Japanese Lessons

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Every morning, six days a week, the streets of Japanese towns and cities are full of lively groups of children converging on neighborhood schools. Elementary school children wearing leather backpacks for books and junior high school students in dark uniforms carrying briefcases, all meeting friends and calling gaily to each other, give the residential neighborhoods a sense of bustle and excitement, which emphasizes the quiet that follows during the school day.

What would it be like to be one of those children? Are the backpacks heavy? What can be in them? All of us were excited and scared at the prospect of Sam and Ellen’s becoming part of these large groups of seemingly identical but animated and happy school children.

We were coming back, really. Our family’s plan to spend ten months in Urawa during 1989–90 meant that we would be returning to the city where we had spent nearly a year during 1982–83. Our experiences during that year certainly colored our expectations of how we would spend the coming year, what we could look forward to, what we worried about, and our feelings about taking two children, ages seven and eleven, to Japan.

Both my husband, Davis Bobrow, and I would be affiliated with the Graduate School for Policy Sciences at Saitama University in Urawa.
My plan was to do research on language patterns in schools and other educational settings, and Dave had a research grant from the Fulbright program to study Japanese national security policy. My work could have been done anywhere in Japan; Dave's required that he be near Tokyo with easy access to government officials and records.

There were several factors that made our affiliation with Saitama University attractive. First, we had made good friends there in 1982-83, and knew the school to be a congenial and helpful host to visiting foreign scholars. Second, the school is located within reasonable commuting distance of the government centers, but far enough away from central Tokyo to make a significant difference in the cost of housing. Furthermore, the school had available an apartment that we could rent on the university grounds. The disadvantages were the distance from central Tokyo, which meant more commuting time for Dave, and being at least two hours away from any elementary schools where English was the language of instruction.

I had read a lot about Japanese elementary education, William Cummings's book *Education and Equality in Japan* (1980) and John Singleton's *Nichu* (1967) among others, and had a generally positive impression of what life for children would be like in Japanese schools. But I think that without our previous experience with a day care center and a kindergarten, we would have been much more reluctant even to consider dropping two American kids into a Japanese elementary school.

On our first visit Sam had been four and a half, and Ellen six months old when we arrived in Urawa. Sam had needed to be in a kindergarten because he needed to be with children, and Ellen had needed to be in part-time day care because both her parents were doing research. We had no particular plans about how to manage this when we arrived, but by great good fortune we ended up living in a small apartment building with wonderful neighbors. The Li family lived two floors below us. They were Koreans, Mr. Li a businessman, who had been in Japan for about four years. They were members of the Urawa
Episcopalian Church and sent their five-year-old son to the church’s kindergarten. Through their intercession Sam was able to enroll in the school also.

We didn’t realize at the time what a stroke of good luck this was. Not only was this school one of the most prestigious and oldest in Urawa, but it was also small and very friendly. The members of the church included both Japanese and Korean families, and the minister had studied in England. Though there had never been a Western child or family affiliated with the school, the teachers and families seemed to have no hesitation in inviting us into the school. Most students did not come from Christian families, so our being Jewish was no barrier and only made us even more exotic.

Sam arrived at this kindergarten able to say “good morning” and to count to five in Japanese. After the first day his teacher told me that they had taught him how to say “Give it to me” because the other children didn’t like it if he just took toys, and so he needed to be able to ask. After that I didn’t hear about any explicit Japanese lessons, only occasional reports that “gradually” he was getting used to things. He was always eager to go to school, and in time my apprehensions gave way to admiration for the school and its teachers and for the students and their families.

I was particularly impressed with the way in which Mrs. Li and a circle of mothers cooperated both to incorporate me into activities with them and to protect the time I needed for my work. They were supportive of both my roles, as mother and as researcher, and made life easier and more enjoyable for me.

Arranging care for Ellen was a bit more of a problem; it was through our landlady’s efforts that we succeeded. She was not only the wife of a local politician and real estate developer, but also a pharmacist of traditional medicines with a business of her own and two grown children. She first took me to several private businesses that take care of small children, but we discovered that they would take children only on a full-time basis, six full days a week. I wasn’t prepared to leave Ellen for
that long. We then went to city hall to inquire about municipal facili-
ties, and it was that office that directed us to the university’s own day
care center, where I was able to enroll Ellen for three days a week.

Here, too, we were very favorably impressed with the individual,
loving care that children from six weeks to three years received. And
here, too, the caregivers seemed neither daunted nor rigid about the
prospect of dealing with a foreign family.

These two very positive experiences with our children were the
deciding factors in our decision to live in Urawa again and to send the
children to the local Japanese school. We also shared the feeling of
many American parents that what our children would miss in a year
away from American schooling wasn’t too important, that it could eas-
ily be made up. We believed that the immersion experience of a year of
life in a different culture and language would in itself be valuable edu-
cation for the children and ourselves, valuable enough to offset the
inevitable frustration and despair of having to deal with an unknown
language and a strange conception of school, children, and life. Such a
dramatic change can be hard for both parents and children, though
there’s no doubt that the major difficulty is faced by the children, who
have to spend more than forty hours a week in the school environ-
ment. The year was not always easy, but we have had no reason to
regret the decision.

Urawa is a typical Japanese city in many ways. It is an old city, the
capital of the prefecture, a center for administration, agriculture, and
industry for several centuries. It is now also a bedroom community for
families of Tokyo workers; its main train station is about an hour from
central Tokyo. The university was moved from the center of town to
its fringes after the war, but the city has grown out around it in the
haphazard “mixed use” way of Japanese cities. The neighborhood of
the university also includes farms, commercial areas, temples, light
industries, and some heavy industry, along with housing for families of
all economic levels.
On their daily walk to school the children passed homes, shops, small apartment buildings, a kiwi orchard just behind the auto repair shop, and a big old keyaki tree fenced off from the surrounding paddy fields and marked as a Shinto shrine by the straw rope with paper streamers around it and by the plaque saying it had been recognized as a shrine by the Taisho emperor. Farther on, past the paddy fields where we could see the whole process of growing rice as the year went on and hear the frogs that lived there when the fields were flooded, a Buddhist temple with its graveyard provided an oasis of green. Gardens around the older houses also held trees, the noisy cicadas that are an integral part of Japanese summers, and an occasional Inari shrine. Right across from the school a small shop sold school supplies and snacks to students and to people who waited for the bus there.

Coffee shops and small restaurants crowded together on this major street and on the four-lane street closer to our home where the traffic also supported a number of fast-food chain stores. It soon came to seem perfectly normal to us to see a shop, carved out of a paddy field, selling small electrical appliances, next door to an old farm house, across the street from a six-unit apartment house and a small factory making aluminum window frames and doors.

We decided not to have a car, so I rode my bicycle to the supermarket about a half mile away several times a week to shop; I was glad to join a food co-op that would deliver some foods, once a week. For other shopping we took the bus downtown from the university stop about three blocks from our building. We rented a car for weekend trips a few times.

Our own apartment was in a building owned by Saitama University and used for housing the foreign students and their families who were at the Graduate School for Policy Sciences. These are primarily mid-career level civil servants from Southeast Asian countries who come to Japan for two years of study. Many of them have young children who attend the local kindergarten and elementary school. That makes these
schools among the most cosmopolitan in Japan; at least our children would not be the first non-Japanese students encountered by the school, the teachers, and the students.

Our apartment was the largest in the building, because Dave was the most senior resident, and at 700 square feet was considered very spacious. It had a small entryway for storing shoes, umbrellas, and other outside gear, two bedrooms, a bathroom, a large (comparatively speaking) kitchen-dining-living room, and a balcony for hanging laundry. Perhaps the greatest luxury in the apartment was its view of Mount Fuji a hundred miles away to the southwest, visible during the clear winter days.

Enrolling in School

Even though our research prospects seemed ideal, even though our housing situation seemed good, even though we felt comfortable making our way around Urawa, and even though we liked our neighborhood and felt confident the year was going to be a good one, we were still a bit apprehensive about school. Would we find that the congenial friendliness of preschool in Japan had given way to a regimented and strictly academic atmosphere, as suggested in some American media depictions of Japanese schools? Would the social pressure for conformity prove to be stronger than in American schools and uncomfortable for foreigners? Just the process of getting our children enrolled and ready for their first day of school provided answers to some of these questions and brought us face to face with differences in approaches to education that became clearer as the school year passed.

Almost immediately after moving into our apartment at Saitama University, we went to Urawa City Hall to apply for our Alien Registration cards. (Sam and Ellen like the term aliens better than foreigners, though not all foreigners feel that way.) With the help of a colleague from the university we were able to arrange a meeting with the city board of education officers responsible for enrolling children on
the same day we picked up the Alien Registration cards. We were surprised that such a high-level meeting would be required. Our colleague went with the four of us to this meeting. The principal of the school was present along with two or three officials from the board of education.

The discussion covered several points of concern. The principal and the officials stressed that our children would be expected to participate fully, as Japanese children do. We were warned that no instruction in Japanese as a foreign language would be provided, that they followed the total immersion, "throw them in and see if they swim" philosophy of language learning. The principal said he would, however, assign a few children to guide ours around, play with them, and help them get started. Everyone looked relieved on hearing that Sam had been to preschool in Japan and seemed to think this would make things easier for us and for them, a feeling we shared.

Japanese are always very concerned that Japanese food is so unique that foreigners will find it inedible, and these officials said our children would have to eat the school lunches—as though they felt this might be a major problem. They did ask if there were foods our children couldn't eat; they recognize that some children have allergies, and many of the Southeast Asian children in this school are Moslems who do not eat pork or some of the seafood found in Japanese school lunches, but our children had no restrictions.

The next part of the discussion centered on the grades in which the children would be placed. In Japan the school year runs from April 1 of each year to the following March. The rules about grade placement are rigidly followed: a child must be six years old by April 1 to begin first grade and must begin on the April 1 following the sixth birthday. Sam, born in April, had just finished fifth grade in the United States, and Ellen, born in March, had just finished first grade. The correct grade placement for Sam was thus fifth grade in Japan. The principal and the officials felt this was the best placement for him. We agreed, and we had discussed this possibility with him beforehand. We knew
that much of the material covered would be different from the curriculum at home and that any repetition in Japanese would be useful. Following the principal’s recommendation, we agreed that Ellen should be put in the first grade, though according to her birth date she belonged in second. This made her one of the oldest first graders instead of the youngest second grader. First grade is a beginning, and it seemed reasonable that she also begin there.

We agreed with the principal on a day in the next week to bring the children to school to meet their teachers and join their classes; we left the meeting feeling excited and nervous. It was all becoming very real.

**The School**

Our school, Okubo Higashi Shogakko (Okubo East Elementary School), is unusual in Japan only because it has some foreign students. It is a public school, free, part of the compulsory education system in Japan, run by the city board of education in compliance with guidelines from the national Ministry of Education, and funded by both local and national taxes. Only 1 percent of elementary school children in Japan are in private schools, so this kind of education is what is experienced by virtually all Japanese children.

Okubo Higashi’s students come from the immediate neighborhood. It has students from first grade through sixth grade in twenty-five classes, about one thousand students in all, including the ten or so foreigners. This is a very ordinary size in Japan, where population densities in the cities and towns are such that this many children all live within easy walking distance of the school. There is no special transportation for students, and they are not allowed to ride bicycles to school, though most children have bikes and use them on other occasions. Think of nine hundred or so bicycles converging through narrow lanes on the school and the problem of where to put so many bikes during the school day!
The front of the school lot is the playground and athletic field, mostly open space but with some simple equipment for games and skills training around the sides. Old tires embedded in the ground serve as hurdles; there are some iron bars for simple gymnastics and some bells hung at various heights for children to try to ring by jumping. One end of the playground has elaborate sets of swings, jungle gyms, climbing poles, ladders, and slides—the same complex we saw in schools all over Japan.

Around the main buildings are some small sheds used to house animals and birds, some storage sheds, a few straggly plots for flowers and plants, the swimming pool and dressing rooms, and the gymnasium/assembly room in a separate building.

The buildings of the school follow a standard pattern, three stories of concrete construction looking very institutional if not prison-like. The two classroom buildings, joined by a short hallway section, are both one room and a hallway deep, so that each classroom has a long southern or western wall that is mostly windows, leading to a balcony outside the classroom. Most buildings in Japan are built this way, to capture sunlight and heat.

At the front there is a large staircase to the ceremonial entrance near the school office, the principal’s office and the teachers’ room on the second floor. Children, however, usually use a ground-floor entrance near their classroom, going into a large entry hall where there are shelves and cubbyholes for each person to leave outside shoes during the school day and to store school shoes while one is away from school. There are also sinks for washing hands and gargling outside these entrances. The hallways leading to the classrooms are clean and light, decorated with projects done in class.

In each classroom there is a rack for hanging book bags during the day, and each student has a desk. Shelves under the windows hold classroom supplies. There is an electric organ in each room. The walls are decorated with posters, the school motto, the classroom schedule, and
student work. The windows have curtains used to regulate the sunlight, and each classroom has a gas stove for heat. This sits away from the walls near one corner and is used sparingly during the coldest months; the hallways and other areas of the school are not heated at all.

At least at Okubo Higashi, children are encouraged to wear long pants during the winter months. We were told by parents that at other schools in Urawa children who wore long pants instead of skirts or the very short shorts Japanese boys usually wear were subject to ridicule by their teachers. Stoically enduring cold has long been a means of character building in Japan.

The motto found in every classroom, in the hallways, on school publications, over the stage in the auditorium, and which makes its way into many public speeches is

Thinking Children
Bright Children
Strong Children

At first glance this did not seem to be remarkable in any way, except that I particularly noticed the word “Strong.” Interpreting it to mean physically strong as it usually does, I was a little surprised to find this as a goal in school. Only later did I think to ask my friends what the phrase “Bright Children” might mean, to confirm my suspicion that it did not refer to intelligence. They said it meant children who were lively and eager to participate in activities and life, not hanging back out of mistrust or selfishness or idiosyncrasy. These answers sent me back to the booklet about the school prepared for parents of first graders, which we were given as a new family in the school.

The motto is explained in the booklet and turns out to be shorthand for a complicated set of ideals for children. “Thinking Children” is explained as children who can consider well, making correct judgments about actions. “Bright Children” are those who are rich in cooperativeness, full of fresh and lively vitality. “Strong Children” are children
who, being healthy in mind and body, are able to make the judgments needed to carry out the responsibilities of their own individual lives.

As the year went on I decided that this motto accurately reflected the goals and practices of the school, more than mottoes sometimes do. It suggests that action, not merely abstract academic learning, is the test of education; it suggests that children are active agents in their own education, not passive recipients; it suggests that education and action are embedded in a world of other people and that individual judgment, cooperativeness, and physical and moral strength are what children should be learning in school. It doesn’t mention math, reading, and science. They seem to be both components and by-products of the larger goal.

**The First Day and the Equipment**

On the appointed day we went to school with our colleague, the last school meeting he would be required to attend. We met with the principal, the assistant principal, Sam’s teacher Ohshima sensei and Ellen’s teacher Kuroda sensei. Sensei is a Japanese word that means “teacher,” and teachers are addressed either by their family name followed by this title or, more commonly, by the title alone. Because of the honor attached to this role, the same title is used for other people to whom respect is given—medical doctors, religious leaders, and some politicians.

There was a sense of ceremony surrounding the introduction of the children to their teachers and the presentation of backpacks for the children. These were the standard ones we had seen worn by elementary school children all over Japan. They are made of heavy leather, black for boys and red for girls, designed to survive 240 round trips to school each year for six years. They have several compartments and attachments, and all the school equipment sold in Japan is sized to the dimensions of this pack. Sam and Ellen’s shy grins as they tried them on showed that they too felt this was an important moment.
The school gave these packs to our children, a gesture we appreciated on both a symbolic and a practical level—they cost a minimum of one hundred dollars each, usually closer to two hundred dollars. Later in our stay as we watched Japanese children prepare to enter first grade, we became more aware of the importance of the packs. They are bought after much discussion within the family about price and quality and are often a present from grandparents. They are the badge and uniform of a child’s status. Just as other occupations are marked by appropriate clothing and accessories, the occupation of schoolchild in Japan is announced through the wearing of the backpack. Though public school elementary students do not wear uniform clothing, this backpack is as much a marker of status as a blue suit and white shirt for salaried employees, split-toe boots and gaitered baggy pants for construction workers, or briefcases for professionals. Sam and Ellen could now be identified by anyone in Japan as proper elementary school students, especially when they also had the official school name tags they were to wear each day pinned to their clothes, giving their name, the school name, and their grade and class.

Next, each teacher gave them their textbooks. Sam received fifteen, Ellen ten. Besides the ones we expected for mathematics, social studies, and Japanese, there were texts for physical education, music, morals, art, and calligraphy, among others. Ellen also had a communication notebook, which a parent had to sign each day, used for sending individual messages between parents and teachers as well as notations about special things needed the next day at school and homework assignments. I was familiar with this concept because the preschool and day care centers had also used such booklets.

The textbooks are free and do not have to be returned to the school at the end of the year; only replacements for lost ones must be paid for. The books themselves are attractive, nicely illustrated paperbacks, smaller than most U.S. textbooks, most of them nine by five inches or ten by six inches, 100-130 pages. They are light in weight and all of them are supposed to come home every night, the idea being that if
there’s no assigned homework, students should still review and study. It turned out that Ellen’s teacher was much stricter about this than Sam’s, as she was about many things.

Besides the backpacks and textbooks there are other materials required for school that must be provided by parents. The next part of the discussion took us through the list of these items and where to purchase them. First there were the sorts of things we expected—pencils, erasers, crayons, and exercise books for each academic subject. But we didn’t expect that the hardness of the lead in the pencils would be a matter of concern, as it was, or that there would be instructions about the kind of erasers to buy.

In the case of uniform erasers, however, the school is fighting a losing battle. Because of the nature of the writing system, people in Japan seldom use typewriters and make a fair number of mistakes when handwriting. So they use a lot of erasers, which have become something of a minor art form. They come in many colors and elaborate designs, from flowers and flags to cars and cartoon characters. Children much prefer these fancy erasers to the plain white ones we were told to buy, and almost no one at school follows the eraser guidelines.

The clothing requirements, which we learned about next, were also more elaborate than we expected. Most important are the shoes for school. Outside shoes are not worn in Japanese schools any more than they are in Japanese houses. Slippers are provided for visitors at school; we were all wearing those for this meeting. (Somehow, getting dressed up to look serious for such an important meeting and then wearing sloppy bedroom-type slippers during it struck us as incongruous.) In the school building children wear special shoes, white canvas slip-ons with rubber soles. The soles and trim are colored, and each grade at the school is assigned a different color. Ellen’s first-grade color was green, Sam’s red. These are washable shoes and indeed are supposed to be washed each weekend and taken back clean on Monday. Again, it turned out that Ellen’s teacher was more strict and made sure this
happened every week, while Sam often left his shoes at school for weeks on end.

There is an outfit for physical education: white shorts for boys and blue ones for girls, with white T-shirts and a reversible red and white cap for all. The T-shirt must be marked with the crest of Okubo Higashi Shogakko, and a large patch must be sewn on the front of the shirt. This patch has a colored strip corresponding to the grade of the child and is also marked with the child’s last name in very large writing. These clothes are brought home in a drawstring bag for washing each weekend. For swimming, a part of the physical education program, there is an ugly navy blue swimsuit for girls and navy blue briefs for boys, and a cap in the class color, both to be marked with the child’s name.

The children wear protective clothing at lunch, consisting of a white smock apron with sleeves, a white cap to cover hair, and a surgeon’s face mask that is worn while serving food or going through the line. Our kids called these their “doctor clothes.” They too, are brought home for laundry each weekend in their own drawstring bag, along with a place mat, a napkin, and chopsticks. Finally, there is a triangular white head scarf to be worn each day during the cleaning time.

I came to resent the necessity of doing this laundry each Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning no matter what other weekend activities might be planned, worrying about the weather and whether things would get dry on time, coordinating the drying space school clothes needed with other laundry needs. In the telling, it seems like a minor thing to be bothered by, but for me it was one of the irritations of life in Japan. Clothes dryers are expensive and not very effective in Japan. Having to rely on a limited amount of outdoor drying space for the laundry did make me more aware of and attuned to the weather and the “natural world”; that was some compensation.

The next topics covered in our discussions were the monthly fees for lunches, PTA dues, and special purchases of supplies made by each
Getting Started

teacher, finally, there was the walking group. Each child is assigned to a group of children living close together, who meet at a specified place each morning for the walk to school. A mother from this group is in charge of gathering everyone together, and one child is designated by the school as the group leader. The route they will follow to school is also laid out, and where several groups converge on the way to school the roads are marked with a sign telling drivers that the road is a school path. Children from our apartment building joined with those in the next building to form a walking group of about fifteen children led by a sixth-grade girl. The meeting time was forty minutes before the beginning of school, and the walk took about twenty minutes, guaranteeing that everyone would not only be on time, but have time to play before school began. This also gave the mother in charge time to round up any children who did not appear on time. The first day Sam and Ellen were sick, she came to our door looking for them. After that I went down to notify her if they were not going to school.

Then it was time for Sam and Ellen to join their classes. The principal asked if they knew what to say or do, and we said they had practiced bowing and saying “Bobrow desu. Dozo yoroshiku onegai shimasu.” This is a standard phrase said on introduction, meaning approximately “I am Bobrow. Please be kind to me.” So they were hurried off by their teachers to confront their new classmates for the first time, and Dave and I went home. We felt as though we were abandoning them.

I also felt I had been plunged rather abruptly into the world of the kyoiku mama—part of my plan for the year, but startling nonetheless. Kyoiku mama is a slightly derogatory job description for modern mothers. Literally it means “education mom,” and it points to the intense involvement of many Japanese mothers with the education of their children. There is a hint in the use of the term mama that this is a new phenomenon, since mama is a term for mothers that has been borrowed from Western languages, replacing the native okaasan in some families.
The job of the kyoiku mama is a complicated one, revered, accepted, gently ridiculed, and sometimes resented by Japanese mothers, children, and families. The term indicates the widespread feeling in Japan that education for children is of crucial importance to their lives and that children cannot succeed in the job of getting educated for adult life without significant help from their mothers. Effort, persistence, and commitment are required of both mothers and children in the business of education. Mothers’ efforts encompass the physical health of their children, loving support, willingness to have them place school responsibilities above family ones, willingness to absorb the frustration and rebellion that school demands often engender in children, and the ability to cajole children into the homework, study, and drill that school success requires. The modernity of this role has two aspects. First, only very recently have many mothers had the leisure, the release from more directly productive economic activities, to pursue this job. Relatively low employment rates for Japanese mothers of school children, and most strikingly the move away from farming, are necessary for mothers to have the time to make these efforts.

Second, calling a mother mama instead of okaasan imparts a sense that the motivations operating in the relationship between mother and child that induce a child to accept a mother’s guidance and control have changed. The children of okaasan, children in a “traditional” Japanese family setting, are motivated to cooperate by love mixed with respect for the mother’s rank and power. A modern mama, most often found in the context of families that depend on salaries for their livelihood, must depend on love alone, without much rank or power, to entice children into the desired paths of education and socialization. The emotional intensity of the relationship between mothers and their one or two children in this situation inspires some ambiguity in contemporary Japanese.

In spite of a popular media image of modern Japanese mothers as totally absorbed in their children, however, it is not clear that this is a wholly accurate picture. First, nearly half of the elementary school stu-
dent's in Japan in the 1990s have mothers who are employed full time or part time. These women, by all reports, work for money as well as personal fulfillment, and the jobs they are most often found in certainly do not seem likely to be very enjoyable in and of themselves (Kondo 1990; Roberts 1994). There is no reason to doubt that their earnings make either crucial or significant contributions to the family quality of life.

At the same time, it is true that one of the culturally acceptable reasons a woman can offer when she seeks full- or part-time employment is that her earnings will contribute to the educational success of her children, by making available to them the supplementary schooling called *juku*, commercial tutoring for elementary, junior high, and high school students. Many students attend these schools to receive the supervision, help, and emotional support to accomplish drill work and study imposed by school. Their mothers' jobs both make it impossible for mothers to do all of this and make it possible to pay someone else to do it. Some women openly acknowledge this tradeoff; others I think make it but less openly. Some women decide that they will sacrifice the income they might make and the satisfaction they might find in jobs for the sake of a personal investment in their children's education. Several of my friends, though, were quite aware of the implications of this choice for their own lives; they had not been brainwashed into thinking it was the only available path for Japanese women.

One of the questions I wanted to be able to answer after this year as an observer and participant in Japanese elementary education concerned the relationship between school and home and how each one was implicated in the academic performance standards reached by Japanese children and in the quality of life for Japanese children and mothers. I wanted to see just why "it's hard to be the mother of an elementary school child," as one of my Japanese friends put it. Although I had her as an example to watch (and she was much better at the role than I), I was already well on my way to finding out through personal experience.