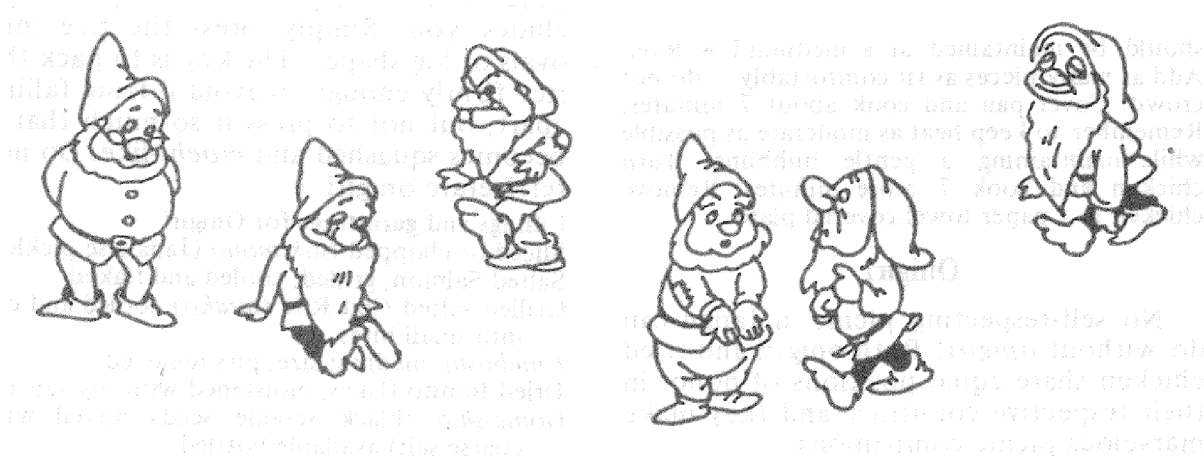




The Gnomes of Nose

Up to the time I moved to the countryside, Japanese workmen invariably got full marks for diligence, punctuality and above all, tidiness. The mess they made was minimal and they always cleared up afterwards. This image was shattered by my first encounter with Nose gnomes (I call them Gnomes), a hardy breed prolific in Nose and probably indigenous to rural hamlets up and down the country. Usually to be found inhabiting rambling crumbling farmhouses, they spend their waking hours pottering around rice fields and opting for any job that comes their way.

My first mistake was to ask a local man, one I thought I could trust, to recommend a good worker to do odd repairs around my newly-acquired home. Recommendation has a different meaning in local terms. Rather than introducing a competent person, able to do the job on hand, he came up with someone he owed something to, a case of 'you scratch my back I'll scratch yours' or in the Japanese sense, the *on/giri* machinery in action.

Gnomes started to appear on the doorstep. I numbered them for easy identification. Gnome 1 appeared once and disappeared for ever. Gnome 2 stayed, until my nerves could no longer stand the strain. Gnome 3, his brother, would have driven me mad had he not had the inexplicable urge to work between 5 and 8 in the morning, thus I never needed to meet him. Other unnumbered workmates followed in their wake but the pair that are indelibly etched on my memory are Gnome 2 and Mad Mate. Gnome 2, a sparrow-like figure, would appear in the morning on his wobbly bicycle, invariably late. Not because he hadn't started off in good time but because half the tools he carried dropped off his bicycle at regular intervals and he'd have to stop to retrieve them, re-tying them on again with miscellaneous bits of string. His journey home took twice as long as he had the additional chore of imparting the day's happening in the Oliver household to everyone he saw on the way. He commandeered anything he spied for his own use without asking, including my washing-up bowl for mixing concrete. Whatever he handled either fell to pieces, because unusable or at least was never the same gain. Mad Mate loped behind him like a faithful puppy, carrying out orders in exactly the opposite from the way they had been issued...More time was spent chatting with other locals around a heaped bonfire they carefully built first thing on arrival, than on what they were being paid to do; plastering walls, laying concrete and so on. Being a newcomer and lacking confidence in the language I hesitated to complain but finally I couldn't take it any longer, repairs or no repairs, they had to go.

To my amazement a neighbour employed the same duo to re-build his garden wall shortly afterwards. I watched to see what a mess they would make of it. To my chagrin the result was perfection – a long traditional tile-topped wall. I examined the formula for this success. To start with, this neighbour was out building the fire a full hour before they arrived. When they arrived late, and they only did on the first day, he

complained loudly. Every minute of the day he was with them, checking and supervising. I don't suppose he calculated his own time but he certainly got good results.

This bitter experience was at least a good education for me in the mysterious workings of rural society. What had frustrated and irritated me was an example of an extensive unofficial welfare network, one which, because the government falls sadly short on real social needs, fills the gap. Mad Mate and his like would be put away or hidden from view in a city. In this village they are made to feel useful and given jobs to the level of their ability, even if like Mad Mate, this mainly involves demolishing walls with a sledgehammer or carting food to the cows. Everyone knows the gnomes are inefficient and their work slap-dash, but that doesn't stop people giving them odd jobs. Their inefficiency is equally shared by all the households to spread the welfare burden evenly throughout the community.

Likewise locals prefer to employ people they know rather than bring in outsiders. 'Better the devil you know than the one you don't adage. A strong clannish loyalty pre-vails to protect home-grown gnomes. Even when at a later date I went against local custom and brought in outsiders for a major building project, I had problems, but of a slightly different sort. This bunch turned out to be Okayama gnomes masquerading under the guise of hypochondriacal Soka Gakkai fanatics who, although good at their work, spent much of their time dwelling on their non-existent ailments and crying off sick. Either way, you can't win it seems.

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