

# Connecting memory with historical documents

Finding answers in the  
Landscapes of Injustice  
Digital Archives

Kelly Fleck  
Editor

VICTORIA — Often stories about my family's history, especially those from the distant past, feel like legends or myths. They are stories from memories belonging to people long gone, often untethered to specific dates or places.

Over the last few years, I've had the opportunity to learn more about my family history, and those stories have started to take root in real life and places.

In December of 2019, I was in Mio, Japan, my family's ancestral home, standing in front of my great-great-grandfather's grave.

Mio is a small seaside village in Wakayama prefecture, with deep ties to Steveston, B.C. In 1888, Mio fisherman Gihei Kuno arrived in Steveston and saw how bountiful salmon fishing was in the Fraser River. He encouraged others from Mio to come to Steveston to work.

We believe my great-great grandfather, Bunichi Hamade, arrived in Steveston in 1899. He would have only been 25 years old. His wife, Ito, and daughter, Hana, stayed in Mio. In 1902, he



PHOTO CREDITS: BC RAIL

Hamade Family Store at 2700 Commercial Dr. (Photo taken in 1914, before it became family store) when B.C. Rail was installing poles.

became a naturalized Canadian citizen, allowing him to work for the fishing cannery as a fish buyer, and he bought and lived on his first boat in Steveston.

He urged Hana, my great-grandmother, to move to Canada. She came in 1918, when she was only 19 years old, with her husband, Matsunosuke.

After writing about my Mio experience in *Nikkei Voice*, Landscapes of Injustice project

manager Michael Abe asked if I would be interested in learning more about my family through case files collected in their digital archives.

*"Accessing these files has been a way to authenticate and understand my Bachan's memories about our family."*

The archives are a culmination of four years of research from project members out of the University of Victoria, including case files from the Office of the Custodian,

Bird Commission, land-title documents, fishing-boat-ledger files, and protest letters.

*Nikkei Voice* has been working with the Landscapes of Injustice project over the last year, sharing stories about Japanese Canadians' discoveries in their family case files.

All of the stories I've heard about my family history come from my Bachan, who has always been very open to sharing her stories and answering my ques-

tions, which I realize I am very fortunate to have. But she was only 12 when her family was interned. So accessing these files has been a way to authenticate and understand my Bachan's memories about our family, as well, it has been a way to dig into her parents' experience.

I particularly wanted to learn about the store Hana and Matsunosuke ran in Vancouver. The store is the centre of many of my Bachan's stories about her childhood.

While my Bachan still remembers the address, she couldn't remember the store name, so opening Hana's files and seeing that information in front of me was like a light going on.

In the case files, I found the store, Star Confectionery, was right where my Bachan remembered, at 2700 Commercial Dr. It was a small grocery store and connected to the back was the family home, a four-room frame house that they rented for \$15 a month.

My Bachan always says since Hana was an only child and lonely growing up in Mio, she wanted lots of children. I always imagine that home brimming with life from the nine Hamade children coming and going.

It was in front of the store where my Bachan learned to ride her brothers' bicycle. When her

See CASE FILES P. 8

# Mindfulness in the City: Renewal in the springtime



Spring is about growth  
and renewal. Are we  
growing too?

Caroline Ishii  
Columnist

OTTAWA — I was in the park watching brown leaves from last autumn cling onto the branches of a tree. I wondered how the leaves hung on through the winter of fierce snowstorms, crushing ice pellets, and high winds?

As the wind went through the trees, they made a beautiful sound. Crispy, fluttering, like they were waiting to fall. Were they happy they made it this far?

I feel like these leaves are us. We are resilient, making it through a harsh winter with strict pandemic restrictions. But when is it time to let go of what we were and become who we want to be? How do we know when to let go?

Trees know when to bud and grow leaves. They don't obsess or

overthink, it just happens by being a tree. Can we be the same?

Can we stand in our presence and have life meet us where we are? Do we need to rush, push, or force ourselves to go faster than we are comfortable?

### Running with friends

This reminds me of running with friends. I don't enjoy this because I go much slower than others. I like my speed, it's comfortable for me.

When I run with others, I feel I must push myself to keep up. I can't even have a conversation because I am struggling to keep up and gasping for air, which is why I wanted to run with friends in the first place.

It's great going out with a friend for encouragement and support, but when it turns into being unkind to ourselves, why do we do it?

Why are we so mean to ourselves? Because we compare our-

*"What if I told you that not knowing, trying something new, and making mistakes are essential to human growth and well-being?"*

selves to others? Because we want to be better than we are? What is better anyway? And who defines better? We do!

### Self-compassion

Being kind to myself is something that I am learning in every moment I am not. We learn the most when we fail. How do we

grow unless we take risks?

As we age, we realize we do not have all the answers. We are fearful of trying something new because we may fail and look foolish. And we may speak harshly to ourselves when we make mistakes.

What if I told you that not knowing, trying something new, and making mistakes are essential to human growth and well-being?

### Creating an Alzheimer's resistant brain

We know it's important to get physical exercise and eat healthy foods for our well-being. But did you know that it's also critical to give our brain a workout every day to keep it active and healthy?

Neuroscientist and author of *Still Alice* Lisa Genova said in her 2017 TED talk, "The experience of having Alzheimer's is ultimately a result of losing synapses.

The average brain has over a hundred trillion synapses, which is fantastic; we've got a lot to work with. And this isn't a static number.

We gain and lose synapses all the time, through a process called neural plasticity. Every time we learn something new, we are creating and strengthening new neural connections, new synapses."

In recent studies on preventing dementia and Alzheimer's,



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Spring is a time of rejuvenation. What lessons can we learn for our well-being from the renewal of spring?

researchers have found that even more important than doing crossword puzzles, which confirms what we already know, is to try something new.

"You don't want to simply retrieve information you've already learned, because this is like traveling down old, familiar streets, cruising neighbourhoods you already know. You want to pave new neural roads," says Genova.

Building an Alzheimer's resistant brain means giving your brain new experiences every day. It doesn't have to be strenuous like rock climbing or daring like

bungee jumping. It's about constantly learning new things, approaching daily routines in new ways to break patterns, and trying something different to engage new or rarely used mental pathways.

It's as simple as taking a new route to the corner store, using your non-dominant hand to make a phone call, learning a few lines in Korean, or making bread for the first time. It doesn't have to be complicated or demanding; it can be fun and delicious.

See MINDFULNESS P. 15



From AOKI P. 10

did not talk about her paternal grandparents' history with Japanese Canadian internment. However, she celebrated her heritage by going to the Powell Street Festival every August and eating Japanese noodles on New Year's Eve. As a child, Aoki would proudly tell people she was Japanese Canadian.

"I remember having this grin but not really knowing what it means to be Japanese Canadian. So that stemmed the beginning of my heritage-based research, of questioning what does it mean to be Japanese Canadian? Where do I belong, and how can I, through my art, create a sense of belonging and understanding," says Aoki.

Part of this research included participating in the Powell Street Festival walking tour last fall, where Aoki learned about the history of the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall (VJLS-JH).

Inspired by the school's history as the only building not confiscated from the Japanese Canadian community during the war, Aoki is currently working with VJLS-JH to create a dance film with music created by Onibana Taiko, a Vancouver taiko troupe.

"At that moment, I [decided] I wanted to perform in this space. The act of actually performing in this space speaks to the resilience of Japanese Canadians, the fact that it's still there," says Aoki.

Aoki's heritage-based research



PHOTO CREDIT: LUNG LUI

"The Love Bubble Project" was a pop-up art installation from Small Stages, that took place throughout March.

has led to deep reflection within herself to create personal and vulnerable work. Up until this point in Aoki's career, she has created ensemble dance work. With her mentor, dance artist Jill Henis, Aoki has been working through how to carry the weight of and honour her family's history through her dance, which has been heavy and challenging.

"This heritage-based research was also a place for me to be vul-

nerable and explore being the author of my own movement, which I find for myself as an artist is scary, but at the same time it is exciting to learn how to trust

*"My feelings and my thoughts go beyond the words, so that's why movement is the hidden language where I can explore," says Aoki.*

yourself and that your movement language has power behind it," says Aoki.

As Aoki searches for answers, digs deeper into understanding

her own identity, and sharing and discussing her art with other Nikkei, she is finding a sense of belonging in the community.

"I find that my feelings and my thoughts go beyond the words, so that's why movement is the hidden language where I can explore and speak," she says.

\*\*\*

To learn more about Jennifer Aoki, visit [www.jenniferaoki.com](http://www.jenniferaoki.com).

From NAJC P. 14

community.

There is funding available under two programs. The Cultural Development program provides financial assistance to community and cultural organizations and individuals for projects and activities which promote and develop JC culture and heritage. The Sports, Education, and Arts Development (SEAD) program promotes the athletic, artistic and academic development of Japanese Canadians at specialized or national levels. SEAD is not meant to replace scholarships or bursaries.

The Endowment Fund Committee members, Sarah Matsushita, Sue Doi, and Yukari Peerless, are planning to have an information session for anyone interested in applying. Date TBD. Eligibility and application information is on the NAJC website, [www.najc.ca/funds-and-awards](http://www.najc.ca/funds-and-awards).

Please keep in touch and let us know if you have any ideas for online programming. Also, we are interested in what's happening in your community.

For example, do you know a JC senior who is celebrating a special birthday? Let us know by emailing [national@najc.ca](mailto:national@najc.ca). We will share our best wishes on our Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/najc.ca](http://www.facebook.com/najc.ca)

Stay safe and enjoy the spring.

National Association of Japanese Canadians, National Executive Board

\*\*\*

From MINDFULNESS P. 7

Did curiosity kill the cat?

I've always been a curious soul. As children, we ask many questions. I continue to be curious. I absorb as many podcasts, videos, and books as I can on personal development and ask many questions.

The proverb "curiosity killed the cat" warns of the dangers of unnecessary investigation or experimentation. Instead, I believe not having a curiosity about life can endanger us.

Through societal pressure, fitting in with our peers, and "growing up," we think we should know everything and not ask questions or as many. We lose our curiosity.

Studies in positive psychology, which is the scientific study of human well-being, repeatedly show that zest, curiosity, hope, gratitude, and love relate to higher levels of happiness.

Another saying is that a cat has nine lives. In ancient times, cats were worshiped because they seemed magical in their ability to take risks and survive with their agility, flexibility, and sturdiness.

I believe we can have many lives as well, and curiosity is the key to entering them. My friend refers to significant periods in her life as a "mini life." I love this concept.

Good or bad?

We are often quick to label something in our lives as "good" or "bad." This reminds me of my grandfather, Otomatsu Ishii.

Otomatsu came to Canada from Japan in 1902 in search of a better life. After three years of



PHOTO CREDITS: CAROLINE ISHII

Spring blooms that columnist Caroline Ishii captured in Japan and Ottawa over the last couple of years. Spring is a time of rejuvenation. What lessons can we learn for our well-being from the renewal of spring?

hard labour in B.C., he gained his Canadian citizenship.

He bought an island north of Vancouver Island, sent for a picture bride, they had a family, and he did what he loved, fishing. He seemed to have a "good" life.

During the Second World War, my grandfather and his family were sent to internment camps.

At the end of the war, my grandparents were given two choices by the Canadian government, either move East of the Rockies or to Japan. Unable to return to their home, they were

heartbroken.

Otomatsu brought his family to his hometown in Nushima, Japan. The war had ravaged Nushima, and there was nothing left of his family home. He felt guilty

for bringing his family there and died shortly afterward.

His last request was for his ashes to be placed in the Ishii gravesite in Nushima, and he told his children to find their way back to Canada. My father George re-

turned to Toronto, where he met his wife Suyeko, and my sister and I were born.

Meeting Otomatsu

While in Ochi, Japan last year, I searched for my grandfather's gravesite in Nushima. I found Otomatsu's gravesite through a friend in Ochi, who took me there.

No one had visited him since they left for Canada 70 years ago.

I felt enormous respect and gratitude to my grandfather for the hardship and sacrifices he made. I told him so.

I said he might have thought

his life was "bad" and he made mistakes by going to Canada where he was mistreated and later returning to Japan where life was hard after the war.

I said, "It turned out okay, grandpa. I was born in Canada. I came to Nushima, and I understand why you loved it—it's beautiful. I have a good life. Thank you so much."

Connecting the dots

Our lives are fleeting and part of something continuous that will move forward in ways we can't imagine.

This relates to what we're going through with COVID-19. How do we know what will happen in the future because of it? What are the important lessons we are learning now? Lessons like how essential human connection is, or the simple things we took for granted, like meeting friends for coffee and hugging someone you love.

This is just one "mini life" in our book and one book in the library we call "family history."

Sometimes, only by looking back on our lives and family history can we connect those dots.

Co-founder and CEO of Apple Steve Jobs said in his 2005 Stanford commencement address, "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So, you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life."

\*\*\*