

# Mindfulness in the city: *Shoshin* or beginner's mind



It is never too late to start again or try something new

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Columnist

OTTAWA — "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer," wrote French philosopher and author Albert Camus.

I love this saying. For me, it means finding the spirit of summer even during blustery winter days and harsh COVID-19 constraints in the city.

Where do you find the spirit of summer?

I find it in cross-country skiing, skating, and walking in nature. I also find it curling up with a good book, drinking my morning café au lait, inspiring music, spending time with a good friend, and writing. I hope you are keeping your spirit of summer alive.

I believe it starts by taking care of yourself and listening to

what you truly need. And it's often the small things that add up in your day and life. The cup of tea when you're weary, soaking in a hot bath, listening to inspiring music and dancing if you feel like it—why not? Or bundling up for a walk and looking up at the sky.

I've found that looking up at the sky is important. It is a reminder that there is a world out there, more than you and your current issues. For me, it's often instantly expansive, opening my heart and mind.

"You are the sky. Everything else is just the weather," says Buddhist monk Pema Chodron.

It's also for me about eating foods that fuel my spirit, whether for comfort or fun, but ideally a bit of both.

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## Lunar New Year

The year didn't start as we had expected or hoped, with stay-at-home measures and disappointments related to COVID-19.

This year, Feb. 12 is the Lunar New Year, commonly referred to as Chinese New Year in North America. The Lunar New Year is not only observed in China. It is celebrated across several countries and territories in Asia, including South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, and Tibet. More than

1.5 billion people celebrate Lunar New Year, making it one of the world's largest celebrations.

The Lunar New Year date changes every year, typically falling between Jan. 21 and Feb. 20 annually. This is because it is based on the traditional lunisolar calendar, regulated by the moon and sun cycles.

Japan used to celebrate the Lunar New Year. During the Meiji Era, Japan moved towards westernization. It adopted the Gregorian calendar, with the new year beginning on Jan. 1.

The Lunar New Year is a time for new beginnings and wishes for fortune, happiness, and health.

Regardless of where we live and what calendar we follow, we can start the year again.

We can start or restart almost anything, at any time, although our minds may tell us it's too late, we're too old, or we might fail.

## Shoshin (Beginner's Mind)

I love the concept of *shoshin* or "beginner's mind" in Zen Buddhism. It refers to experiencing life in a way that is unburdened by the past and by previous knowledge. It encourages us to start afresh wherever we are, with an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of perceptions.

We can have *shoshin* from one



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Columnist Caroline Ishii finds mindful moments outside while cross country skiing in Ottawa.

year to the next and from one breath to the next. COVID-19 is hard on us, but we can be incredibly hard on ourselves, too, speaking from personal experience.

Here's the secret I think we all know, but are afraid to admit.

There is a child within us all, even though we may become older in outer physical appearance. It's never too late to find this child. They are waiting for us.

Close your eyes, take some deep breaths, and you will remember. I

hope you will find them.

This child lives in the present, finds adventure in new days, and is excited by the smallest things.

The great naturalist, Rachel Carson, said in her book, *The Sense of Wonder*, "If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over all children, I should ask that her gift to each in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life."

Happy Lunar New Year!

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## From AKIYAMA P. 1

this background role or supportive role, and I just felt this was my time. I had a message. It was a very real experience for me, and I want to share it."

With an 80s-inspired sound, electric bass, synthesizer, drum machine, and layered vocals, the song is distinctly different from Akiyama's previous work. Akiyama also plays the upright bass and sings in Birds of Bellwoods, a Toronto-based indie-rock band.

Akiyama joined the band after graduating with a degree in jazz bass performance from McGill University. Music, art, and performance run deep in Akiyama's blood. His mother is a professional painter, and his father, Denis Akiyama, was a well-known Japanese Canadian actor and a musician.

Denis was an accomplished Sansei actor at a time when there was not much space for Asian actors in the mainstream media. He died from an aggressive cancer in June 2018. He was known for his work in *Miss Saigon*, both on Broadway and in Toronto. As well for starring opposite Keanu Reeves in *Johnny Mnemonic* and as a voice actor. Akiyama acted alongside his dad, playing father and son in the Disney film *Eloise at the Plaza*.

Growing up in an artistic household shaped Akiyama's identity as an artist. Music could always be heard in the house, whether someone was playing an

instrument or just listening, explains Akiyama. He started playing the piano around six years old.

Akiyama's parents showed him the possibility of pursuing art as a career while recognizing the hard work and dedication it takes to succeed.

Akiyama continues to work with Birds of Bellwoods, and the band has been working on their second album, after their debut album, *Victoria*, was released in 2019. In the summer, the group usually hits the road, performing shows and in festivals across Canada, which of course, was not possible this year.

Instead, this year has been a time of deep reflection, says Aki-

*"He was a lot to me, a teacher, a friend. Over the past few years I've been really reflecting on that," says Akiyama.*

yama. He returned to a song he wrote during the year his dad passed away, *Too Young*, one of the many songs he wrote to process and understand his grief.

"When he was still in this house, but he was quite sick, at that point, I didn't really understand grief. I wasn't really that sad. I knew he was going to die, but I wasn't really that sad about it, and I felt really emotionally barren. I felt almost irresponsible, why am I not reacting to this?" Akiyama explains.

"Through his passing, it hit me quite intensely, the song describes that journey to both sides, and it has been kind of therapeutic

for me, I think just to get those ideas out, and then release it to the world."

The song's 80s-inspired sound comes from a box of old cassette tapes Akiyama found while sorting through his father's things last year. A treasure trove filled with his father's recordings, music, songs—both finished and unfinished—voice notes, ideas, and even recordings of Denis practicing his one-man play.

Akiyama began going through and digitizing the tapes, knowing they would disintegrate and cease to exist if he didn't. He has digitized 40 hours of tape so far. They are decades old, some recorded even before Akiyama was born. The tapes became the inspiration for the sound of *Too Young*, paying homage to his father and the generation of music he came

from. Akiyama also used some of his father's guitars and keyboards on the track as another way to pay tribute to him.

"Though there was so much heaviness and intensity in these tapes, the overall theme was joy, positivity and love for music and art. You can see [his] creativity just being pored into these tapes," says Akiyama.

"He was just creating them for the sake of creating them, and there's so much beauty in that. I've tried definitely to encapsulate that in just enjoying things for the sake of enjoying them. I think [being] an artist as a profession, sometimes you can get lost in



PHOTO COURTESY: KINTARO AKIYAMA

Kintaro Akiyama and his father, Denis Akiyama, on the set of the Disney film, *Eloise at the Plaza*, where they acted together as father and son.

that and become career-driven or monetarily-driven, and then you lose sight of what you're truly supposed to be doing, which is creating for the sake of creating."

Over the last two years, Akiyama has also begun acting, which came to a grinding halt with the pandemic, he says. Now, he has been exploring voice-acting work, which he does at home. His father was well-known for his voice-acting work and had a thunderous voice, says Akiyama. It has become another way his career seems to be paralleling his father's.

"My dad never really gave me a ton of formal music lessons or

acting lessons, but I think just vicariously from being in his presence, I hold a lot of those skills and that kind of presence. I see it now, and I try to channel some of that," says Akiyama.

"He was a lot to me, a teacher, a friend. Over the past few years, I've been really reflecting on that, and his death was probably the single most impactful thing that has happened in my life. I try to kind of carry on his legacy in a way that he would."

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Kintaro Akiyama's song *Too Young* is available on all streaming platforms, such as Apple Music, Spotify and YouTube now.