Aki worked for Akahigedo, a traditional Eastern medicine clinic that based its work ethic on the old Edo practice of training staff to surpass acupuncture and shiatsu technique. To become a master, you had to become acquainted with your own soul. The master of this clinic trained young inexperienced doctors and therapists to empathize with patients of any age and illness. The tradeoff for the long hours at work was that these therapists became highly skilled and wizened at a young age. And because Aki had chosen to commit to the life of a therapist at Akahigedo, I was free to design my life as I wished. I threw myself headlong into journalism, which led to becoming a writing teacher, then an artist and finally after seven long years of waiting for Aki’s graduation from clinic life, becoming a mother.

My in-laws, Toshihiko and Hiroko, accepted me into the household in a way that allowed for as much or as little participation as I wanted. They did this so elegantly that I have often asked myself when I am in their shoes, when my son Seiji and my daughter Mirai bring home their future partners, will I be able to act as graciously, good-humored, financially generous and empathetic as Hiroko and Toshihiko have done for me?

The Wakabayashis got a wild card with me as their daughter-in-law. They thought they were getting an American and they assumed they knew all about Americans. Aki’s uncle Tsuneo married his college sweetheart and settled in California. Now as the second foreigner to enter the family, in the true Wakabayashi tradition, I was warmly accepted -- even though they didn’t know the first thing about Jews.
Toshihiko and Hiroko had no firsthand experience of the laws and customs guiding how a Jew leads their life. They didn’t know, for example, about the weekly day of rest, Shabbat. My in-laws would soon discover restrictions on what I could and couldn’t eat, baffling to this seafood loving family. However, good-natured tolerance was offered consistently. To this day, I am amazed by the Wakabayashi principle: if their son Aki was okay with my beliefs and practices they would be too. And that position – meddle-free marriage -- keeps us going to this day.

We Jewish women in Japan married to local boys are rare. There are few of us in Tokyo, a city of 12 million at the core and 35 million if we include the suburbs. Yet here we are, a tidy dozen women. We see each other at Jewish holidays. Occasionally, we do yoga together and exchange homeopathy and meet up for tea. We say goodbye to each other as we depart Japan after long decades. And there is a reason why we must go. If the truth be said, it’s because we made difficult brides. We are feminists. We are educated. We want our careers. We need our free time for meeting friends, for continued education, for hobbies, relaxation and exercise. We are what you would call “wagamama brides.” We appear selfish and self-serving. We are the center of our own stellar lives. We want trips overseas, not just a few days, we want weeks if not months of rest, relaxation and recharge in order to come back and appreciate all that is good here.

Speaking personally now, I am one of the few who remained. On September 27th, 2012 I marked my 25th year in Japan. Still, my ways are not exactly ‘local.’ I still can’t help indulge myself to a remark, a critique, a summary of life as I see it. In fact, to the untrained ear, I offer a running commentary from morning to night. Since it comes so naturally, I thought, why not write it down? I tried years ago when I assumed I had a lot to say on the subject of a Jewish woman’s marriage to a Japanese. This was before we had kids. This was before we reached the seven-year watershed in our marriage, that moment of truth that for us was the turning point in a relationship that was impossible, not because it was really difficult, but because we had impossible expectations of each other in the very limited time we were physically in each other’s presence. These were the clinic years—when Aki worked long hours. We both entered holy matrimony with assumptions that created pretty high expectations and when we both realized we had not married our perfect partner but we had married the partner perfect for maximum soul growth in this life, we resolved to breath easier with each other. We had no idea what our marriage would become once we actually spent time with each other. Aki quit the clinic in 1997. I sent him on a round-the-world trip for six months, told him to run our savings out, and through it all, Aki’s parents watched but didn’t bat an eye -- even though they knew that their penniless son would soon be returning from his grand tour in time to welcome our first child into the world—without a job prospect!

Aki and I were committed to getting along knowing full well that our thinking was different. We could laugh and that helped me remember that we both wanted all the same good things for ourselves and our family. Grasping this, really understanding that this was the heart of all that transpired between us, leads me to the beginning of my story.

This story is dedicated to my mother-in-law Hiroko and if he lives long enough to read it in print, my father-in-law Toshihiko Wakabayashi, the bedrock of my life. We continue to grow together through our differences. As we come to accept more of each other, life becomes magical. And as I write and recall these stories, I feel so many thanks in my heart for my home of 25 years and my dear family, the Wakabayashi family.

Liane Grunberg Wakabayashi is a teacher and innovator of a Tokyo-based intuitive art workshop called the Genesis Way. Liane has lived in Japan for 25 years and is married to Akihiko Wakabayashi, the bedrock of my life. We continue to grow together through our differences. As we come to accept more of each other, life becomes magical. And as I write and recall these stories, I feel so many thanks in my heart for my home of 25 years and my dear family, the Wakabayashi family.