A Season for Mental Spring Cleaning

By Catrien Ross

I had already decided to write about the periodic need for mental spring cleaning when the earthquake struck Kobe on January 17. In the wake of the predawn catastrophe—the worst in Japan's postwar era—my article topic assumed more solemn meaning. Suddenly there were more than 5,200 dead or missing; some 27,000 injured; around 100,000 buildings destroyed or damaged; and over 300,000 homeless. Within days Kobe, a cosmopolitan port once so proud of its skyline, was turned into a city of refugees.

Late last year I read an account of Nobel Laureate Oe Kenzaburo's keynote speech to a group of physicians at an international medical forum in Osaka and Tokyo. He suggested that to face death is to look at life with greater imagination and urged the assembled researchers and public health specialists to rethink the future of Japan and the world. That the words of a writer should be so prophetic is not surprising. Long before economics took precedence in gauging a nation's value, it was often the poet-bards and shaman-visionaries, both female and male, who nurtured the hopes of their culture and guided their society to the next stage. They could not avert disaster, but they could reinforce the psychological resources to cope with unexpected loss.

It was clear in Kobe that much-touted earthquake technology did not perform as planned. Equally obvious was the fact that natural calamities work under their own laws, defying the most sophisticated, preventive techniques that humans can design. All my preparations cannot obscure the fact that life is tentative at best, and that every day the unknown skirts my familiar routines. To some people this lends piquancy. Others prefer not to think too deeply about such shadowy matters. Those who have experienced a severe illness or other personal crisis often describe the significant mental or spiritual changes that occur with a closer awareness of dying. From my own life I have learned that Oe is right; like it or not, death can be a key to broader understanding.

Even before the Kobe tragedy occurred, 1995, the Year of the Boar according to the Chinese calendar, did not begin encouragingly for Japan. Earthquakes had already damaged the Hokkaido and Tohoku areas, but people, resilient as always, carried out their New Year rituals regardless. During the first few days of 1995 over 80 million people, myself among them, visited shrines and temples. I started out the year by riding the cable car at midnight to the top of Mount Takao, a shelter of green in western Tokyo only minutes away from my home, and where I usually enjoy an early morning walk and ki exercising. It was one of those crisp, clear nights when all the stars were visible and a hopeful mood was echoed in reverberations of the temple bell.

Year-end is traditionally the cue for Japanese housewives to undertake the thorough cleaning which readies the house for a new cycle ahead. In the West we prefer to wait until early spring, when emerging buds nudge us to restate our sense of living. Closets are emptied, cupboards aired, floors scrubbed. But mental spring cleaning, whether done in December or in March, can also revitalize. Like a neglected shelf, the mind, too, becomes cluttered with rubbish that from time to time needs to be sifted and discarded. Typically it requires a major jolt to truly start the process, a kind of inner earthquake that uproots ingrained thought patterns and gets creativity moving again.

A decision to live overseas in a culture totally different from one's own is certainly a way to shake up the system sufficiently. The task of coping in Japan, for example, offers so many cultural tremors and shocks that by now I should, reasonably, have been reduced to a complete mental and physical wreck. But while the experience has been both humbling and grueling, it has likewise afforded me an exhilarating opportunity to stretch the boundaries of my thinking. To better survive over the years I have been compelled to abandon a variety of inflexible approaches as well as my acquired knowledge about how things should or should not work. In the process I have retooled many of my ideas and thereby been transformed. Some of my previous notions, so tenaciously held, have resurfaced in more workable form. Others, however, have long since gone out in the garbage, along with old habits and last year's junk.

Out with the old, in with the new

Actually, changing the way we think is not always so difficult. My first encounter with holography was in a university physics class, but it was not until I discovered 3-D images printed in a Japanese newspaper that I really became excited. Described as a sort of "non-computerized virtual reality," 3-D or 5-D images can quite literally alter our way of looking at the world. To see the hidden picture in such holograms entails a slight shifting of focus. A moment's blurring, then everything clicks into place. Life can be like that. A tiny variation in our field of vision and our perspective can immediately widen, with possibilities never seen before astonishingly emerging.

Of course, huge events like the earthquake in Kobe (called by the Japanese media the Great Hanshin Earthquake), result in massive and irrevocable changes for individuals and communities. But small happenings and decisions also have substantial impact on our lives: a chance conversation; a business card exchanged; a simple journey rerouted. It was a casual suggestion to drop by someone's office in the U.S. state of Arizona that led to my first visit to Taiwan and Japan as a member of a governor-led, economic mission. A

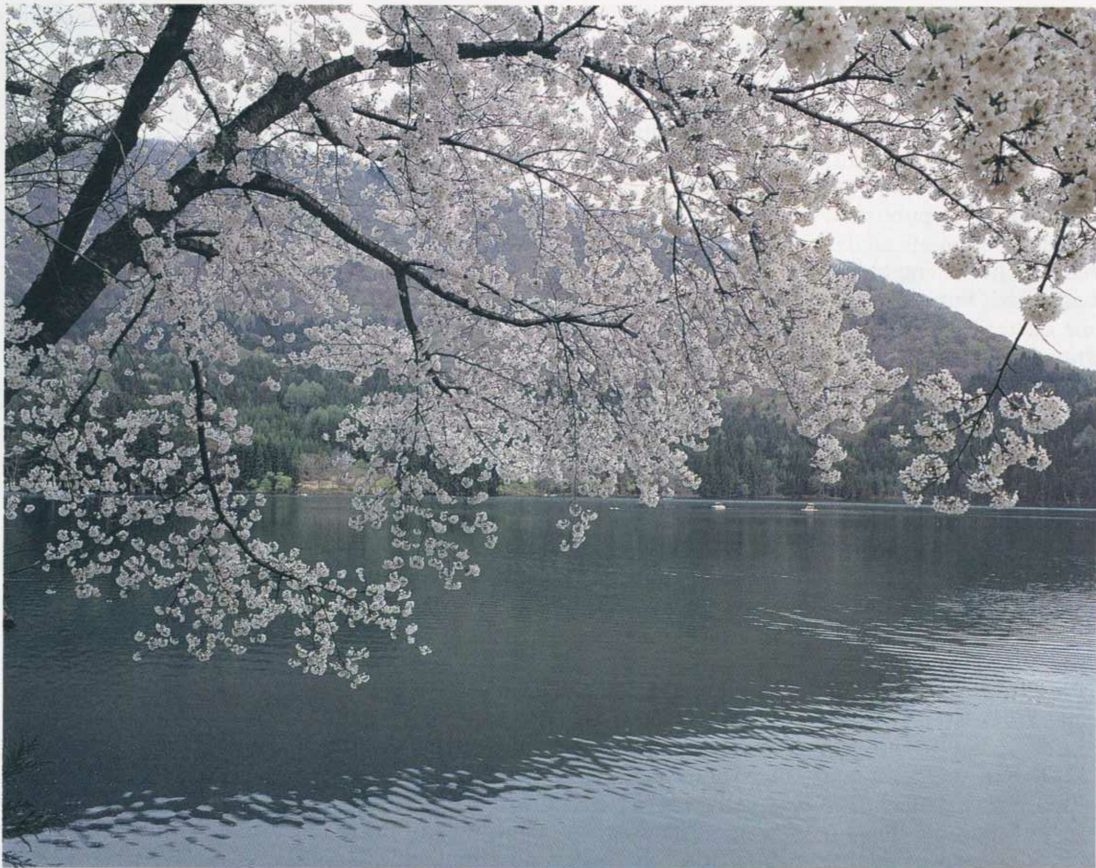
pleasant chat begun by a Japanese woman resulted in my moving into a furnished house with garden in central Tokyo. A telephone call I made from America was inadvertently picked up by the man who is now my partner in Oriental and alternative healing therapies.

But a change in perception does not necessarily involve grasping only for the new or adventurous. It may mean simply perceiving the value in the familiar or tested. Japanese people, for example, have been distressingly eager to discard old traditions in favor of the trendy. Every nation has the right to fashion its own image, but it seems a pity that Japan has been so quick to abandon an intriguing cultural legacy for someone else's ideas about what is fashionable or acceptable. One evening last year a friend and I wandered around the Tokyo area known as Shinjuku searching for what was once a landmark restaurant housed in a Japanese-style, high-roofed farmhouse. The restaurant was gone, replaced by a nondescript business hotel.

Today I willingly endure what I consider minor inconveniences for the enjoyment of living in a spacious, Japanese-style house with garden and carp pond close to the mountains. However, I have been told by well-meaning Japanese friends that none of them would ever agree to live in such a monstrosity, for a host of reasons. The upkeep of tatami matting is too difficult; shoji screens are too fragile; design is too drafty; wood corridors are too cold.

One or all of these may actually be true at any given moment, but surely some allowance can be made for the sake of retaining a sense of space and character. It is a flimsy premise to barter an entire heritage for the supposed amenities of a miniscule, ferro-concrete box, the typical modern apartment. Thus, all over Japan, two-hundred year-old farmhouses, marvels of construction and carpentry, are being easily destroyed, with almost no thought given to possible relocation or preservation.

Foreigners, especially scholars of Japanese literature and the arts, have been sometimes accused of wanting to imprison Japan in a time-warp that ignores the country's push towards modernization. I don't think this is such a bad thing. In fact, thanks to such foreigner's love of things Japanese, much of the beauty of Japan's culture has not only been preserved, but showcased to a much larger world. Watching Japan's relentless clamor for the new, shiny and Western, I wonder if Japanese people



will awaken one day to find that much of lasting worth has forever gone.

Starting over

As might be expected, the destruction in Kobe exposed many of the strengths and weaknesses of Japanese society. One strength was the evident solidarity among people. In the days following the earthquake there was, for example, little or no looting and no rioting. Compare this to cities like New York where a few years ago a sudden power blackout lasting only hours resulted in a looting spree. Or Los Angeles, where race hatreds fueled a rioting and looting rampage. In Kobe and surrounding areas, as stores reopened for business, orderly shoppers lined up to purchase available goods. Break-ins and other robberies did occur, but early on the overall mood was one of stoic calmness, despite the fact that people were hungry, cold and disillusioned. Lacking shelter, water and gas, they somehow struggled to cope together as hygiene conditions worsened and awareness of the scale of devastation set in. Thousands of well-wishers streamed forward carrying supplies for relatives and friends, while citizen volunteer groups, never a priority in Japan, attempted to organize and lend aid.

By the time this article is published there will have been continuous analysis and recriminations. In the end blame may indeed be assigned, but meantime the lives of Kobe citizens are irretrievably altered. More than half the fatalities were aged 60 or older, nearly two-thirds of them women. With the "graying" of society it is a demographic pattern increasingly found in the big cities, Tokyo included. By the year 2015, one in four residents of Tokyo will be 65 or older, with the number of bed-ridden or dementia sufferers expected to have grown from about 50,000 in 1990 to around 140,000.

When a temblor hits, the weak and the slow have trouble escaping, if indeed any escape is possible. Were a major earthquake to shake Tokyo, the most conservative estimates put the death toll at 60,000, many of them the elderly. Last year in Japan the number of people 65 and older reached around 17.57 million, an increase of 700,000 over 1993. Already the number of people 65 and older who live alone totals 1.82 million, with the figure expected to grow each year.

Although more and more Japanese elderly will have no choice but live alone—in contrast to the past when the majority were cared for by relatives at home—I have been impressed by how prevalent the custom of family care still is. Three years ago, in the village of Daito-cho, in Shizuoka Prefecture, I stayed in a farmer's house where eight people, or four consecutive generations, all lived together under the same roof. Bent over but still active, the great grandmother enjoyed each family meal in the kitchen, where the biggest electric rice cooker I have ever seen sat simmering all day.

From there I traveled to Hanamaki, in Iwate Prefecture, where I stayed with a three-generation family in their large (but admittedly cold) home. One day a week the two young daughters are ordered to take what their mother terms a walking day: a full one-hour's walk each way to school, roundtrip. Several of my young students in Tokyo have told of living together with grandma or grandpa.

Nevertheless, not all is rosy in Japan by any means, and the devastation in Kobe has darkened the picture even further. A major weakness is the social apathy that continues to tolerate abuse of power in both the public and private sectors, as well as the accepted school bullying which last year drove a 13-year old boy to suicide. Mental spring cleaning may be something that Japan needs at a level beyond the individual if real change is to occur, but the same can be said of most countries and cultures in the world today.

Walking on Mount Takao in the early morning frost recently, I chanced to see a young man perform the austere, purification ritual in the Biwataki waterfall. Dressed only in a loin cloth and head scarf, he plunged with much ferocious shouting to gather energy and courage, into what must have been icy water. There he sat calmly in full lotus position, chanting and fingering his prayer beads as the waterfall cascaded over his body. He looked very happy and very cold.

There is the idea in Oriental philosophy and meditative exercise, that if something is going to happen it will happen, and all the pushing I do will not make it happen any sooner. It is a relaxing thought which can be encountered first-hand by doing, say, T'ai chi chuan, the moving meditation so beloved by the Chinese. One of my clearest memories of Taipei is of the hill behind my hotel, where several hundred people gathered every morning to quietly dance T'ai chi together. The contrast with a Western effort like aerobics could not be greater. Aggressive, noisy and striving, aerobics sweats and strains towards a goal, each twist and pull daring its realization. T'ai chi uses few or no words. A student merely follows the teacher's steps, practicing each flowing position until it becomes a part of the body's natural rhythms.

Awareness of existing rhythms, if only to acknowledge nature's stupendous power to upset our best-laid plans, is a type of growing up. One week after the January 17 earthquake, a Japanese newspaper reported that the government's Meteorological Agency would begin releasing data to alert disaster prevention organizations to unusual seismological activity. Previously the agency had hesitated to do so, believing that detailed information would only cause anxiety among residents. Thus significant activity just before the earthquake hit Kobe was never communicated. Foreknowledge of impending disaster may have influenced how people prepared.

But maybe not. Accepting natural rhythms means recognizing that I, like everyone else, do not really know what tomorrow will bring. In this uncertainty lies the value and the challenge of living.

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