My acquaintance living in Kyoto, which is a city full of old temples, grumbles:

‘The remarkable popularity of the song “In a Thousand Winds” has caused the Japanese temples to complain that burial plots in their graveyards do not sell well.’

What the popular song really means is that we should accept our death based on an animistic world view of human beings becoming unified with nature after death. But a large number of Japanese have misinterpreted the song believing it advocates scattering the bones of the dead instead of entombing them. I know a considerable number of people around me who do not want to be buried in the tomb with their own family. It is true that it costs a great deal to purchase and maintain a grave. Whereas, if the bones of a dead person are scattered, there is nothing more to be concerned about in the future. Scattering bones may sound rather romantic to those people, but its basic idea, in a way, is to throw away unnecessary things.

The deceased may remain unforgettable in the mind of one’s family and friends, but shapeless things are to be forgotten as time goes by. We will keep remembering our deceased parents and brothers or sisters, but the existence of our ancestors is recognized only through tombstones or Buddhist memorial tablets. A most remarkable present trend is to throw away a link with past history and predecessors, and the popularity of that song may have prompted or even promoted the trend, although perhaps not intentionally. It seems to me that below the surface there is post-war individualism at play here.

A certain man – let us call him Mr A – had to deal with the death of his parents, and the parental house, which was a single-family
house, with no one living in it. Other family members could not afford to buy the property, so they had to sell the house. But Mr A was distressed, because it was his ancestral home and the repository of so many childhood memories.

Mr A was quite affluent and purchased the house from his joint inheritors so that his newly-married son could live in it. He expected his son to be glad to live in the house of such distinctive character with its old associations and garden.

But the young couple had a different set of values. Weeding the garden, associating with neighbours and fastening the many wooden sliding doors of the house were seen as quite irksome tasks for them. In less than two months, they had moved to a flat, where one key was enough to secure their everyday life.

Mr A expected that the young generation’s mind would be enriched by living in the ancestral home and becoming conscious of historical connections with the previous generations. What he intended to present to the couple was the value of continuity and keeping in touch with the past.

‘Bringing up children has brought us no rewards,’ a disappointed Mr A mutters despairingly.

That thought may lie at the root of the growing trend to have fewer or no children. Of course parents do not bring up children for what they get back. They are repaid enough by the pleasure of seeing their children grow up. But from the viewpoint of genealogy and its long time-span it is quite natural that parents should waver when they come to wonder what they are bringing up their children for. They might as well depend upon social welfare work in their old age, and reject the idea of making great efforts to leave a fortune to their descendants.

During my stay in England thirty years ago, I observed the English life-style which is ahead of today’s Japan by thirty or forty years.

The English people’s way of life is based on the unit of a married couple and it does not matter much whether or not they have children. While their children are young, they choose to live in towns where they can have easy access to schools and shops. The children usually leave home when they finish at secondary school, whether or not they go on to college, or university, or get a job. After the