

# Stories from a mountain town: Mind the gap



Slowing down and noticing the day-by-day changes in nature

**Caroline Ishii**  
Columnist

OCHI, Japan — It's rainy season in most of Japan, a time of abundant rain and high humidity. It's called tsuyu in Japanese, literally meaning "plum rain" because it coincides with the ripening of plums.

The weather forecasts rain all week in Ochi, my town, with most days predicting a 100 per cent chance of rain. However, I've realized that doesn't mean it will rain all day or even at all. It changes moment by moment. From torrential rain to a light rain, and sometimes periods with no rain at all. The sun might even make an appearance.

These transitions are a part of Japanese culture. There seems to be a mindful movement from one

moment to the next. Japanese mindfulness and appreciation of nature can be seen in the sheer number of words to describe rain. Starting with *ame* for rain, the word changes depending on factors like intensity, temperature, time, season and so on.

I started walking a lot during the COVID-19 pandemic. I've come to treasure these meanderings through the town and in nature. Even if it's raining, I walk daily, and I've noticed minute changes in nature day-by-day, rather than a sudden shift from one season to the next.

**Rice**

There is a lot of rice production in my town, grown traditionally in wet-rice cultivation paddies called tanbo, on the plains and in the mountains.

When I arrived in Ochi last August, there were green fields in front of my apartment. I have seen these fields become gold-

rain we'd been having. In walking through the fields, I saw there is actually an ancient and intricate irrigation system of channels from the streams, coming mainly from the Niyodo River. The paddies fill almost to the brim but are monitored closely to not spill over.

It was heavily raining one weekend. There was a farmer with a tractor in the heavy rain and deep mud. I thought his tires would get stuck in the mud, but he continued slowly and steadily, hour upon hour until he was done. By the end he must have been soaked.

Soon after I noticed vibrant green tufts of vegetation in the corner of each paddy: rice plants! The farmer used a manual tiller to place each rice plant equal distance from each other in the water. When it was done, he would fill any empty spaces by hand, his body deep in mud and water.

With the planting done, the farmer waits for the water, the sunshine, and the gods to help him grow the rice crops. It's back-breaking work. I understand now why every grain of rice is so important to the Japanese.

There is a shrine called jinja, near the rice fields dedicated to Inari, the god of rice. Daikoku, one of the seven gods of good for-



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

Plants and vegetables outside of homes show the changing seasons.

tune, is also said to be the god of abundant crops. People make offerings to the gods and pray for a bountiful crop to sustain them. I feel the gods are close by the rice fields. They are fed with rice and gratitude.

They say the rice tastes delicious here because it is made with the clean waters of the Niyodo River. I believe it's because there is love in there too.

**Frogs**

Shortly after arriving at my apartment last August, I was on the balcony looking at the night sky. It was expansive and brilliant, filled with the moon and stars.

But I was startled by something I could not see, but hear.

The sounds of frogs, incredibly loud and all around me. I noticed little frogs everywhere! They were on the balcony, the glass patio doors, and the steps to my apartment. I even found one in my sink one day. I like frogs, and they were small enough to be cute, though I would bring any frogs that managed to get in back outside again.

Every day I would see them on my balcony, and I would say, hello. When you live alone in the

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# Frankly Speaking: Tribute to judo sensei Mas Takahashi



Mas Takahashi was a strong competitor and leader in Canadian judo

**Frank Moritsugu**  
Columnist

Many of us older ones—judoka or not—didn't learn about Mas Takahashi's passing until seeing the June 2020 issue of the *Montreal Bulletin*.

Under "Condolences" was Mas' portrait, reporting that "he passed away in his sleep on February 14."

The Ottawa judo sensei was 90 years old and survived by his beloved wife of 64 years, June; his children Allyn, Phil, Ray and Tina, as well as his eight grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Masao "Mas" Takahashi was both a strong judo competitor and a leader of the sport in Canada. He founded Takahashi Dojo in 1969. His wife June and all four of their children earned black belts in judo.

June has a rokudan (sixth-degree) black belt, which makes her one of the highest ranking female judoka in Canada.

Their children have also notably contributed to the development of judo in Canada. Three have participated in the Olympics: Phil as a competitor in judo, Tina as a judo coach and Ray as competitor in wrestling.

Takahashi Dojo former students include Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. He began practicing judo in the 1950s when he was in his mid-30s, ranking ikkyu (the top brown-belt rank).

Subsequently when Trudeau travelled to Japan, he was promoted to shodan (first degree black belt) by Kodokan, the headquarters of world judo.

Before leaving office, Trudeau was awarded a nidan (second-degree) black belt by Mas. Trudeau's three sons, Justin, Alexandre and

no judo dojo.

Because I was a Kitsilano-ite and also a Kamino student, I remember thinking that Mas was quite sturdy looking and took the twice-weekly lessons seriously. He seemed like one of our most promising judoka.

After we were expelled from the B.C. coast in 1942, his family was among those who moved to sugar beet farms in Alberta.

In 1943, Issei blackbelt Yoshio Katsuta and Mission Nisei leader Yosh Senda started a dojo in Raymond, Alta., and Mas was among those who got back into judo training.

In 1949, a now 20 year old Mas enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force. His military career took him to different places in Europe, Japan and Canada including Toronto, where they lived in a home near Downsview. I was among his old B.C friends who got

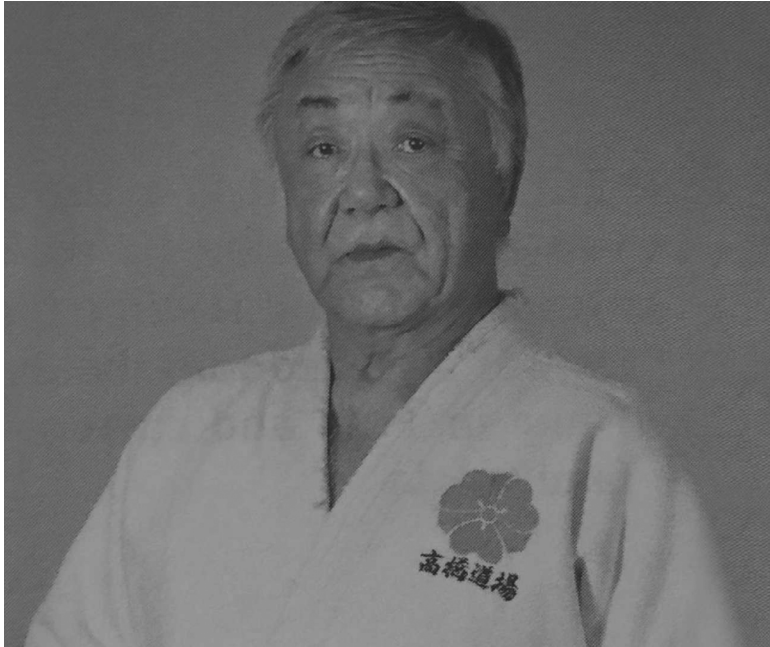


PHOTO COURTESY: TAKAHASHI DOJO

Masao "Mas" Takahashi, 8th dan.

to see Mas regularly and got to know June. Mas' final RCAF assignment was in Germany, where the family relocated.

In December 1961, the World Judo Championships were not held in Japan as the first two had been. Instead the championship was hosted in Paris and also included a meeting of the International Judo Federation (IJF).

The Canadian representatives attending the championships and

conference were Frank Hatashita of Toronto, president of the Canadian Kodokan Black Belt Association and myself, vice-president at that time.

Hatashita, another Canadian judo leader, was also the coach for the two-man Canadian team, made up of Fred Matt and Henk Janssen.

Being a magazine editor, I was assigned by *Sports Illustrated* magazine to report on the championships. It was the first time judo was reported in that popular American magazine.

The Takahashis being in Germany, naturally got special leave to attend the world champion-

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*"I remember thinking that Mas was quite sturdy looking and took the twice-weekly lessons seriously. He seemed like one of our most promising judoka."*

Michel as well as the children of his successor, Brian Mulroney, also took lessons at the Takahashi Dojo.

But back to Mas: He was born in Stave Falls, B.C. (part of Mission in the Fraser Valley). In the late 1930s, his family moved to Kitsilano in Vancouver.

When Mas was eight, he joined Atsumu Kamino sensei's Kitsila-



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country, you take any advantage to make friends, even if they are frogs!

One night in the late fall I noticed it was quiet when I went outside on the balcony. It was such a stark contrast to the noise before. I enjoyed the peace and quiet, but I missed the sound of the frogs that seemed to symbolize life. I felt more isolated in the winter and got lonelier.

A few weeks ago, I was outside at night. I heard the croaking of a frog and my heart skipped. The next night, there were a few more. When I walked through the rice paddies during the day, I noticed tadpoles swimming in the water in the rice fields. Larger dark green frogs, and many tiny, vibrant green frogs, almost the same colour as the freshly planted rice. It was as if they were born from the rice.

When I went outside the other night, I heard the noisy sounds of the frogs once again. I found out the frogs and other water life, such as small crabs and snails, are essential to the rice paddies' ecosystem. They provide fertilization and keep the water clean. The frogs are not just my friends; the farmers wait for them as well.

Flowers

What surprised me is the beautiful flowers and plants here all year round and the varieties of one species. Outside people's homes, they often have many pots of different kinds of flowers.

I thought the sakura season



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Columnist Caroline Ishii's town is filled with rice paddies, that change with the changing seasons.

was the highlight because it was magical and spectacular. Lately, the ajisai or hydrangea is the star, in front of people's homes and growing wild along the river and roadways. I thought these feelings were reserved only for sakura, but I was wrong.

Mind the Gap

Through noticing these transitions in the countryside, I realized that our lives are all about the gaps, the time between. We may not recognize this if we are not mindful and close to nature. We try to hang on to what we know, and resist change. But everything is always changing even when we don't want it to. You are

changing now as you read this.

The question is whether we want to accept and embrace this change, or lose the opportunity to be a part of it. When we notice, things stand still for a bit longer and our lives seem to move slower.

creativity, flexibility, resilience, courage, and patience. Perhaps we didn't even know we had them.

We kept busy before so we didn't have to stop. Stopping would mean spending time with ourselves. Don't we want to spend time alone with ourselves? We might quickly say yes, I do.

I believe so much of what we do is to avoid being lonely. I know this was the case for me. I stayed in long term relationships longer than I wanted to. I often forced myself to go events I didn't want to because I thought I should and I was afraid of being alone.

*"Through noticing these transitions in the countryside, I realized that our lives are all the gaps, the time between."*

Take when COVID-19 first hit. It seemed there was a collective stop in society. We were forced to go inside and ask ourselves, what can we do? How will we get through this? We had to go into ourselves and find the inner resources we've kept buried deep:

I thought I would be happier when I let go of the relationships and activities that weren't giving me joy. Still, there was something deeper tugging at me. I wasn't as joyful as I thought I would be.

With social media and advertising, it was easy to compare myself to others and feel that I was not good enough. I didn't like my own company. I know this sounds so cruel, but it was the truth. I didn't like who I had become, and I didn't feel worthy.

I've realized that being lonely is tied to feeling worthy, that we matter and belong. Why would I want to spend time with someone I don't like, right? I have this sense that I am not alone in these feelings.

I was reluctant to spend time with myself and used to blame others, my location and then COVID-19. While I didn't want to be alone initially, I was forced to become the creative and social director of my life.

What happened? Change is gradual. What we focus on becomes part of our lives. What do I really want? Our hearts talk to us all the time but listening is more complicated.

We would like someone to say to us. You've done an excellent job. You could stop now, you seem tired. Aren't you hungry? How about having dinner and calling it a day? You've done enough. You matter as you are. I love you. Rest. Let go. Those are kind words of someone who deeply loves you. Can that person be you?

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bell was struck the sound echoed down the valley bouncing from side to side—a experience never to be forgotten—and I rang this bell several times a day. What a wonder,” says Moriyama.

The bell has a distinct deep and clear sound, “go-on,” symbolizing “gratitude, kindness, goodness and benefit,” fitting sentiments to reflect what those who came to the province in the early 1940’s due to the forced uprooting from B.C. had experienced from Ontarians and reciprocated.

The inscribed dedication, a haiku by Takeo Nakano reads: “Kaede no kuni/Nikei shi kagayaku/Hyaku-nen sei” or “In the land of the maple leaf, Japanese Canadians proudly celebrate their centennial.”

In Japan, on New Years, a Buddhist ceremony called Joya No Kane occurs where a temple bell is rung 108 times to signify a cleansing of 108 passions to start the new year with a clear mind and body.

From 1977 to 2011, Japanese Canadians held special ceremonies to ring in the new year with a wish for peace and harmony. Few exceptions to the New Year’s Eve event occurred, once because of a severe ice storm, and another due to threats of coyote attack in the park.

One of many highlights, as remembered by Kunio Suyama was ringing in the millennium with over 200 celebrants holding a long rope attached to the bell striker.

In 2012, the church was not able to secure permission to hold the ceremony until it was too late to organize the event as Ontario Place was partially closed due to revitalization planning.

Told the future of the bell would depend on whether it fit in with the revitalization plans, the church asked the NAJC to send a letter asking the Ontario culture minister.

The NAJC asked the minister to give serious consideration to maintaining the bell at Ontario Place and keeping the community informed on the progress of the revitalization plans and the future of the bell.

In response the government sent assurance that the Japanese Canadian community would be kept informed of the progress of the revitalization plans for Ontario Place as it might affect the bell.

No recent communiques have been received and redevelopment plans have stalled.

Toronto NAJC President Lynn Deutscher Kobayashi regularly runs through Ontario Place and has been checking on the bell. She was appalled to hear that one redevelopment proposal was for a casino. The Toronto NAJC or TBC will be following up with the province to ensure this important community marker is not neglected.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of park space in the city and the need for more park space versus a casino may now be apparent.

Here is hoping.

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