

Assignment: Japan

by Molly Shaw, as told in 2025

In 1973, I turned 27 years old. Although happily married for two years, my yearning to do something adventuresome with my life, had landed me in Baltimore, MD, a long way from my family on the U.S. west coast. I worked full-time as a nutritionist for the Baltimore City Health Department. My husband Doug Shaw worked as Mayor's Representative for the City of Baltimore. Doug grew up in Michigan. We met as US-2's (two-year missionaries working for the Global Board of Missions of the United Methodist Church) in 1969. After two years of living on \$125-a-month stipends as missionaries, we felt wealthy with our first "professional" salaries.

One workday morning, I received a phone call from Doug in his office, and he asked me if I could meet him at home during my lunch hour. I thought it was unusual, but the excitement in his voice intrigued me, so I said yes. On arriving home, I was surprised to see he had brought a guest, John Cock from Washington, D.C. I knew John was from the Ecumenical Institute, as Doug and I did some volunteering for the Institute after attending a seminar called "RS-I" in 1969, attended some regional meetings with Institute staff, and heard a "call to be the church."

John stood facing me at about a three feet distance, stretched out his arms and put them on my shoulders, locked eyes with mine and said, "Molly, the Holy Spirit has laid it upon my heart to invite you and Michael to spend a year as interns at the Ecumenical Institute in Washington, D.C. Will you accept that call?" I remember staring into his eyes and without hesitation saying, "YES!" I felt like a fresh wind had just blown into the room. I was excited and scared all at the same time.

In a matter of weeks, Doug and I sold our piano, our bikes and most of our household appliances and furniture and moved to Washington, DC, excited about doing something different, and even adventuresome, with our lives.

We occupied a room with a mattress on the floor and soon discovered that the mattress had bed bugs! After a good cry, I got past that. We woke up every day at 5:00 am to participate in the "Daily Office," followed by boisterous singing of spirit songs that really lifted us up. We ate breakfast as a community. One morning, we sang a song to the tune of "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." John Cock suggested to Doug that he take the name of "Michael," as it was a strong name. This re-naming seemed appropriate to everyone in the room, and from then on, Doug insisted on being called Michael, and it stuck.

We made lots of phone calls to recruit people to religious studies courses. We learned about living in community. I "worked out" for a year at the American Road Builders' Association as a secretary. I rode into Washington, D.C. to work every weekday with a carload of other "permeators." At the end of the year, assignment staff members offered

Michael and I an assignment in Tokyo, Japan. Thinking it was just for a year, we said "why not?"

I flew to Tokyo on a tourist visa in September 1974 with a group of colleagues who had also accepted this opportunity. Michael stayed behind to process a work visa. He finally arrived in mid-November. That was a long time for a married couple to be separated, so our colleagues gave us a couple of nights in a nice hotel.

We got creative when it came to earning income in Japan. Michael and I taught English as a second language to different individuals and groups. I remember teaching a housewife. I went to her home and just talked with her about American life. Another time I taught a class of young women (post high school) at a "girls finishing school", where they also learned tea ceremony and flower arrangement. Michael taught English to Japanese businessmen. After class, they took us both out for a fine meal at a restaurant, and we learned how to drink sake. Michael also taught English in a girls' school. The students and faculty gave him a going away party when we left Japan. Another time, I worked for Encyclopedia Britannica recording songs for a children's lullaby cassette tape. They paid me well.

We acutely felt the cold of winter with no central heating in the house where we lived. Smelly kerosene space heaters produced fine heating for rooms; however, their warmth never reached into the house's hallways. Going out of rooms into hallways always proved FROSTY going. We moved around a lot that first year. By August, we were living in a nicer house, still in Tokyo, and we had a comfortable room. Michael and I announced happily that we were expecting our first child.

Jeremiah William was born on August 15, 1975, at the American Sanitarium Hospital, run by the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Michael stood in the labor room with me, and we did the breathing exercises together that we learned in a Lamaze class. Jeremiah weighed almost eight pounds and was 21 inches long. As was customary in Japan, I stayed in the hospital for seven days. What a relaxing time for me to get to know our new little guy! Michael's second cousin, Diana from Michigan, visiting in Japan on a student exchange program, came to visit us the day Jeremiah came home. Our baby son lucked out with fine stand-in grandparents: Paul and Gerry Evans, who loved watching over him whenever they could. Paul enjoyed talking to Jeremiah while Jeremiah sat in a baby carrier on the table. The Evans' brought wisdom and stability to our community. We also had the guidance of Martha Denny, a speech therapist, who gave me lots of tips on teaching Jeremiah to talk.

Rev. Byoung Hoon from Korea baptized Jeremiah in early December 1975. A couple of weeks later when he was four-months old, we flew back to the US, and he met both sets of biological grandparents. What a joyous Christmas and New Year's for us all!

When Jeremiah turned nine-months old, Michael and I accepted assignments to spend the summer in Osaka, assisting and teaching in the International Training Institute. We ran with the idea of transporting our baby back to the States to stay with my sister,

Mary, for the summer, and she eagerly took care of him. A colleague Ken Hamje, while returning to the U.S. cared for Jerry on a plane flight to Los Angeles, where they met Uncle Don Shaw, who transported Jerry again by plane to Portland, OR, where his Aunt Mary connected with him.

He spent the summer with cousins Erica and Jens and Aunt Mary and Uncle Wally. One day, Aunt Mary and Jeremiah sat on the front porch, enjoying the warm summer sun. Suddenly, there was a cat and dog fight in the back yard. Aunt Mary jumped up and ran around the corner to separate the dog and the cat. In that moment, Jerry crawled over to some interesting cans on the porch and picked up an open container. When Aunt Mary returned, Jerry held a can of paint thinner while guzzling its contents! Mary recognized what had happened in a hurry. With no moments to waste, she grabbed Jerry around the waist, while he still held the can, and headed for the car. The ride to the hospital was a blur, but Jerry does not remember to this day what happened. Mary retold that story numerous times of how my child had a thorough stomach pumping that day!

Another bonus of that summer visit was Jeremiah's time with his grandpa and grandma Prine, in Oregon. They invited my brother Bill and his family to share wonderful picnics together on several occasions. Oh, how I missed our little guy! He returned to us on his first birthday via Order: Ecumenical friends who were traveling from the U.S. through Japan. Back in Tokyo, he was too tired to stay awake to finish his birthday cake, but Michael and I celebrated having him home.

After his return our family took a vacation to Fukushima, near Sendai. Jeremiah loved playing in the water. We ate in a restaurant to celebrate our 5th wedding anniversary where Jeremiah especially loved eating "moyashi," bean sprouts, cooked with meat on a dome-shaped grill.

In the summer of 1977, we moved to Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, where the summer weather was very pleasant. Our assignments included staffing for the launching of a human development project in the mountain town of Oyubari, near Yubari City and about two hours from Sapporo. The staff stayed in a former Catholic monastery at the top of a hill above the downtown area. When we first arrived, the women of Oyubari showed us how to properly make our beds on tatami mat floors for the coming cold winter.

Soon after the five-day consult, where residents shared their hopes and dreams for the future of their town, I recall being on the street walking with our young Jeremiah. Someone offered him a warm cooked ear of corn to eat. We sat on a log as he bit into the ear of corn, relishing every bite, as the juices ran down his chin. People in Oyubari were friendly toward us, and though only a few residents spoke English, the women surrounded us and talked animatedly and smiled at Jeremiah, who remained shy and oblivious to all the attention.

During the first week after the consult our staff, along with several residents, painted all the store fronts and trash cans downtown with bright blue paint to symbolize that something new was happening in their small town.

In the fall, Michael returned to the U.S. and attended the funeral of his Grandpa Shaw. He and I had about six weeks together between his return from that trip and my assignment in February 1978 to travel with a team of consultants to Korea for three weeks to set up another human development project near Seoul. Just before I returned, I found out I was pregnant again. I was so glad to get back to Oyubari to my family and my own bed.

An early lesson in self-care in this mountainous village was participating in the ritual of the community bathhouse. Located at the bottom of the hill from our house, the bathhouse contained two large rooms: one for males, and the other for females. Mothers or grandmothers carried the babies on their backs, and all unashamedly disrobed in the room beside the huge steaming bath that looked like a shallow swimming pool. I felt self-conscious as my second pregnancy became so obvious later that year, but no one stared at me and I received very kind and respectful glances.

Mom and Dad Prine (my parents) flew to Japan and came to stay for a week in July in Oyubari. We introduced them to our dear friends, the Hiratas, who were about their ages and who were pastors in a Japanese Methodist church in Sapporo.

In October 1978, Jerry and I dressed up for Halloween. Michael, on the road a lot, missed our house Halloween party. Jeremiah dressed as a clown and wore his red sleeper, his dad's big shoes and a painted nose. Being very pregnant, I dressed as a giant pumpkin, wearing a big orange blanket over my protruding belly.

We had a fire in our room in November, just a couple of weeks before we expected our second baby. The wood stove sat on its four feet on a platform. We kept a pan of water under the stove to keep the platform from getting too hot. I accidentally let the pan go dry, and the platform caught fire. Fortunately, the fire department responded quickly, but they had to break a beautiful stained-glass window in the room where we lived to get into the house. We mostly had only smoke damage.

With the long, winding road down from Oyubari to the hospital, I feared my labor might begin and I would not have enough time to get to the hospital before the baby's birth. Fortunately, we made the decision to visit with American friends who lived close to the hospital, and they welcomed our visit. As it turned out, my labor was under three hours. We made the wiser choice—WHEW! On November 22, 1978, Nathaniel Donald Shaw was born at Providence Hospital in Sapporo. He was a big baby at 9 lbs. 6 oz. A Catholic nun visited my room and spoke prayers of joy. This simple act of compassion led me to meet more of her Catholic sisters in a nearby town, which later resulted in my teaching English to the Japanese sisters.

My sister (Aunt Mary) sent us a box for Christmas while we were in Oyubari that year. In it was a felt advent calendar that she made. The calendar has hung every year since then in our family rooms every Christmas.

When Nathan was six-weeks old, we moved back to Tokyo. Aunt Mary came to visit us in the Spring, just in time to bake a cake for Michael's 32nd birthday. The cherry blossoms bloomed beautifully in the springtime in Tokyo. We took a train to Kyoto and visited a famous castle. We stayed in Tokyo until June, when we found out we were assigned back to the U.S. Michael stayed in Tokyo for a couple more months. Our boys and I flew to Chicago, and I drove a rental car to Michigan with the boys to stay with Grandpa and Grandma Shaw at their house for about a week. We adjusted to the time change well even though days and nights stayed mixed up for a while. We then settled into Chicago Centrum. Jeremiah became part of the preschool and Nathan participated in the infant school, while I attended the summer assembly downstairs.

After finishing up employment in Tokyo, Michael joined us in Chicago in August. We watched the assignment board as it changed like the stock market. First, it looked like we might go to Dallas, Texas, and finally we were assigned to Memphis, Tennessee.

There are moments today when I become aware of certain spaces or human courtesies as very Japanese. I smile and am reminded of how grateful I am for my family's
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December 5, 2025