

Lessons from a mountain town: Random acts of sakura



Taking a moment to stop and smell the sakura

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OCHI, Japan — How do we keep our glasses half full during a crisis? How do we stay positive? I keep on returning to the sakura (cherry blossoms) for answers. The sakura are starting to bloom all over my town in Japan. They remind me that life continues despite the current COVID-19 crisis and I will get through this. I woke up late because I got stuck watching the news and couldn't stop. I tumbled down the rabbit hole, looking at a news story about the number of COVID-19 deaths, then I compared regions, countries and the world. The media is good at attracting you to read more, with their strategically placed links leading you

to click through a cycle of bad news. That's the danger of bad news, it's easy to get more. The more we get, hoping to find answers and a solution, the more we feel discouraged and fearful. It wasn't the best way for me to get ready for bed. We are curious, we want to know and to be aware of policies and events that affect us, but how much is too much information? It depends on how it makes us feel, we need to decide for ourselves. We need to fill our lives with more joyful moments. How do we do this during a crisis? The antidote to fear and worry is gratitude and mindfulness. Take time to notice the things that make you happy, the things you are grateful for, my friend reminded me. I was speaking as if my glass was half empty. I hadn't noticed that I was sliding down; it's easy when you are socially

next. In sakura season, Japanese culture believes every stage is beautiful, from the time the first buds appear to when the petals drop to the ground. In fact, it's believed that if a sakura petal lands on you, it will bring you luck. In the West, we often focus on the destination and the end. In Japan, it's more about the journey. Japanese society has more of a long-term view and that things last if we take care of them, including family, friendships and nature. The Japanese appreciation of the transitions can be seen everywhere, from the food changing in character and colour in stores and restaurants to an entire special vocabulary created around sakura.

Sakura vocabulary:
tsubomi = bud
sakihajime = started to bloom
gobuzaki = full bloom has almost been reached (50 to 70 per cent opened)
mankai = full bloom
chirihajime = petals have started to fall from the trees
hazakura = trees have turned green (leaves have replaced the pink petals)
There are also words to describe moments in sakura season:
Hanami = flower viewing



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

A store window display of sakura-themed treats that come out in the spring time.

Hanagasumi = flower haze, when there are many blossoms
Hana-no-ami = flower rain, when rain falls on the cherry blossoms
Hana-akari = flower lights, when sakura are in full bloom their bright colour makes the night not so dark
Sakura-fubuki = cherry blossom snowstorm, when sakura petals dance in the wind and look in the distance like a storm of pink petals
Hazakura = cherry tree leaves;

when little green leaves grow after the sakura fall, a sign that summer is just around the corner
Yozakura = night view of cherry blossoms, when the sakura are light up at night. In the West, of course we also have nature and seasons, but do we notice all of the transitions and each stage between the seasons? It's spectacular seeing the rows

See SAKURA P. 15

What to do when you're stuck inside during a pandemic

Columnist Mel Tsuji on what he likes to do while stuck inside

Mel Tsuji
Columnist

TORONTO — “We are in a war against an invisible killer,” the radio blared. “Witness the cancellation of a generation,” read a headline from a *Toronto Star* opinion piece, describing the plight against the pandemic in Italy. Dramatic stuff describing the first week in the escalating fight against COVID-19. It is all very real and I can feel it, being isolated at home, unable to go out, unless it's for medicine or groceries. Since I'm retired from my jobs as a reporter/producer with CBC and teaching journalism at Humber and Seneca Colleges, my transition to staying home has been relatively easy. Not so much for my son and daughter. Trevor is still on the job every day as a customer relations officer at a car dealership, but he says his work is drying up and he may have to take reduced hours or be laid off temporarily. Lindsay is still working as a producer with a national news program, but is working from

home to keep a safe, social distance. Now, forced inside myself, my job is now to find productive things to do. To start the day, we keep to our old habits. We tune into CBC Radio's *World at Eight* for the latest national and international news. After that, we tune to an old standby, *Metro Morning*, for a great digest of local Toronto news. I usually to listen every morning to get an idea of what's happening in the day ahead. At breakfast, I turn to the TV. First, it's to CP24 to see what happened overnight. Then I quickly switch to CBC News Now for the national news, then to CNN for the American and foreign news.

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I'll also hop around NBC, CBS and ABC. After my news fix, I switch over to sports. Not much going these days, but in normal times, it can get quite busy keeping up with what's happening in hockey and baseball. I'm not a big basketball fan, but I go for highlights. The morning agenda can keep me busy from 8 to 10 a.m. After that, I can review some interesting documentaries recorded a night or two before. I love music docs from PBS and there have been a few dandies re-

cently, including Elvis in Hawaii, Chuck Berry and the Monterey Pop Festival. That latter was from 1963. It was a waste of time because the groups shown weren't too good and scene shots were mostly of people trying to look hippie cool. For relaxation, I usually look around my home. First to my books. I have probably four to five favorites I'm getting through. One is Linda Ellerbee's *And So It Goes: Adventures in Television*. Ellerbee had a long career as a reporter and anchor in TV and it's a funny and informative look at the industry. Another is Herman Wouk's tome, *War and Remembrance*. It's a followup to his 1,000 page *The Winds of War*. Both are great novels. I've broken up my reading with Thomas Boswell's *The Heart of the Order*. If you like baseball, you'd love this one. Boswell was the baseball columnist for *The Washington Post*. If it's hockey you want, there are some gems on television. Sportsnet has been running NHL Classics. On March 18, it re-broadcasted a game from over 30 years ago, when the Edmonton Oilers played the Pittsburgh Penguins, Mario Lemieux versus Wayne Gretzky. This was great hockey to watch, though, it was marred by extreme hooking and holding, a



PHOTO COURTESY: MEL TSUJI

One of the ways columnist Mel Tsuji entertains himself during the day is by reading.

characteristic of play at that time. It was Gretzky magic, playing against his old club. He was setting up in his “office” behind the net, then passing out to wingers for easy goals. It was also a fantastic treat watching Paul Coffey streaking down the wing and cut in front for one of his unbelievable goals. His speed and quickness are similar to those seen these days by “Conner McDavid.” He had already scored 40 goals for the season that wasn't even completed. Another game shown on Clas-

sic NHL was a game from Oct 19, 1989. Gretzky was approaching the NHL point scoring record of 1,850 points set by ole “Blinky,” Gordie Howe himself. To heighten the drama, the Great One was playing against his old club, the Edmonton Oilers. He tied, then beat Howe's record. To mark the occasion, a presentation was made at centre ice with Howe being brought in to highlight the festivities.

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PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

In Japan, the entire cycle of sakura are appreciated from the time the first buds appear on the branches to when the pedals fall to the ground.

From SAKURA P. 11

of sakura carefully planted. But I am more delighted by the random sakura trees I see everywhere. In a plot of farmland, in green cedar forested mountains and the gravesite of a loved one.

I call it random acts of sakura. I wonder who had the foresight to plant sakura even though they didn't know what the future held or if they would get to see them bloom.

I am still in awe every time I see sakura, like fireworks with the burst of colours. I pause and the world is beautiful and per-

fect at that moment. In learning to recognize and embrace these moments, especially now, and piecing them together, we make our hour, day and lives.

In sharing joyful moments of sakura discoveries, my hope is that this starts your gathering of awe-inspiring moments in your life.

Sakura can teach us that life is impermanent and fleeting. What we plant now, we may not see bloom in our lifetime, but others will. There is beauty even in the face of difficult times when we look for it.

From AOKI P. 8

Neon Future IV is also the name of his highly anticipated sixth studio album, released April 3. Like his previous *Neon Future* albums, it's packed with collaborations, connecting with performers from all walks of life, like boyband legends Backstreet Boys to Japanese-American rocker/rapper Mike Shinoda.

His concerts never cease to amaze fans. Keeping just ahead of the trend, he brings a fresh and exhilarating experience with every show. If you're used to confetti cannons, jumbo-size screens, t-shirt giveaways and bass bins that can kickstart your heart, you'll be overwhelmed with a Steve Aoki concert.

This year's concert stage doubled as the Aoki Playhouse, with the bottom stage transformed into a foam pit for himself and a select few VIP fans to jump into. He played new tracks and classic bangers all night. Aoki concerts always end with something called "cake face." Ten cakes are tossed into the faces of fans with handmade signs.

With what was staged to be the first concert of his two month North American Neon Future IV Tour, he managed only to fulfill seven of his 29 stops before COVID-19 emergency procedures cancelled the tour. Aoki instead performed virtual concerts from his Las Vegas mansion to help fundraise for the World Health Organization.

Nothing slows him down, from



PHOTO CREDIT: DR. JONATHAN ETO

During Steve Aoki's concert , the bottom part of the stage has transformed into a foam pit.

releasing a new app to venturing into his first podcast, called *Aoki 'N Air*, a weekly travel show about his favourite place in the world, Japan. A five-episode series, Aoki speaks about all that interests him from travel, art, food, music

and fashion.

Though Aoki may not reach his average of 250 concerts this year, you'll be sure to hear, see or connect to him in some way. Until next time, eat, sleep, cake, repeat.

From HAPA P. 10

rns also saw how he has grown as a filmmaker. Since the film's release, Stearns has spoken in panels and conferences around Canada and North America about mixed race identity.

He was awarded the Cultural Pioneer Award from Harvard University for his exploration of multiethnic identity and the Emily Award from Emily Carr University.

He also co-founded Hapa-palooza, an annual festival celebrating mixed heritage through arts and culture, from 2011 to 2017.

"I think reflecting back 10 years later, there's definitely a lot of things I've learnt making that film and that I would've done differently," says Stearns.

"But at the same time, that's also reflective of who I was at that time in my life, exploring those questions and talking to my family. It became that film that a lot of Japanese Canadians gravitated to because they saw their family reflected in my family."

Since the films' release, Stearns has received countless comments and emails from viewers, who have seen their families in his, or have used the film as a springboard to discuss identity.

One mother told him after she took her children to see the film, they discussed their identity the whole car ride home, a talk they had never had before.

The film has also strengthened Stearns connection to the Japanese Canadian community. He attends cultural events, like the

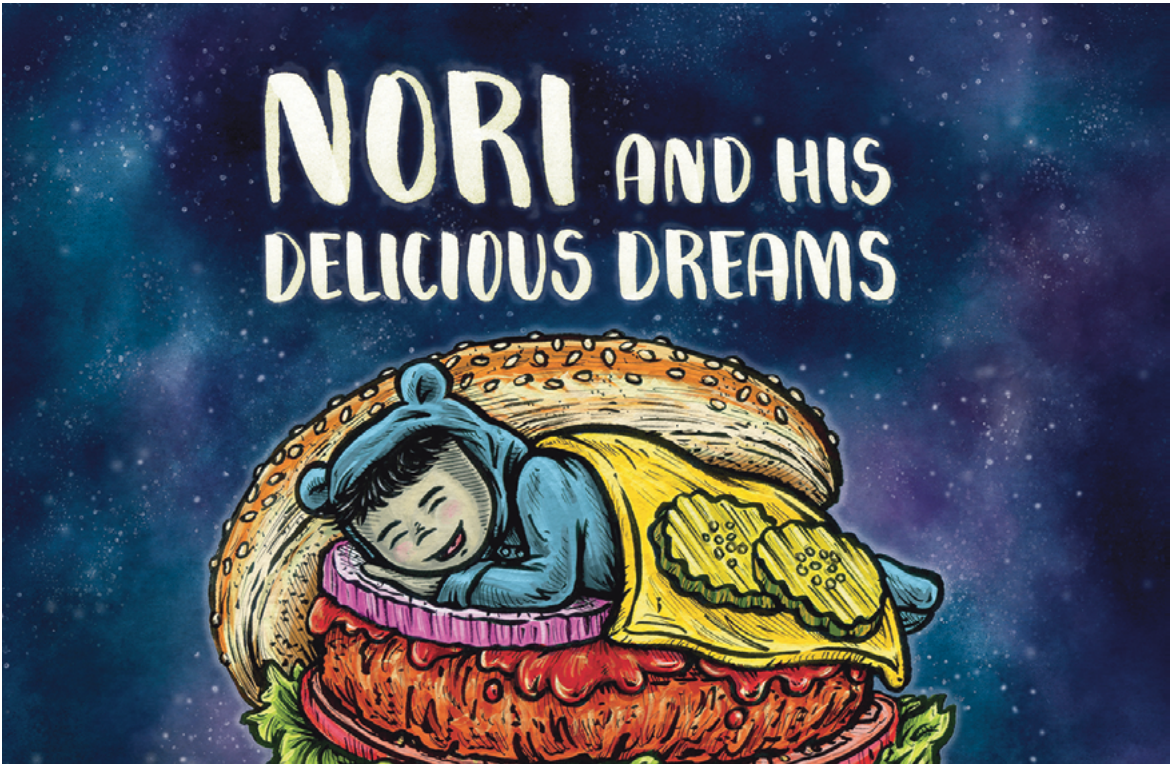


PHOTO COURTESY: JEFF CHIBA STEARNS

The cover of Jeff Chiba Stearns new children's book, *Nori and His Delicious Dreams*. During the quarantine, Stearns read his new book on a Facebook live stream.

Powell Street Festival and festivals like mochi-pounding with his kids. It has also been an opportunity to meet with community leaders like Art Miki, and learn more about Japanese Canadian history.

"With everything I've done, [Japanese Canadians] have been incredibly supportive, and I think that for me inspires me to want to continue making media that celebrates and explores the history and heritage of Japanese Canadi-

ans."

When it comes to mixed race identity, Stearns says the rest of Canada can look to the Japanese Canadian community as leaders.

When Stearns was growing up in Kelowna, B.C. he was one of a handful of mixed race children in the school.

When he looks at his daughter's class in Vancouver today, it

is a completely different story, a majority of the class are mixed race children.

"Japanese Canadians can be leaders other communities can look to, to see the shift in community," he says.

"I think the more that we can accept the fact that our community is going to be one that is mixed and blended, as long as we can understand that and celebrate that and continue to teach the traditions and continue to

run our organizations the way they are and be respectful of that, then I think we will be in a good place."

Stearns is now also exploring mixed race identity in children's literature. His new children's book, *Nori and His Delicious Dreams*, tells the story of a mixed race Japanese Canadian boy who dreams of sleeping in different types of food every night.

The book is also a way for children to learn about different types of food. Parents have told him their children are wanting to try food they've never wanted to before, like falafel.

Creating children's books was something Stearns has wanted to do since he was a teenager. He studied animation at Emily Carr University, and now publishes his books under his own company, Meditating Bunny Studio Inc.

"Now that I have kids, the time is right. I feel like I'm at a good place where I have the ability to make the characters I want to make," says Stearns.

"I thought of myself as a kid who was Canadian, but I was always being asked, 'What are you?' and 'Where are you from?' which is why I think it's important to have characters who are mixed. I'm going to keep doing that in the books and stories I do, because for me it's important to have that representation."

For more information about Jeff Chiba Stearns, *One Big Hapa Family* or to purchase a copy of *Nori and His Delicious Dreams*, visit: www.meditatingbunny.com