

Mindfulness in the city: The language of love



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

Caroline and her great crew creating a special five-course gourmet dinners for 100 guests in the Lord Elgin Hotel kitchen. Left to right: David, Akiko, Ginny, and Caroline.



How to find love within ourselves for Valentine's Day

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OTTAWA — February is a time of red hearts and roses everywhere. It's the time of Valentine's Day, with couples cuddled in corners, speaking sweet nothings to each other. Or is it?

This is what we imagine it to be, especially if we are single. One big Hallmark event that you avoid because you are not one of those couples. Join the club!

Or, you are in a couple, and it's certainly not like the movies anymore. What's wrong with us, you may think, and long for days past while looking enviously at smitten young couples in love.

All my life, I've had a love-hate relationship with Valentine's Day. It's great if you are in love and have a partner, but where does that leave the rest of the population?

According to Statistics Canada 2016 census, one-person households became the predominant household type (28 per cent) for the first time in Canada's 150-year history and is growing.

My ex-partner used to say to me every day is Valentine's Day. While I agreed with this, I soon realized this was a clever play because every day was not Valentine's Day in our relationship.

Every year, I go into February with a bit of trepidation and stay away from social media, where I imagine young couples talking about their love for one another and what they are buying for the sweeties. Which I know is not necessarily true.

Zen Valentines

As chef and owner of ZenKitchen restaurant, I created a special multi-course surprise Valentine's dinner. Valentine's Day is one of the most popular days at any restaurant. At ZenKitchen, we had two seatings to fit the high demand.

I loved planning for Feb. 14. The decorations were tasteful but not too much; the menu themed with love, in colours, mood, and aphrodisiac-type components like figs, ginger, and lots of dark

with the amount of love in a relationship. It was too much at once, like trying to eat the whole buffet table in one sitting. And so far removed from their day-to-day lives.

My experience with this made me realize that what you see as you peek inconspicuously through restaurant windows or on social media may differ from what is actually happening.

Another kind of love

I propose another kind of love during these stressful times with excessive negative news and the cold, grey winter days lasting longer than we would like. I found it a few years ago, and I've been unwrapping it ever since. It's about self-compassion.

Self-compassion is different than self-love.

On the Positive Psychology website, Courtney Ackerman, a mental health programs researcher, defines self-love as "a state of appreciation for oneself that grows from actions that support our physical, psychological, and spiritual growth." It's about valuing ourselves as human beings worthy of love and respect.

Self-compassion

While self-love is probably something you will need to build up, you can choose to be compassionate toward yourself at any moment.

I first learned about self-compassion through Tara Brach, a world-renowned mindfulness teacher, psychologist, and author. In her book, *Radical Acceptance*, when a friend said she was trying to be her own best friend, she was sad because she was far from this. Instead, she was more like her own worst enemy, throwing negative comments and criticisms at herself when she did something

chocolate. Romantic music played, and rows of tables of two lined the restaurant.

What surprised me most about the restaurant full of couples with the mood set, it was one of the quietest nights of the year.

There were whispers and the clinking of silverware and glasses, but generally, silence.

I assumed this was from new couples that didn't have that much to say to each other, now sitting face-to-face in a quiet setting for a few hours. Or long-term couples, used to not saying much to each other while eating dinner, now being forced to converse without the regular distractions of everyday life.

I could feel the stress and discomfort on the most romantic day of the year. And with each course brought out, I could feel the excitement and relief from the diners.

I don't think this had to do

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PHOTO COURTESY: LORENE OIKAWA

Reverend Yoshimichi Ouchi rings in the new year during a sunset gathering with the Toronto NAJC and Toronto Buddhist Church of New Year's Eve. This will likely be the final time the Japanese Canadian Centennial Temple Bell will be rung in its current location in Ontario Place for the New Year.

From TORONTO NAJC P. 14

Church, convened a sunset gathering at the Japanese Canadian Centennial Temple Bell at Ontario Place. The gathering was likely the final opportunity to ring the Japanese Canadian Centennial Temple Bell at its current location in Ontario Place on New Year's Eve. We have been told that the temple bell will have to be moved in the spring when infrastructure work on the west island of Ontar-

io Place begins.

A fifth meeting with the Ontario government took place on Jan. 18. A verbal commitment was made to have the temple bell remain at Ontario Place. Our next step is obtaining a written commitment and confirmation as to where in Ontario Place it will be moved before any dismantling proceeds.

2023 Membership Renewal & Upcoming Initiatives
Apologies to our members, but

we are a bit late in mailing renewal information. You can download a membership form or sign up online here: www.torontonajc.ca/membership.

By the time you read this, an event to address misogyny & anti-Black racism in sports and sports media will have taken place on Feb. 1 at the University of Toronto, Munk School. The Toronto NAJC is pleased to assist as a co-sponsor. We look forward to reporting on this event chaired by Takashi Fujitani, professor of history and director of the Dr. David Chu Program in Asia-Pacific studies. Janelle Joseph, assistant professor, faculty of kinesiology and physical education and founder and director of the IDEAS Research Lab: Indigeneity, diaspora, equity, and anti-racism in sport, will present an analysis of media (mis)representations of Naomi Osaka.

Toronto NAJC has committed to work to increase awareness of the lack of progress in government commitments to implement the 231 Calls for Justice for Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people. This work over the year will be done in conjunction with the Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizens Association (GVJCCA) and the NAJC Human Rights Committee. Lynn Deutscher Kobayashi and Sharon Yamashita are Toronto representatives on the NAJC Human Rights Committee.

From MICHELIN P. 8

to Canada but eventually leave. The ingredients, condiments, and flavours so easily sourced in Japan were inaccessible in Canada, and they would eventually leave. But for Chef Hashimoto, his love for Toronto and the life he built with his wife and children motivated him to stay.

The art of kaiseki is something Chef Hashimoto does not take lightly. He honours the traditions, techniques, and flavours so that kaiseki chefs and experts in Kyoto will recognize his restaurant as serving authentic Japanese kaiseki, but in Canada.

In 2007, Chef Hashimoto returned to Japan to enter the prestigious Japanese Culinary Arts Competition, competing alongside some of Japan's top chefs. From the top 11 national finalists, Chef Hashimoto finished in the top five chefs, receiving the Technique Award, an achievement that distinguished and reaffirmed his skills as a kaiseki chef, even after two decades in Toronto.

"My father is always constantly re-evaluating his cuisine because he wants to make sure that those in Japan will still accept what my father is doing here," says Kei.

In December, they returned to Japan for the first time since the pandemic to host an event for their supporters in Kyoto, a kaiseki dinner prepared by Chef Hashimoto.

These visits to Japan are also to ensure they can bring the most

authentic experience to guests at the restaurant.

A joy for the Hashimotos is being able to converse with their guests, who are often interested in Japan, about places to visit and where to go to enjoy a unique experience in Japan. The greatest compliment from guests is when they say their time at the restaurant felt like being in Japan, says Chef Hashimoto.

Looking towards the future, Kei began helping at the restaurant first by washing dishes, then as a food runner and server. Now, Kei says it is time for him to fully apprentice in the kitchen under his father and develop the necessary skills and knowledge to become a kaiseki chef.

"I think over the years, and having my father take me to places in Japan and seeing what he's done in Japan, it made me proud to be Japanese. I don't want certain cultural practices in Japan to diminish, and I see that a little too often these days, and I'm sure that's not just for Japanese culture, but for all different cultures," says Kei.

"For myself, it's in hopes of preserving what my father has been doing for my future generation. I feel like I was also quite inspired by the dedication that he has put forward in the restaurant and the challenges that he had to overcome. I don't want that to just disappear. I want to fulfill at least a part of his dream but hopefully all of it. It's to carry on a legacy that should not be wasted."

From MINDFULNESS P. 9

wrong. She could never please herself. I could relate.

Kristen Neff and Christopher Germen are the world's leading authorities on self-compassion. Their book, *Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook*, defines self-compassion as "a practice in which we learn to be a good friend to ourselves when we need it most—to be an inner ally rather than an inner enemy."

The essential elements of self-compassion are loving (self-kindness), connected (common humanity), and present (mindfulness).

Being loving is about being as caring toward ourselves as we are toward others. When we make a mistake or fail, we are supportive and encouraging, aiming to protect ourselves from harm. Or when life circumstances are challenging and feel too difficult to bear, we soothe and comfort ourselves.

Being connected recognizes that all humans are flawed works-in-progress, and everyone fails, makes mistakes, and experiences hardships in life. When we forget this, we suffer, feeling isolated and alone.

Being present is essential to self-compassion because we need to acknowledge when we're suffering and "be" with our pain enough to respond with care and kindness. Mindfulness allows us to face the truth of our experience, even when it's unpleasant.

With this awareness, we can respond in a new way, one that is more kind to ourselves and others.

Is self-compassion selfish?
Self-compassion conflicts with the messages we and others tell ourselves about being humble and kind, helping others before ourselves, and being good Japanese Canadian community members. It's easy to forget about ourselves. I often forget to include myself in what I am doing and in my life.

I will want to do something or check something off my long to-do list, but I forget to check in with myself. How am I feeling? Do I want to do this? Do I have

be doing more of this, or that I shouldn't have done that. Noticing when we do this is the start of self-compassion.

It's hard to tell ourselves we love ourselves. I could never do this, and when the self-help books would encourage me to say those words to myself every day in the mirror. I felt like a phony.

There is an easier and kinder way. Just being with yourself, like a mother with a hurting child. Putting your hand on your heart, breathing deeply, feeling the pain, and listening to what you need. I like the term self-soothing that some professionals use for this action. Often used to describe strategies to calm children, why

not adults? Why not ourselves?

Passing on the love

Many of us saw our parents work hard and

our grandparents even harder. It was about self-sacrifice, struggle, and pushing themselves to work more and prove they were good citizens.

Their response to society's racist views of Japanese Canadians at the time affected their thoughts, behaviours, and habits, which became the norm and their personality. Over time, they became defined by their struggles and working hard to prove themselves, even when they didn't need to struggle or work hard anymore.

The greatest argument about bringing self-compassion to ourselves is so that we pass on to future generations an easier, more



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

Caroline's special dessert creation for the five-course Valentine's menu of love. Strawberry-rosewater-chocolate torte, chocolate-mint heart, kumquat, salted spiced chocolate potion, truffle, rose petals.

loving way to treat ourselves.

Joe Dispenza, a neuroscientist and international lecturer, says that we are victims when we allow something in our outer environment to control our thoughts and feelings. And this gives away our life force and power.

It's time to take back the life force and power that those before us felt forced to give way. Creating a healthier and happier future that they dreamt of starts with each one of us.

"Love yourself first, and everything else falls into line. You really have to love yourself to get

anything done in this world," says American actress Lucille Ball.

The language of love

During this month of love, it's a good time to bring more self-compassion into our lives and connect with what we love. This may include chocolate, flowers, a lovely meal, or whatever the language of love is for you.

It's not about hoping, expecting, and waiting to find love, but finding love where it already exists and is waiting for us. Within.

Will you be your Valentine every day?
