

Mata Ashita writers share memory in verse at workshop



PHOTO COURTESY: SALLY ITO

Author Sally Ito led last month Mata Ashita writing group with a workshop on the tradition of storytelling.

Read an excerpt from the collaborative poem inspired by Sally Ito

Leanne Toshiko Simpson
Contributor

TORONTO — The Mata Ashita community continued to grow last month, with Sally Ito joining in for a virtual workshop around the tradition of storytelling. With many returning writers and new faces as well, moments of family connection were shared in breakout rooms, resulting in heartfelt writing across generations.

Inspired by the closing poem in Ito’s book, *The Emperor’s Orphans*, Mata Ashita writers each contributed a line of “directions,” guided by their own memories, to the “never-arriving home” of Japanese Canadian identity. You can read a short excerpt from this powerful collaborative poem. Much appreciation to contributors Angela Uyeda, Calvin Jim, Lillian Nakamura Maguire, Linz Kenyon, Misty Cozac, Pat Rose, Sachiko Okuda, Sharon Kawabata and others for sharing their

beautiful words. Thanks to Mata Ashita speaker Michael Prior, these writers will soon receive a copy of his latest book of poetry, *Burning Province*. Prior will be visiting Mata Ashita on March 6, followed by Jeff Chiba Stearns and Lillian Michiko Blakey on April 3, Hiromi Goto and Erica Hiroko Isomura on May 1, and Ruth Ozeki on June 5. To register for an upcoming workshop, please find Mata Ashita on Instagram @matashitawriting or visit www.eventbrite.ca/e/mata-ashita-the-japanese-canadian-writers-circle-tickets-132358986291

Mapping our generations after Sally Ito's *Nation of Birds*

Dreaming of walking through your well-tended garden,
we turn left to catch the streetcar to tomorrow.

Bright smiles when talking about bachan, but confusion searching for roots in Japan. I’ve run away again;

The old familiar house is gone, with my childhood memories. I may not have the spoken language, but I think I have the heart

of it, learned from my parents. Pour water in the kappa’s sara and follow it
by uncle’s gramophone, playing nothing but Japanese opera.

Find a tray, filled with sweet inarizushi. My grandmother’s house smelled strangely wonderful – green tea, rice, pink bean cakes and incense.

In another world, we feel perplexed, then humiliated, when the waitress at the Eaton’s snack bar served our friends but refused to take our order.

A thread of Japanese ways rises, submerges, and then rises again in the Canadian tapestry of my days, my life. Memories travel

with longing through time. There is always company at this never-arriving home.

Mindfulness in the city: Having tea with Mara



Learning to live with our demons and what we cannot control

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OTTAWA — This year I made a promise to share more of my stories before I die. Don’t worry, I’m not dying—at least that I know of—anytime soon. I woke up one morning and called my best friend, Barb, in a panic. I asked her if something should happen to me, could she release my writings? I explained that I have so much I want to share with others. To help them know they are not alone and alleviate their suffering. She agreed, and we discussed the logistics. The next day I called her again and said sheepishly, “I guess it’s me that needs to release my stories, while I am alive?” I knew the answer to my question. But how and when? Over a year ago, I started to gather my stories to release but left for Japan for a year. I wrote daily from Ochi, Japan, where I was placed in the countryside

to work as an assistant English teacher with JET, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program. I returned to Canada in August 2020, where I continue to write. I wonder when will be the right time to release this gigantic snowball of stories? When will I have the courage? **When is the Right Time?** I’ve learned there is never a “right time.” There won’t be a time when the light will go on, and you will hear a loud voice say, do it now. In fact, it may be the opposite because the bully inside us says, “who are you to do this? What if people make fun of your work? Maybe you should wait a bit longer?” Don’t we want to succeed? Yes, but the bully in us is critical and negative, and most of all, scared. What do we do about the bully? We realize they will always be there. Instead of trying to push them out, since they will not go anyway, maybe we sit them down and give them a cup of tea. **Having Tea with Mara** I love the Buddhist story, *Inviting Mara to Tea*. The night before his enlightenment, the Buddha fought a great battle with the Demon God Mara, and Mara left. However, Mara continued to make unexpected appearances. Instead of ignoring Mara or driving him away, the Buddha would calmly acknowledge his presence, saying, “I see you, Mara, let’s have tea.” Mara would stay for a while and then go. Throughout Mara’s



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

An exhibit that columnist Caroline Ishii stumbled across while cross-country skiing by the Ottawa River. A mural by Tara-Lynn Kozma-Perrin, *We are Resilient*. The exhibit is a collaboration between Canadian Heritage and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada.

comings and goings, the Buddha remained free and undisturbed. Who is Mara for us in this story? Mara is our ego and visits us in the form of troubling emotions or fearsome stories. Why did the Buddha offer Mara tea? By saying, “I see you, Mara,” and offering him tea, the Buddha is accepting the experiences we don’t want with kindness. Why is this important? We can’t fight or drive away emotions and thoughts we don’t want because they will be back and continue to create havoc in our hurts and fears. How do we let go of the emotions we do not want? By observing and accepting conditions such as happiness and unhappiness as transient. When you notice your mental states with pure consciousness, you gain power over them, which leads to more inner peace and less suffering. What is pure consciousness? In Buddhist mindfulness teachings, this means distinguishing between the temporary states of the mind and the knowing of them. Most people lump everything together as the mind itself. What kind of tea do we serve Mara? This question arises from the chef in me and my curious soul. I feel Buddha would say to me, the best, the tea you love most. In her book *Radical Acceptance*, psychologist and internationally renowned expert on Buddhist meditation Tara Brach urges us to accept ourselves and

"I've learned there is never a "right time." There won't be a time when the light will go on, and you will hear a loud voice say, do it now."

NAJC President's message for March 2021

The NAJC uses online programming to have important discussions

Lorene Oikawa
Contributor

Seventy-five years ago, Japanese Canadians received a decision on a legal challenge that went all the way to the Privy Council in the United Kingdom.

In the case of the government's exile orders to force Canadians of Japanese ethnicity to Japan, the Privy Council sided with Parliament.

In *The New Canadian* newspaper, the response was unyielding, "We must continue the fight because we believe in the justice of our cause and because we firmly believe that there is in Canada a thing called democracy."

Unchecked, the government stripped Japanese Canadians of their rights and freedoms. Almost 80 years ago, the massive uprooting of Japanese Canadians started on Feb. 26, 1942. Some were only given 24 hours notice.

On March 4, 1942, Japanese Canadians were ordered to turn over all property and belongings

to the Custodian of Enemy Alien Property. Order-in-Council P.C. 1665 passed, and this legislated theft was called a protective measure.

On March 16, 1942, the first of nearly 8,000 Japanese Canadians arrived at Hastings Park in Vancouver.

They were held there sometimes for months, like the maternal side of my family, before being shipped further.

Further injustices would continue, and it wasn't until 1949, four years after the Second World War ended, that Japanese Cana-

gone away. We have seen hate incidents explode during the pandemic.

The Vancouver Police Department reported a 97 per cent increase in hate incidents and a 717 per cent increase in anti-Asian hate incidents from 2019 to 2020. The hate manifests in the rhetoric of white supremacists and their groups, in the long-established systemic racism in society, and targeted attacks against Indigenous, and racialized individuals and organizations.

There isn't a simple answer to eliminate racial discrimination. It takes all of us, individuals, groups, organizations, businesses, unions, schools, media, and government to take action.

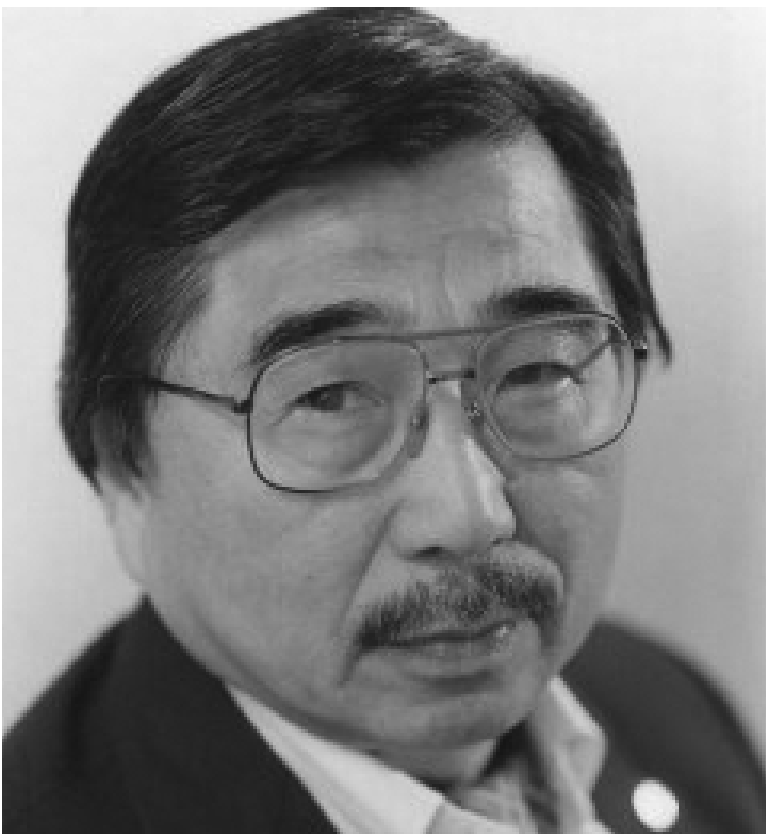


PHOTO COURTESY: KOREMATSU FAMILY

Photo of Gordon Hirabayashi in 1986. NAJC Human Rights Committee is organizing an online tribute to Gordon Hirabayashi on March 25, at 5:30 p.m. CT.

"The NAJC continues our work, including sharing stories and having important discussions through our online programming."

dians could return to the West Coast of B.C. But everything was taken away from them, and there were no homes to return to.

Amid this timeline review, let us remember March 21 is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. The origin of this day is when 69 people were killed by the police at a peaceful demonstration against apartheid "pass laws" in 1960 in Sharpeville, South Africa.

A different community under attack but motivated by hate for people based on their ethnicity. Unfortunately, the hate hasn't

One important piece is education, sharing of our stories, and building inclusivity. Too often, Indigenous stories, including pre-colonial ones and racialized stories, are not a part of Canadian history.

We are seen as the "others" and not belonging. Being a Yonsei, fourth-generation Canadian, doesn't prevent me from being questioned, "Where are you really from?"

The NAJC continues our work, including sharing stories and having important discussions

through our online programming, which has greatly expanded since the pandemic.

Until we can safely gather in person, join us online. www.najc.ca/online-programs/ For news and updates, subscribe to NAJC e-news at www.najc.ca/subscribe/

Three of our upcoming events:

Remembering Gordon Hirabayashi

NAJC Human Rights Committee is organizing an online tribute to *Gordon Hirabayashi, Remembering Gordon Hirabayashi, Courage*

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Toronto NAJC message

Sending out masks with special messages to the community

Lynn Deutscher Kobayashi
Contributor

TORONTO — It was a thrill to provide our 2019, 2020 and 2021 senior members with beautiful masks with a Japanese theme. *Sho-chiku-bai* means pine tree, bamboo and plum.

Bamboo stays green through the year and plum trees bloom earlier than other flowers so the three have the meaning of "withstand adversity and success at last."

A maple was added to signify that the company, Dakko is a Japanese Canadian business.

The reviews are in and recipients were surprised and pleased with the tasteful and meaningful design of this practical gift.



PHOTO CREDIT: ADDIE KOBAYASHI



PHOTO CREDIT: RON SHIMIZU

Modeling the Sho-chiku-bai masks made by Dakko.

the support of the Federal government as it provided a lovely surprise via Canada Post to our seniors.

It was also very gratifying for our board members to be able to do something special for our dedicated supporters and members. We will also be sending masks to non-members who bought tickets for the cancelled Freedom Day event.

Freedom Day 2021
April 1, 2021 – 7:00 PM

Join us for our annual celebration of the day that Japanese Canadians the vote and freedom to live anywhere in Canada.

We have not finalized the agenda yet, but the online event will involve a quiz. Stay tuned and check www.torontonajc.ca in March for details.



PHOTO COURTESY: GEORGES SEGUIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In the Buddhist story, *Inviting Mara to Tea*, the Buddha asks the demon Mara to sit and have tea every time he unexpectedly appears.

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our pain, so we can treat ourselves with the care and kindness we deserve.

She writes, "our habit of being a fair-weather friend to ourselves—of pushing away or ignoring whatever darkness we can—is deeply entrenched. But just as a relationship with a good friend is marked by understanding and compassion, we can learn to bring these same qualities to our own inner life."

While the unwanted visitor Mara, or whatever name you want to give your bully or demon, is busy drinking our best tea, we press the send button, we make that call, or we start what we are avoiding.

Last March, I was speaking

with Kelly Fleck, the editor of *Nikkei Voice*, about the impact of COVID-19 on her life and the paper. She said they had to close their office at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre. She was putting together the *Nikkei Voice* from her home.

It wasn't easy, but she was making it work for the time being. One year later, Kelly continues to put the paper together from her home and has done a superb job. Kudos to her and her team! We are stronger and more resilient than we think. It's been a year living with COVID-19, the unwanted guest we didn't want in the first place. It continues to overstay its unwelcome like Mara.

Drink your best tea with it, and keep on going.
