

ALTHOUGH MY HUSBAND IS GONE, I REALLY FEEL FORTUNATE

Ume (88) from a provincial city in Japan, widow, lives alone in a detached house

FRONT TEETH REMOVED

I went to a dentist, to have my front teeth removed. So, I've decided to wear a mask all the time. The dentist also told me that I did it at the right timing because everyone else was wearing a mask to protect themselves from COVID-19. I'd had a post crown for a long time, but it got a little painful. So I got all of my upper teeth removed, except for 2. We had a positive case of COVID-19 in the city, so I stopped going to the dentist for a while, to be on a safe side. But it got so painful that I went there again. There were quite a few patients there. The pain is all gone now. So I'm waiting for the gum to get harder, and will have an impression taken and get full dentures.

HUSBAND PASSED AWAY

The thing is, my husband passed away in late April this year. It's really unfortunate that I didn't get to see him. He had suffered from pneumonia for a month or so and couldn't walk, so I had him move to a facility. Then came the COVID outbreak, and I couldn't visit him at all. When I did visit the place... what a pity. It really bothers me because I could have visited him any time I wanted if we hadn't had that pandemic. So, when I sit in front of the Buddhist altar, I always complain to my husband like, "Why didn't you hold on for a little longer?"

LAST BREATH

If he had stayed alive until the COVID crisis is under control, I could have visited him often, and he must have had something to say. So, I would say, it's too bad. When I went to see him, he didn't say anything. Even when I held his hands, there was no response. He never opened his eyes and was gone by 05:31 next morning. But no one knew when he took his last breath, even though there were people around him. So, his last days and hours could have been much better, and he must have had something to say. I just keep thinking about it. I prepared some money so that he could get good care at the facility. But he was gone before we used it up.

SAD CEREMONY

Although he liked having fun with his friends, the funeral was really small because of the government's request for self-restraint. It was a real sad ceremony. I know I shouldn't cry, but I am so frustrated with COVID-19.

I HATE THE CORONAVIRUS

My daughter took a trip to Hokkaido, the northernmost prefecture in Japan, in February and got ill after she came back. She went to a doctor, wondering if she had gotten COVID-19, but she couldn't take a PCR test. So, she told me she was really worried. Then she started crying and said, "I won't be at the funeral because you're frail and I don't want you to contract the virus." The doctor told her that she wasn't infected because she had been fine for over 3 months. But she said she was worried because she hadn't taken the test. I told her that she was fine because the doctor said so. Eventually, she came over because we needed to do some paperwork and needed some documents for his inheritance and stuff. But she didn't stay long. I told her to stay over, but she left, saying that she'd come again another time. So really, I just hate the coronavirus, worse than flu and other diseases.

EXERCISING AGAIN

I go to a healthy exercise program once a week. It was suspended because of the self-restriction, but we restarted it yesterday. Although a few members couldn't make it because of the bad weather, it was nice to see friends again after a long break. Other than that, I usually stay at home.

VEGETABLE GARDEN

Now, I just enjoy growing things in a vegetable garden near my house, like green beans, corns, edamame soybeans, cucumbers, and eggplants. It's a 10 or so square meter land owned by my older sister. She passed away last year and the land was vacant, so her family let me use it. That's the thing I enjoy now. I really enjoy giving the vegetables to my children and grandchildren. I don't eat much though. My first son's wife brings side dishes for dinner every other day, and my second son's wife does every Sunday. So, in return, I give them some vegetables.

MAGGOTS

My grandchildren, who live in another city, also come over once in a while. So I give them some rice and vegetables too, and they really appreciate that. They'd say, "Thank you, thank you!" and take them home. That makes me happy too. So I do what I can to grow good vegetables, but it's quite challenging. I also get maggots in the garden. They're evil, just like coronavirus. I don't use chemicals though.

TO WALK OR NOT TO WALK

The vegetable garden is really close from home, about 500 meter away. So, it's not that hard. My doctor always ask me if I take a walk. So, I'd say to him, "I'd love to, but my knees hurt when I walk. What should I do?" Then, the doctor would say, "Working in a garden is different from taking a walk!" It seems like I do need to walk. I've had a stroke, so they tell me to walk. I think I will start taking a short walk in late afternoon. But my knees hurt when I walk. Well, what to do, what to do....

WORKING ON A SHIP

Both of my sons work on a ship, so they don't come home too often. They'd be on a ship for 2 months and take a month off. We used to work on our own ship, but now they're employed by someone else. The older one is captain, and the younger one is chief engineer. I think it's quite tough for them. Since the older one is now in his late 60s, he says he may retire soon. There's a shortage of workers now, and I've heard that many people would keep working until age 70. We are having fewer and fewer people working in a ship. People now put families before anything else. But if you have this kind of job, you'll be away for a long time. So, people tend to stay away from it. I also worked on a ship until age 50 because I had a captain's license. So, the kids were raised by their grandmother.

MOTORCYCLE

I ride a motorcycle, but one of the daughters-in-law takes my gas credit card away because she's worried about my safety. But when the younger son is home, I'd have him bring some gas in a fuel tank. So, even though she takes the card away, it's not working. But I do appreciate her concern. She'd say to me, "Mom, you shouldn't ride that thing." But I'd do it just a little bit, in the neighborhood, to a supermarket around 4 km from home. My family would buy things for me, but that's not enough. So, I would go there about once a month, without telling her. Please keep it a secret. When I go to the supermarket, I find the stuff I like. When I order things, you can only get limited items like, "Please buy milk and bread." My daughter-in-law would take me shopping when we go to the doctor together. But it's just once every 2 months, and that's not enough.

NO HANDOUT

I'm almost 90 years old, but this COVID thing, I've never experienced anything like that. But the problems are far from over. People keep saying "self-restraint," so businesses must be hurting a lot, without customers. So, I don't think I need to receive the 100,000 yen handout from the government (Note: the Japanese government gave out 100,000 yen (\$936) each to all residents in Japan as part of economic stimulus measures to counter the COVID crisis). I'd like them to give it to someone else. They say spending the money is helping these businesses, but we don't go out much because of the self-restraint. I'd like to buy something big once things get a little better.

FORTUNATE

My sons' families live 3 to 4 km from my house. They take me to places, like shopping and doctors. The daughters-in-law take good care of me. So, although my husband is gone, I really feel fortunate. You'll never know what will happen to our lives. He's gone, and there's nothing I can do about it. So, I will keep going, looking forward to seeing my great grandchildren grow up.

Ume's story was shared with us by [International Longevity Center \(ILC\) Japan](#) – 国際長寿センター, member of the ILC Global Alliance, an international federation researching

and advocating the vitality and the societal and economical position of older people. In the Netherlands, the ILC network is represented by Leyden Academy.