with me. She gently reaches for them, taking the bud between her forefinger and middle finger, stretched out from her upturned hand. I could see that she is accustomed to handling flowers, almost as if they are a part of her own body make-up. I gladly pay for the pretty colors that brighten even the hardest of days. I look into the small arrangement and can't help but smile — it was as if she knew that the combination of a light pink rose, a violet-colored snapdragon and a yellow daffodil was exactly the remedy I needed.

Fancy flower shops with their silky ribbons, lacy paper-wraps and elaborate ornaments are a dime a dozen. But Masaki-san's personal touch and her warm and welcoming smile are a rarity in our fast-paced modern world. She is one of the few reminders of a time when merchants and shoppers were not only sellers and buyers looking for the highest profits or the best prices, but an integral, personal and valued part of a close-knit community.

All of us innately long for genuine person-to-person contact. The word that best comes to mind when I think of Masaki-san is what the Japanese call *ninjō*. Written with the Chinese character combination for "person" and "feelings," it means humanity, empathy, kindness, sympathy. Very possibly, it is the generosity of Masaki-san's *ninjō* that has helped her maintain her regular customers who have continued to purchase flower offerings to their gods and ancestors for 40 years. For me, it is Masaki-san's genuine love of flowers and the simple joy of seeing her pretty, dimpled smile as she looks upon them that warms me even with a frosty winter approaching in Kyōto. **HH**

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan." While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of "Hidden Treasures." If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she explained that "Oideyasu!" means "Welcome!" in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by e-mailing her at jackiejkim@hotmail.com.

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