

Mindfulness in the city: Winter manifesto



Embracing the Danish concept of *hygge*, or coziness in the winter

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OTTAWA — With the colder weather and shorter daylight hours, I struggle to stay uplifted and positive.

In my frequent walks in nature, there are changes. Trees are losing their leaves, and the grounds are covered with leaves, pine needles, and frost on colder mornings. Birds are flying south.

Nature changes organically with the seasons. Can we change too?

I've been fascinated by the Danish concept of *hygge*, pronounced "hoo-gah". It is a quality of coziness and comfortable conviviality that evokes a feeling of contentment or well-being.

Hygge is derived from a sixteenth-century Norwegian term, *hugga*, meaning comfort, related to the English word hug.

Denmark is known for having intense winters, but an integral part of *hygge* encompasses coziness, warmth, and well-being while enjoying the simple pleasures in everyday life.

According to the official Danish travel website, "*Hygge* means creating a warm atmosphere and enjoying the good things in life with good people. The warm glow of candlelight is *hygge*. Cozying up with a loved one for a movie—that's *hygge*, too. And there's nothing more *hygge* than sitting around with friends and family, discussing the big and small things in life. Perhaps *hygge* explains why the Danes are some of the happiest people in the world."

Can we learn from the Danish

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spirit of *hygge*?

In most countries with winters, certain traditions and comfort foods keep people warm and cozy during the colder months.

Winter in Japan

In Japan, the seasons and food go hand-in-hand.

With colder weather, people

enjoy steaming *nabe* (hot pot dishes) with family and friends. Street vendors sell piping hot roasted *yaki imo* (sweet potatoes). Simmering pots of *oden* appear at convenience stores, with ingredients like fish cake, *daikon* radish, *konnyaku* (yam cake), and my favourite, tofu pockets with *mochi* in a soy sauce kelp broth.

Also, hot packs of different sizes appear in stores. In Canada, pocket warmers are usually used when you are enjoying winter activities. In Japan, they come in various sizes for different body parts, with adhesive backings, and last 24 hours. On a cold day, a friend gave me a hot pack to try on my lower back, and I was in heaven.

Without central heating and little insulation, most Japanese homes are cold and damp in the winter. To save on electricity, only certain rooms in a home are heated as needed with spot heaters and the *kotatsu*, a low table with a small heater built underneath and a heavy blanket that covers the table to the ground to keep your lower body and feet warm as you sit at the table.

I loved the *kotatsu*. However, it can be dangerous. Not only because you are advised not to fall asleep under the cover, because it



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

When the cold weather comes around, enjoying warm food with good friends is a way to embrace *hygge*.

can become too hot, but also because you can become addicted to it.

In some places where I lived in Japan, I would come in from the cold outside to the chill inside and immediately rush to turn on the *kotatsu*. I spent a lot of time under the warmth of the cover that engulfed more and more of my body each time, making it hard to leave my warm den.

Ottawa-Gatineau winter

Now that I'm living in Ottawa-Gatineau, one of the best

remedies for winter is to be prepared for it and enjoy the outdoors, whether walking, skating, snowshoeing, or cross-country skiing.

This year, I'm prepared with comfortable waterproof boots and the warmest long coat I could find. These will keep me warm during the city and forest walks.

I'm also finding ways to brighten up my living environment and make it more *hygge* this winter.

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Unraveling centuries of family history with scroll

Using a grandfather's *koseki tohon* to uncover family history

Fumiko Miyahara
Contributor

In the first part of this article, Fumiko Miyahara writes about discovering her family's genealogy scroll. Around 2.5 m long, the family scroll was beautifully handwritten by Fumiko's great-great-grandfather, Rikichi Miyahara.

The scroll covers over 200 years of family history, starting with Miyahara's ancestor, So-ue-mon Miyahara, who died in 1704.

Read part one in the October 2022 issue of *Nikkei Voice*, where Fumiko translates and uncovers her family's history as retainers of the House of Ryuzoji, one of the three mighty warlords of Kyushu, to living through the end of the Edo Period and beginning of the Meiji era.

Part II

The scroll ended with my great-grandfather Yoshitaro Miyahara's (1860-1925) entry. It was apparent that he wrote in additional information on his father Rikichi, such as the date of Rikichi's death, as well as the

information on his own wife and children. The handwriting was completely different.

Because I was the only one in my generation who was retired with "lots of" time on hand, once the scroll translations were done, my next project was to continue the genealogy, adding the information on my grandfather Miyahara and my father's generations.

It became clear that we did not know enough about our grandfather. I felt I needed to add at least the same level of information as there was on the scroll for other ancestors.

There was a rumour that our

"It turned out that the koseki tohon of my grandfather, Nobuta Miyahara (1886 – 1969), was a little treasure itself."

grandfather had a first wife, but they divorced because she could not bear any children. None of us knew her name or how long they were married. We did not know our grandmother Miyahara's maiden name or her father's name.

What becomes useful in these cases is a document called *koseki tohon*. (*Tohon* is a copy of the entire *koseki*, while *shohon* pertains only to the individual). I'm sure that many Nikkei people are familiar with *koseki*.

The *koseki* system registers all Japanese citizens by household under a household head and re-

cords milestone information on the individual, such as the date of birth, relationship to the household head, parents of the individual, date of marriage, date of adoption, date and reason for removal from that particular *koseki*, or date of death. All are in one place.

Another unique feature of *koseki* is that it is associated with *honseki* (registered domicile or the city/town/ward the Japanese citizen considers to have their roots), which is often the address where the household head was born. It can be a puzzle to figure out where an individual's *honseki*

is.

But it holds key information one needs to know because *koseki* is maintained by municipalities. A *koseki* copy must be requested from the city hall where the *honseki*/permanent domain is.

I decided we needed our grandfather's *koseki tohon* to learn more about him. The national *koseki* system in Japan came into place in 1871. My grandfather was born in 1886. (The year is based on *koseki*. The engraving on the Miyahara tomb differs by a couple of years.)

Only one, their spouse, or direct descendants, such as a child or a grandchild, can request a copy of *koseki*, so I asked my brother in Japan to obtain it.



PHOTO COURTESY: FUMIKO MIYAHARA

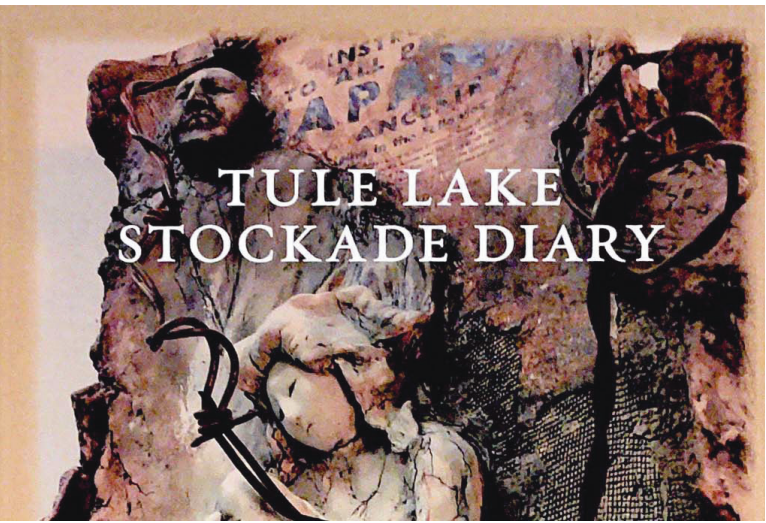
Fumiko Miyahara's cousin at the Miyahara family grave. He worked to clean the graves and graveyard in preparation for Obon. He is the last Miyahara to look after the gravesite. As he does not have any children, the family does not know what is going to happen in the future. He does not wish to adopt a child to pass on the responsibility of looking after the graves. Such adoption is also becoming extremely difficult because there are not enough children. "Who is going to look after the family grave?" is becoming a common problem in Japan nowadays.

It turned out that the *koseki tohon* of my grandfather, Nobuta Miyahara (1886 – 1969), was a little treasure itself. We learned his first wife's name. They were married for 12 years! The divorce was filed a couple of months be-

fore Nobuta's father died. Probably, knowing his death was imminent, my great-grandfather thought he had to do something about this heirless situation.

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PWFC online talk: Examining the *Tule Lake Stockade Diary*



Tule Lake Stockade Diary by Tatsuo Ryusei Inouye, a Japanese American incarcerated in a U.S. concentration camp during the Second World War.

Starvation, Sickness, and Shaved Heads: Transnational Citizenship and the “Alienation” of Japanese American Bodies in Wartime Incarceration

Join us for an online talk by Masumi Izumi, Doshisha University, on Tuesday, Nov. 29, 2022, from 3:30 to 5 p.m. (PST).

Zoom link: <https://events.uvic.ca/capi/event/70017-starvation-sickness-and-shaved-heads-transnational>

This talk will examine the notion of “citizenship” in its generative power to construct “aliens,”

using the *Tule Lake Stockade Diary*, written by a Japanese American incarcerated in a U.S. concentration camp during the Second World War.

The U.S. government precariously constructed Japanese Americans as enemy citizens and aliens, and Japanese Americans were forced to reconstruct their sense of belonging and allegiance in reaction to this state violence.

The talk will unpack the complex ways in which Tatsuo Ryusei Inouye, the author of the *Tule Lake Stockade Diary*, expressed his citizenship through his incarcerated body. Inouye was a Kibei

(born in the U.S. and grew up in Japan) Nisei judo practitioner and a dual citizen—a transnational figure even in peacetime. He left detailed descriptions of the physical conditions within the stockade, as well as the prisoners’ interactions with the camp wardens, the FBI, and the military.

By juxtaposing the photographs of the so-called “pro-Japan trouble makers” with the contemporary account of prison life that reveals Inouye’s thoughts and the transformation of his incarcerated body, this talk will elucidate a Japanese American’s desperate attempt to reconstruct some principles upon which he could build his own sense of citizenship apart from the ones imposed on him from his two warring home countries.

Dr. Masumi Izumi, PhD (American Studies), is a professor in the department of global and regional studies at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan, where she teaches North American studies. Masumi researches Japanese American and Japanese Canadian wartime experiences, as well as their post-internment communities and trans-Pacific migration.

She is a current visiting scholar with the Past Wrongs, Future Choices project.



PHOTO CREDIT: DR. JONATHAN ETO

Yosakoi dancers were cheered on by an energetic and excited crowd at Japan Festival CANADA 2022 in Mississauga.

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cestors. People participated in this folk entertainment, making a circle around the centre.

Honestly, I was very surprised when I saw many people show their interest in the folk dance, even if they didn’t know the moves. They were very eager to learn, and I admired that. Bon Odori is a very Japanese thing when it comes to summer and brings back memories. Since the pandemic, there were very few Bon Odori celebrations until this year, even in Japan. I’m here in Canada and was so glad I enjoyed the summer festival. Here I was able to see how Japanese culture was celebrated.

From my perspective, Canadi-

ans enjoyed dancing without any hesitation compared to Japanese people. In Japan, we tend to be shy in public, even if we know how to move. They had fun and put so much passion into their dancing, regardless of age.

It was a very good opportunity to experience Japanese culture. This annual event opened my eyes to how people celebrate and embrace Japanese culture in Canada and outside Japan.

To all of the Japanese students who are studying abroad all the way here in Canada with millions of different passions and goals, I highly recommend that you volunteer at cultural events so that you can get a better understanding of Canada and Japan.

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It’s part of my winter manifesto.

I’ll use white fairy lights to decorate and make spaces more magical. I’ll light candles. My latest love is candles with rechargeable batteries. I don’t have to worry about putting out the candles should I fall asleep under warm blankets while reading or watching a good movie.

I’ll make more time for hot baths with healing bath salts and a good book.

After being outdoors, I’ll savour nourishing soups and sip hot cocoa with marshmallows or a warming chai tea.

And I’m scheduling some quality time to connect with friends, either attending a theatre show, or music concert, going to a new restaurant, or just walking in the snow.

trees of various shapes, birds flying from branch to branch, and chipmunks scampering among the leaves.

The more I relax, the more I see. I can hear myself say, “thank you for bringing me here.”

On my walks, I hug a tree, but always when no one is looking, so I don’t look like the crazy lady who hugs trees. By connecting with a tree that is deeply rooted and has probably been around for longer than I have, I ground myself. I ask the tree to nourish, inspire, and help me be more present.

We rely on devices to support us in our communications and

I feel the earth beneath my feet and the skies above.

I breathe deeply, drawing energy from above my head, down my back, and into my feet to the ground below. From the ground, I bring my energy back inside my body, toward the top of my head and the skies above. I keep on doing this for 30 seconds while I breathe deeply. I am a tree with my roots firmly planted in the ground.

And when I open my eyes, I am in a new place, back to the present.

Our lives are made of these moments of presence when we can truly appreciate who we are and what we have within and around us.

It’s between moments of busyness and doing, with our long to-do lists, when we pause for a walk, look outside, sit down to enjoy a cup of coffee or tea, pat a dog or cat, or look at children playing, where we find presence.

“One of the fundamental parts of Danish hygge culture is deliberately taking time away from the daily grind to be fully present.”

connections, so why not nature too? Nature has been here since before we were born and will hopefully be here after we die—if we take care of it.

One of the fundamental parts of Danish *hygge* culture is deliberately taking time away from the daily grind to be fully present.

When I find myself stressed, running from thing to thing, and rushing to meet deadlines, I am grateful when I remember to pause more.

If I can’t get out for a forest walk, I pause where I can find some quiet and do a breathing exercise to ground myself.

Ground control breathing exercise

Standing with my eyes closed,



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

Caroline Ishii embraces the Danish spirit of *hygge*, or coziness, through walks in nature with friends and her new puppy.

moment.

This sounds easy but is hard to do if you’re a high-achiever and doer like me. I’ve had to train myself and make space in my life for this.

Psychologist and internationally renowned expert on Buddhist meditation Tara Brach says we run from task to task instead of enjoying our lives along the way. Our nervous systems can feel this stress, and the primary reaction when we’re under pressure is to try and control and manage things that are not often controllable, which creates more anxiety.

American philosopher, histo-

rian, and psychologist William James (1842 –1910) talked about the “ceaseless frenzy” in which we always feel that we “should be doing something else.” He said this ceaseless frenzy, the race through life, is symptomatic of the numbing of spirituality.

Winter provides an excellent opportunity to practice making time for the pauses, the gaps, and the in-between of the doings.

And in this space, we transform from human doers to human beings again. We develop our sense of *hygge*. What’s in your winter manifesto?
