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Mindfulness in the city: Making our own endings



Looking back and facing the past as a way to move forward

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OTTAWA — *Vestigia Nulla Retrorsum* was my high school's motto, Runnymede Collegiate Institute in Toronto, meaning in Latin, "we never go backward."

I would cheer with the rest of the teens in the auditorium when the principal would say this at the end of his addresses, but I didn't get it. Decades later, I still don't get it.

Instead, I've realized it's sometimes best to take a step backward before moving forward.

Our lives are hectic and stressful, and we often don't make the time to reflect on whether the direction we are heading in is the right one or if we need to change course.

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey talks about how easy it is to get caught up in the busyness of life, working hard to climb the ladder of success, only to discover that all this time, the ladder has been leaning against the wrong wall.

This metaphor made a big impression on me when I first read the book long ago and stayed with me over the years.

I've had the most significant

learnings and growth when I failed and had to retreat and lick my wounds before carrying on. I wish we could change the negative connotation in our society around the word "failure."

What if we were to replace "failure" and "mistakes" with words like "experiments" or "testing"?

Failure was not an option for me growing up with a strict Asian mother who would criticize me, no matter how well I did. Coming back home from school, I would proudly say to her, "I got an A on my project!" She would reply, "why not A+?"

Whatever I accomplished was never enough for her, and I grew up to be an adult who felt I was never enough.

My mom died over 30 years ago, but she is still with me in many ways. I have continued where she left off, to criticize, berate, and not give myself any slack. I have become my mom!

And to make matters worse, I often subconsciously looked for partners who would treat me how I felt I needed to be treated. So, any pain and suffering felt familiar to me.

I ran away from home in my late teens, and I have been running for a long time, feeling if I kept on being busy and running from the emotions that I feared, they would not catch up with me.

When I eventually let my emotions catch up to me, acknowledge and name them, they didn't destroy me as I thought they would.

In slowing down through meditation and yoga, reflection, and speaking with helping professionals, I realized that my feelings were normal and the treatment I received when growing up was



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

Caroline and her mom at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre after she won the Miss Tokyo pageant. It was a very proud day for Caroline's mom.

not my fault. I started to unravel the tangled emotions inside me.

In accepting all the emotions within me, I began to accept myself as I am.

What is our past but our fuzzy recollections of what was true? What if we were to change the story?

I now see my background as stories, neither good nor bad, but what it was. Families and people are complicated because they are human, with trauma passed down from generation to generation and myriads of emotions under the surface.

Brené Brown, a *New York Times* best-selling author, popular TED

Talk speaker, and research professor, says that for 15 years, her team collected research on emotions from 7,000 people. Participants were asked to write down every emotion they felt and name it.

The average number of emo-

she presents 87 emotions and experiences humans can feel.

For example, she lists the places we go when we feel wronged: anger, contempt, disgust, dehumanization, hate, and self-righteousness.

When we fall short: shame, self-compassion, perfectionism, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment.

And when life is good: joy, happiness, calm, contentment, gratitude, foreboding joy, relief, and tranquility.

I wish my mother could have received the help she needed to

"When I eventually let my emotions catch up to me, acknowledge and name them, they didn't destroy me as I thought they would."

tions people could come up with was three. Happy, mad, and sad.

Brown asks, what does it mean if we don't have a vocabulary as expansive as the human experience?

In her book, *Atlas of the Heart*,

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Plan 75 finds slivers of light in the darkness

Director Chie Hayakawa's first feature film explores a dark future

James Heron
Contributor

TORONTO — In the Sagami-hara mass murder of 2016, a troubled young man massacred 19 residents in a home for disabled people. He claimed it was a necessary act, saying the residents were unproductive, they created hardship for the rest of society, and that it is in the nature of the Japanese people to sacrifice their lives for the greater good of their nation.

Director Chie Hayakawa's superb first feature film opens with an eerily similar pre-credits scene, but the setting is a seniors' home. Cut to post credits, and we are a few years into the future.

The *koureikashakai*, or “super-aged society,” combined with low fertility rates and exclusive immigration policies, make Japan the oldest country in the world.

In this future, in response to the economic pressure, the government has introduced “Plan 75,” a program that encourages seniors to self-euthanize after their 75th birthday. The mass murderer's role has been usurped by government bureaucracy.



Chieko Baisho (left) stars in director Chie Hayakawa's eerie and dark *Plan 75*.

The program is promoted with the cheery energy and chirpy youthfulness of an infomercial. Young recruitment agents set up in parks where penniless seniors wait for a bowl of soup.

They offer a \$1,000 bonus to allow participants a final trip or a nice meal. Driven by hopelessness, social antipathy, and shame, most wearily sign up.

The story centres around Michi (Chieko Baisho), a 78-year-old woman, still healthy and of clear mind but with a precarious fi-

nancial situation. She has lost her job as a cleaner at a hotel, and her apartment building is soon to be demolished.

Jobs for seniors are scarce to non-existent, and access to social welfare seems locked behind confounding computer kiosks. She is lost, her future a blank.

The other main characters are those Michi encounters as she works through the Plan 75 process. She signs up for the program through Hiromu (Hayato Isomura) and bonds with a

caseworker (Yumi Kawai) whose job is to council recruits in carefully timed 15-minute telephone sessions while avoiding any possibility of dissuading them from carrying through to the end.

Maria (Stefanie Arianne) is a gentle Filipino health care worker lured into the euthanasia facilities for the higher wages she needs for her daughter's life-saving surgery. There, she sifts through the pockets of the dead to remove personal items before disposal.

Plan 75 had been selected to

represent Japan at the 2023 Academy Awards and won special mention at the Cannes Film Festival. It is a resonant and shocking meditation on a society's ability to justify and carry out the elimination of a generation.

Intelligently directed by Chie Hayakawa, *Plan 75* is sober, deliberately paced, and painfully relevant, not only in Japan but also for Canadians as we struggle with the morality and broadening access of our MAID policies.

Hayakawa's literate script—with echoes of both *The Ballad of Nakayama* and *Soylent Green*—is well-served by the empathic performances of the leads, particularly Chieko Baisho in the central role of Michi. She cycles between desperation and serene resignation and memories of joy and terror with fluid intelligence.

The scenes in the ghostly euthanasia facility are horrific in their matter-of-factness, and the parks and thread-bare apartment blocks where the seniors bide the empty hours are oppressively bleak. However, Hayakawa does find moments of dark humour.

Watching the supporting characters reconnect to their humanity leavens the darkness. The film's final frames offer a moment of fragile exaltation that will stay with viewers long after they exit the cinema. Unforgettable and highly recommended.

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treat her mental illness, which put a negative filter around her life and those she touched in her violent rages.

She didn't realize that she had a mental illness that could have been treated—it wasn't discussed openly in those days. Even now, there is often a negative stereotype associated with mental illness.

The Canadian Mental Health Association believes there is no health without mental health.

The association says negative stereotypes and discrimination often plague the lives of people with mental health conditions and prevent them from leading satisfying lives. People often worry about asking for help because they believe that asking for help means admitting something is wrong, and they worry about how others might see them.

My mom hoped to be a loving wife and mother, but the stories from her past and painful emotions that she had to suppress growing up were released later in the only way she knew how, through anger. She suffered greatly, and so did those around her who loved her.

This story is what compels me to be honest and open about my experiences.

In doing so, I remove the shame my mom must have felt for being "damaged" from a childhood filled with neglect and violence. I also free myself and future generations. And I permit others to release their shame. We are all interconnected.



Caroline and her mom heading to the Japanese language school picnic at High Park in Toronto.

Brown says we need to deal with our emotional pain points because it affects us and those we love. "We will do almost anything not to feel pain, including causing other people pain. It is so much easier to hurt than to feel hurt," says Brown.

"We need to understand where the hurt, the sorrow, the despair, the anguish, the rage is coming from so that we don't work it out on other people on an individual level or collective level."

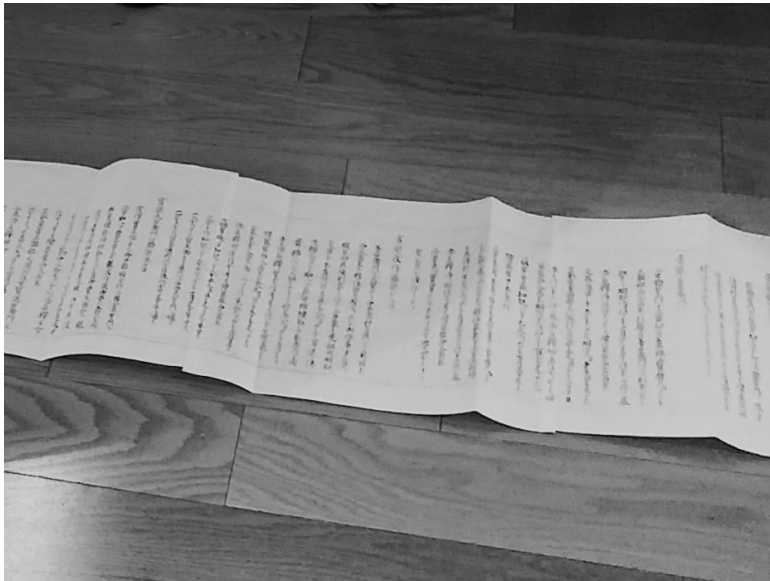
These days, I sometimes feel my mom's light touch when cooking and sharing food with others, shopping for interesting food items, and travelling in Japan, all things she loved to do and would light her up. I remember her gifts

of cooking, generous and loving spirit, and smile.

In acknowledging our emotions, including those we are afraid of, we release them from our tight grip and let them go. Doing so makes room for more love and light to come into our lives.

We may not have started the story, but we can write the ending we want or create a new one.

"Our job is not to deny the story but to defy the ending—to rise strong, recognize our story, and rumble with the truth until we get to a place where we think, yes, this is what happened, and I will choose how the story ends," says Brown.



Fumiko Miyahara's family genealogy scroll is almost 2.5 m long, with family history that spans back 11 generations to the 1700s.

From SCROLL P. 5

clan. So much was changing and disappearing.

It appears he still collected rent on the farmland the family had been tasked to administer during the feudal system. It was not until after the Second World War with the Agrarian Reform, when the majority of farmland was given to the tenants who farmed those lands.

The late 1800s was also when the Japanese began emigrating to places in South and North America, like Canada, Hawaii, and Peru, seeking a better life. While the world around him was swirling like a storm, my great-great-grandfather chose to sit at the desk and meticulously write down his family history.

Maybe because he, as his forefathers, was a bureaucrat and administrator, his handwriting in *sumi* ink is impressive and neat, almost the print form—perfect for record-keeping. The *kanji* (Chinese characters) used are old, and the writing style is old, but each stroke in *kanji* is clear, which immensely helped me to decipher the writing.

So, the first thing I worked on was to translate it into modern Japanese for easier reading by new generations. Then, I translated it into English so my Canadian-born children could read it.

In part two, Fumiko shares her efforts to research and add her grandfather and father's generations to the Miyahara genealogy and about exploring *koseki*.