

Warm Winter Hearts

Robin Sakamoto

(Kyorin University)

Reverse Culture Shock

My first year as a junior high school teacher in Japan was naturally full of many new experiences. Perhaps what amazed me most of all was the amount of “extra” duties done by the teachers outside of teaching classes. One of my least favorite “extra” duties occurred on what had been a favorite holiday of mine, Valentine’s Day.

Valentine’s Day in the U.S.

In the U.S., Valentine’s Day is celebrated from elementary school through high school. In elementary school, students exchange cards with everyone in the class including their teacher. The cards are sold in boxes at grocery stores and usually have favorite cartoon characters on them such as Mickey or Minnie Mouse and these days even Pokémon. If you are a shy student, you don’t even have to sign your name on these cards. You can simply write, “From, Your Valentine.”

This tendency is seen even more often in junior high school. You can see boxes of chocolate placed secretly in book bags or on desks with the simple note “From, Your Valentine.” Can you imagine how exciting that is? You spend the rest of the day trying to figure out just who your “Valentine” is and usually that involves a lot of whispering with friends and shy glances to people around you. What a wonderful way to take a break from the cold bleary winter!

In my high school, a week before Valentine’s Day, the brass band club would set up a fundraiser in the cafeteria. You could order a carnation for your “Valentine” and it would be delivered to him or her sometime during the school day. You paid extra for this service and that is how the brass band club raised money for new uniforms. In any case, you sent a pink carnation to show “you’re interested”, a white carnation to show “friendship” and a red carnation to show “love”. On Valentine’s Day everyone would be looking to see how their

“Valentine” reacted when getting the flower and hoping that your flower was the only one they received! Teachers just basically resign themselves to the fact that the day is going to be filled with silliness and fun.

Valentine’s Day in Japan

Can you imagine what happened on my first Valentine’s Day in Japan? Of course I had asked my mother to send me boxes of cards from the U.S. for my students including candy hearts with English messages on them. I had planned to give them to my students in English class. However, my English teachers promptly told me that it was not allowed to give out candy in school. Not only that, my “extra” duty that day was to collect all the chocolate I could find that students had brought to school and bring it to the teacher’s room! I felt terrible doing so as I could well remember how special those treats had been for me when I was a student.

Not only that, I learned about the custom of “*giri-choco*”. How can a gift of love be obligatory? And it seems that in Japan, women are expected to give chocolate to men including their bosses. This was indeed a new custom for me!

I was more prepared my second year in Japan and decided to try Valentine’s Day in Japanese style. I spent hours making and wrapping chocolate for all the teachers at my school. I enjoyed seeing their happy faces when I gave them their chocolate. But I was completely unprepared on White Day when I got an obligatory return gift!

I still like the spontaneity and excitement of a U.S. Valentine’s Day. But I’m glad that even though it is celebrated differently, there is a day in Japan when I can let people around me know how special they are and how much I appreciate them even if I don’t find the time to say so during our busy days.