

WTE column of Jan 21, 2013. Editor's headline: "Considering a trip abroad"

For years I've had a standing invitation from a Japanese family to visit them in their home near Tokyo. Inasmuch as a friend in China has extended an invitation also, I'd like to combine the two opportunities. My friends and I visit via skype.

"Just do it," my sons tell me. Yes but. Even off-season I'll be able to finance the travel only by shortcutting something else. Will my California son agree to postpone for a year my payments on a loan he extended sometime ago? I've ben chipping away at it but the travel expenses will defer that.

Then there are the preparations. Applying for a visa to China is like scaling its Great Wall, to say nothing of the cost. And will my housemate look after the dog, water the plants, take in the mail? My son and daughter-in-law make alternative arrangements for the after-school hours their daughter spends with me? My neighbors keep a weather eye? One time, when a pipe burst in my sprinkler system, a neighbor dashed over and shut everything off.

My Japanese and Chinese contacts originated in the U.S. and are of long standing. Here's how I got to know the Japanese family:

Since my divorce I'd lived in what's euphemistically called "genteel poverty," but now I was tenure-track teaching at a small, private university in Mitchell, South Dakota. This good fortune coincided with my obtaining an amount of money, another fortuitous event.

In 2000, Darold developed bi-polar problems so severe, it forced him to retire. My adult children and I made repeated trips to help him dissolve his law practice. When the building sold, I gained my community-property interest, which I invested in a house within walking distance to the university where I taught.

It was a pleasant though older home. Previous owners had finished the basement into living quarters and added a downstairs bathroom. Still, the house was poorly insulated. The roof that covered an added-on sunroom was the wrong pitch and showed signs of leakage.

Then the teaching job turned sour and the administration chose not renew my contact. I decided to return to Nashville to prior contacts and advertised my home for rent. Shimpei and Noriko Miwa stopped by with their small daughter.

"Why don't you just buy the house?" I asked the couple. Noriko was a stay-at-home mom looking after tiny Kyoko; Shimpei, a manager at a Toshiba plant in Mitchell that manufactures printer toner. Both are slender and tall, with admirable language skills.

“Toshiba discourages home-ownership abroad,” said Shimpei. “My company wants to be able to move me quickly, should the need arise.” He explained that, while the employees are local, management is sent from Japan on a rotational basis, sometimes to be transferred elsewhere on short notice.

“The house needs repairs that I can’t manage right now. Could I visit periodically and stay downstairs?”

The Miwas agreed to the idea. We arranged rent payments via internet banking, which eliminated the need for a property manager. Our year-to-year rental agreement specified the family would vacate the house on the date stipulated by Shimpei’s employer, with the caveat that the move might happen earlier.

And so I occasionally resided in Mitchell for a few days during spring or summer break. Tiny Kyoko didn’t speak a word of English but took to me in a big way. I sometimes babysat while her parents visited fellow expatriates in nearby Sioux Fall. This year Kyoko will be turning ten.

One summer I hosted two teenagers from Germany, friends of my cousin’s, whose parents wanted them to become fluent in English. Ann-Kathrin and her younger brother Christoph flew into Denver; they would return to Germany from Nashville. After spending a few days with my son’s family in Wyoming, we journeyed north.

At the Miwas we learned to eat with chopsticks. Shimpei had acquired a motorboat and eagerly took us boating. Another time Noriko and Kyoko took us to the lakefront beach for a swim. The highlight of our Mitchell stay was when I persuaded Ann-Kathrin to try out for a student-driver’s license. She studied hard and passed the written exam on the second try.

How proudly Ann-Kathrin held aloft that piece of plastic! In Germany, student driving is strictly through driver’s school, which costs thousands. And I now had someone with whom to share the driving on our trek across the states.

I had not attained another tenure-track position and contended myself with the position of lecturer. But Darold’s death in 2003 freed the rest of my community-property assets, and so I bought a fixer-upper at below value in a good location. In Nashville I spent my off days and weeks (plus those of my sons, when they visited by turns) renovating the place. A handyman and his crew addressed the more substantial tasks. I figured I’d make more money upgrading and selling the home than teaching, which indeed proved to be the case.

Once the Miwas left for Japan I planned to return to my Mitchell home and address deferred maintenance. They telephoned, however, saying that Toshiba wanted Shimpei to remain in Mitchell for another four months. What to do? The Nashville house had sold and I was ready to move.

As luck would have it, a friend in Springfield, Illinois, owned a rental condo that had just vacated. I sold some of my Nashville belongings, reserved a U-haul truck, and drove to Springfield to leave my car. Returning to Nashville by bus I loaded up for the U-haul trip. A few months later I repeated the ordeal for the move to Mitchell.

The Miwas had sold what they could, including their boat and lovely bedroom suite. They'd taken with them what the company would ship to Japan but left behind a lot of stuff for me to take care of. We've been in touch ever since.

Next week you'll hear about my Chinese friend.