

Lessons from Ochi: The inaka and the boogie man



Learning how to be alone while living in the Japanese countryside

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OCHI — Over the past year, I worked as an assistant English language teacher with JET, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, in a small mountain town called Ochi on Shikoku Island, Japan.

In leaving Ochi, many friends and colleagues wanted to say goodbye, take me out, give me gifts, and spend time with me. I wondered where all these people were when I was yearning for the company throughout the year. It was during the pandemic, and people weren't going out as much, but it was more than that.

It was about living in a small town in the *inaka* (countryside). I had never experienced this being a city girl. It was also about being an outsider.

The average family in Ochi has five children or more. Many households are multi-genera-



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

One of Caroline Ishii's dreams while in Japan, was to find her grandfather, Otomatsu's gravesite. She was able to reunite with him after 70 years in Nushima Island in Awaji-shima.

tional, with the parents, children, and often grandchildren living together or close by. In regular times, they interact with other friends and family. In COVID-19 times, they lockdown into their own mini-communities.

The teachers and school staff drive over an hour every day to Ochi from Kochi city. They work long hours and return to the city at the end of the day to their families and friends.

I felt alone in the rural countryside; there was nowhere to hang out like coffee shops or cafes, and almost everything closed early.

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I didn't want to be in the countryside. I had asked JET for a city placement. I feared being isolated and alone in a rural area, which ended up happening. The more I resisted where I was, the more I

suffered.

I started blaming Ochi for my problems. When I noticed this and let go of what I thought this experience would be versus what

it was, I stepped into the present. I started becoming grateful for what I had before me, and my life changed.

Ochi is incredibly beautiful, with cedar-forested mountains, vibrant green rice fields, the clear blue-hued Niyodo river, and abundant fresh local produce.

I took responsibility for saying "yes" to coming to Ochi. I was not a victim or a prisoner. I could leave when I wanted. When I acknowledged that I had a choice and decided to stay, I became free. It's the cages we put ourselves in where we suffer the most.

I had a long-held dream to live and work in Japan, things I always want to try, see and do. I wanted to do the JET program for a long time, but I didn't have a BA, one of the applications' requirements. Now that I had my MBA, I could.

I also wanted to go to Japan to find out more about my roots. In particular, I hoped to find the gravesite of my grandfather, Otomatsu. Gathering information and clues through the years, I felt the last piece was coming to Japan.

In Ochi, I was fortunate to meet a new friend, Rika, who brought me to Otomatsu's gravesite on Nushima Island in Awaji-shima. I reunited with my grandfather after 70 years.

With daily immersion in the Japanese language in Ochi, I improved my Japanese language abilities. My mother spoke to me in Japanese when I was young, and I responded in English. I went to the Toronto Japanese Language School. However, I paid little attention to the classes and resented not watching Saturday morning cartoons like my

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Frankly speaking: Watching Nikkei in professional sports



Watching vital TV sports when the darned set keeps misbehaving

Frank Moritsugu
Columnist

TORONTO — Has your TV ever stopped coming on for you? Mine did a few days ago (I am writing on Friday, Sept. 25). Starting the TV with the remote only meant it opened a Bell Fibe sign in white letters on blue background. And no channels would come on, no matter how I tried.

In fact, the trouble began some days before, when the image (whether it was on a film or a commercial) would suddenly stop and the features became "crushed" for some seconds, or be hit by a complete blackout which also lasted for a short while before coming back to normal.

It was bad enough having this nuisance interrupting a program but not being able to turn on one's TV? It was particularly upsetting to a sports fan like me.

As you know, the other problem had been that since last March, the pandemic suspended so many professional games that we sports addicts were following—such as those featuring the Raptors, Blue Jays, Maple Leafs, etc.

In my case, I missed the Raps and Jays most. When top-level basketball came along, Toronto Raptors had become my first choice followed by baseball's Toronto Blue Jays. Of course, baseball is the sport many of us JCs loved since our kid years on the Pacific Coast.

The restraints set in March when the pandemic was officially recognized included many that were meant to prevent the coronavirus from spreading. Especially no large crowds allowed—they could increase the virus being spread, making things worse.

This meant when the games

fore Labour Day—what a delight.

Soon I was watching the Raps versus Boston Celtics. The series was the semifinals of NBA's Eastern Conference. Then on Sept. 11 the Raps, last season's national champions, lost to the Celtics 92-87. And us fans will have to wait until next season to happily enjoy again our Raptor stars led by veteran point guard Kyle Lowry.

One weekend night I found no baseball game I wanted to see. Instead, looking over the sports channels I discovered that international tennis was a biggie that Saturday, Sept. 12 because the U.S. Open final for women's singles was airing from New York.

And one of the finalists was named Naomi Osaka and she was representing Japan at the Arthur Ashe Stadium. The TV showed that she was a relatively small person but could she ever

return those shots by her competitor, Victoria Azarenka of Belarus.

Naomi-san has Japanese facial features and a dark complexion. Googling reveals that her father is from Haiti, her mother from Hokkaido, and Naomi was born in Japan. Father Leonard Francois was a college student from New York visiting Japan when he met her mother, Tamaki Osaka.

Following Japanese custom, Naomi used her mother's sur-



PHOTO CREDIT: DR. JONATHAN ETO

Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka won the U.S. Open on Sept. 12. Here is Osaka at last year's Rogers Cup in Toronto on Aug. 8, 2019.

name. In international competitions, she represents Japan where she was born and lived until moving to the U.S. when she was three years old.

Happily, in her victorious championship match, the TV image was interrupted only a few times.

As I became very much a Naomi Osaka fan, my wife Betty wondered if I was pushing the race thing a bit much. 'But oh no,' I replied. 'If Bianca Andreescu of Mississauga had been well enough to take part in the U.S. Open, she would have been my favourite and Naomi Osaka my

second choice.' Betty said, 'Really?'

Back to baseball on TV after pandemic allowed reopening of their major league matches. And unlike the other teams whose home games were played on their home fields, the Toronto Blue Jays were prevented by the Canadian government to use their local facility, which also meant allowing foreign teams to take part.

Instead, a ballpark in Buffalo was taken over. And in addition to cutouts in the seats, the var-

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somebody wants to work with me,” says Narumi.

Not letting location or distance hold her back, each job Narumi has taken, has opened more doors to new experiences and opportunities.

Her path has zigzagged her over the world and brought her the opportunity to work with choreographers she has admired her entire career, like Canadian Crystal Pite with dance company Kidd Pivot or Mats Ek in the main role of Juliet, in his last big creation, *Juliet and Romeo* and to be part of the company with Netherlands Dance Theater 1.

Narumi will be back in Canada this year as she joins Ballet BC for the 2020/21 season as a guest artist.

“As I get older, I’ve had unexpected opportunities to work with choreographers that I always wanted to work with,” says Narumi.

“I loved my path, I’m grateful [for each] experience and person I’ve met in every country, every city, every group, company or school that I get to be part of.”

This path is what has brought her to the Fall for Dance North stage, meeting choreographer Joshua Beamish during her time in Vancouver, and the festival’s artistic director Ilter Ibrahimof first saw Narumi perform during her time with Kidd Pivot.

The sixth-year for Toronto’s annual international dance festival, Fall for Dance North had to make



PHOTO CREDIT: MIKAELA KELLY

Contemporary dancer Rena Narumi and choreographer/dancer Joshua Beamish performing an original piece called *Proximity*.

a major pivot in its programming due to the global pandemic.

Called *The Flip Side*, this year’s festival is a combination of live and digital performances, offering a mix of free and low-price programming with a focus on Canadian performative arts and music says Ibrahimof.

“We decided to do all works by Canadian artists, so that if we do have a more national and international audience, we can put a bigger spotlight on Canadian dance

makers and Canadian dancers, with the diversity we are known for as part of the DNA of the festival,” says Ibrahimof.

Through programming that includes live online performances, podcasts, original series, augmented reality performances and online workshops, this year’s lineup looks to highlight the personal view of art-making, with

a behind-the-scenes look at the craft, while still offering professional, polished, and high-quality performances.

Being online, the festival can reach further than Toronto, with national and international audiences. Programming and changes this year are setting a precedent for festivals in years to follow, in how to reach new audiences and charge tickets for virtual content in order to support the arts in meaningful

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ways, says Ibrahimof.

“I feel like what we are doing now, will stay as part of what we do in the future in some sort of form, and I feel like it’s a healthy mix of both digital and live performance. I love that now we can speak to a national and international audience with our program, and there are not as many geographical limitations that we used to have,” says Ibrahimof.

Bringing the festival online, has also made it accessible in a whole new way to new audiences, says Narumi. Who hasn’t turned to art, from music to books to film and so on during the pandemic.

Art has been a form of joy, expression, connection, and escape during the pandemic, she says. Anyone who felt daunted by going to the theatre to see a performance can watch from the comfort of their own home, with their friends and family, and with low ticket prices connects people to dance like never before. She hopes opportunities like this will introduce more people to dance and performing arts.

“Many people feel like the theatre sounds too high class, or I don’t know what to wear, what to see, what to feel. But I say it’s like a museum. You go to the museum and you feel what you feel. I think art and entertainment give us the opportunity to think, feel, and discover yourself. You don’t need to be right or wrong, I think that’s the beautiful thing about art,” says Narumi.

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friends.

What I will remember most about my time in Japan is the food. I experienced many familiar flavours and fell in love with new tastes. Over the past year, I thought of my mother often who cooked and ate Japanese food with incredible passion as if she needed it to keep her memories of Japan alive.

I took away many lessons from living in a small mountain town for the year. I learned that loneliness has many forms. It’s not what I expected to learn.

In loneliness, we long for community. This yearning for our tribe is part of being human. Our survival relies on being in a pack and looking after each other, over being the lone wolf.

There is also a form of loneliness based on fear of being alone. When I first separated from my ex-partner of 17 years, the thought of being alone on a Friday or Saturday night made me feel like a loser.

I would desperately seek out friends to go out with me. I couldn’t bear being alone, especially when I saw others with their loved ones and friends on social media.

In Ochi, I spent Friday and Saturday nights—and most of my nights—alone, especially when the pandemic escalated. We were encouraged to stay home.

It became not as scary as I thought it would be. I would ask people to hang out. If they couldn’t, I would find activities that I wanted to do at home: a



PHOTOS COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Ochi is a beautiful countryside town, with fresh produce, vibrant green rice fields and cedar-forested mountains.

good movie and popcorn, writing with soulful music or speaking with friends in Canada.

I grew to like being with Caroline. I found out that she is smart, adventurous, and fun to be around. To know that I hid from her, avoided her, and ignored her for so many years because I didn’t want to be alone, makes me sad.

For a long time, I thought I didn’t deserve the attention. I felt it was selfish and self-centred. I had learned that good girls put others first. My mother taught me that self-sacrifice and thinking of others before ourselves is

an integral part of the Japanese tradition.

Why change? I noticed these patterns of putting myself last were self-destructive. I was a victim, blamed others, and even Ochi for my unhappiness. Most

development, wrote daily about what I was going through, found an incredible life coach, and spoke more regularly with friends back home. Most importantly, I started trusting myself.

I stepped into the role I desperately wanted others to step into for me. This was to support me, be there for me, and love me. We may have a partner, family, and friends who can be there for us now, but they may not always be. The only person who can always be there for you is you.

I didn’t think about the needs of Caroline before. She was des-

“I took away many lessons from living in a small mountain town for the year. I learned that loneliness has many forms.”

of all, I suffered. I was looking for love in the wrong places. I wanted places and people to be what I wanted them to be, instead of accepting them as they are. This included me.

What changed? I listened to hundreds of experts on personal

perately trying to get my attention for a long time, like a child pulling at her mother’s skirt, screaming, and trying to attention. I would pretend not to notice or walk away.

Once I did start to notice, I became friends rather than enemies with myself. I realized there are two Carolines. The one that is observing what I am doing and providing a running commentary. The other is within us, the spirit that never changes. Some call this the intellect and the heart.

I brought back both Carolines with me to Canada. I deeply appreciate the friends I have here and their support and love. There is nothing like good friends and community around to lift you up. But I also know that I’ve got my back too as my best friend.

I forget this at times. I feel off, and I experience what I call “friction.” There is agitation, sadness, exhaustion, and a feeling that something is not right.

I pause to acknowledge what I am feeling rather than hide or run away from it in guilt and shame. I ask what I can do to help. With the question, my best friend is alerted and comes in to help me. This is one of the greatest gifts I brought back with me from Ochi. I learned this in the *inaka*, where I didn’t want to be, afraid of being alone or ask for help.

I came to terms with what I feared most: being alone. In doing so, I realized that the boogie man is not out there, but is me. And when I came closer, the boogie man became my best friend.
