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Interview: Older Japanese Find Comfort in Ritual

Aging populations affect nations and peoples around the globe. By 2030, one in every three Japanese will be 65 or older. People in Japan live longer, on average, than anywhere else in the world. So what can we learn from the Japanese experience?

*Anthropologist Jason Danely has spent nearly a decade capturing the everyday lives of older Japanese. Exquisitely written, Danely's book **Aging and Loss: Mourning and Maturity in Contemporary Japan** opens another window on to the many landscapes of aging. The author shows us how older Japanese embrace contradiction, experience loss and grief and — at the same time — feel connected and hopeful.*

*To learn more, **AHB** reached Dr. Danely at Oxford Brookes University, in Oxford, England.*

Ruth Dempsey: *Aging and Loss* takes us on an aesthetic voyage. Why is aesthetics necessary to understanding the quality of Japanese aging?

Jason Danely: I think that if we can think of aging not as something that happens to us but as something more like a story that each of us weaves, then what is most interesting to me is not the literal content of the story, but how it is invigorated or inspired by the choice of images, metaphors and rhythms.

When I first went to Japan, the first thing that struck me was the feeling of being transported to an entirely new sensory world. People seemed to have very different ideas about what made the world beautiful, whether it was gardens made out of rocks, or the delicate flavours of the tofu or the smells of sweet roasting potatoes. Like age, these sensory worlds get under the skin, even taken for granted, but they allow older people to find meaning in their lives when grief can make life feel smaller.

The best examples of this were everyday rituals and small acts of thoughtfulness that allowed feelings of care to flow through the lives of older people. So by describing how people carried out these rituals, I could highlight some key aspects of Japanese aesthetics, like transience and emptiness, and ground them in things that I saw older people doing every day.

RD: Can you give me a thumbnail sketch of the people in your study?

JD: Of the 30 older people I interviewed, I chose a core group of 12 that I felt illustrated the diversity and similarity of older people living in urban Japan today. The book is about them most of all.

Half were women, half were men. They lived in different areas of the city. They had different family structures, religious backgrounds, education and careers. The youngest was 67 and the oldest was in her 90s. They opened up their homes to me, took me to visit

their graves and introduced me to their families. They helped me tremendously with creating this book to them.

RD: Throughout the book, you draw on the cultural tale of Ubasuteyama. What is the story, and why is it important today?

JD: The story of Ubasuteyama has been told in different forms for centuries. That right there is interesting.

But this is not just a folk story. It usually doesn't involve magical creatures and other things one sees in many Japanese tales. The central conflict of the story revolves around a man in a small mountain village who must take his old mother deep into the mountains and abandon her there to die. What must he feel? And what about the mother? Would she feel comforted by her son's compassionate hastening of her death? Would she be upset or grief-stricken?

What is most interesting to me about Ubasuteyama is that if one looks at the many versions of the story, you can see that it is a profoundly emotional tale — about aging, dying and living on.

RD: Let's turn to some of the people in your study. Hasegawa-san, 75, likes to create haiku poems. You often met him at the senior community centre. Is that right?

JD: Yes. Hasegawa-san is a retired civil servant and feels a strong sense of betrayal from the government he devoted his career to. He believes that the state has abandoned older people. He points to shrinking pensions and rising health and care service costs.

While he does attend political rallies on occasion, he is also very creative and transforms his feelings into poetry. Hasegawa-san was not that interested in spiritual matters, but I think this sort of creative expression of loss was similar to the other kinds of personal rituals I write about in the book.

RD: When Nishida-san retired from her weaving business at age 60, her son wanted her to take an overseas trip. Instead, she decided to purchase a new butsudā. What reasons did she give for her decision?

JD: The butsudā is a piece of furniture about the size of a small cabinet, used to give a place to memorialize the family who have passed away. These can be very ornate and gilded in gold leaf. They are passed down through the family.

As a woman, the ancestors in the Nishida-san's butsudā would not have been those of her parents' household, but the household she married into. Even so, she was very affectionate and caring towards them, in part because her husband died very young and his family took good care of her as she raised their young children.

So for her, part of retiring and imagining herself as an elder in the household meant honouring this chain of care. At the same time, getting a new butudan showed her sons the importance of caring for the family. Nishida-san is now 94 years old. I am sure her sons will remember her commitment to family, when she is no longer with them.

RD: Sato-san has been coming to the cemetery to visit his wife's grave for three decades. He says his visits are a source of strength . . .

JD: Sato-san lost his spouse when he was in his early 30s, and it was devastating at the time. He never remarried, and his mother-in-law helped raise his three sons.

Sato-san was not a religious man, but I think it wouldn't be outrageous to say that he found a higher power through his devotion to his wife. I don't think he was unusual in this among Japanese people. Returning to her grave year after year, and several times throughout the year, he slowly became aware there was a "power," as he called it that was responsible for allowing him to live even though she died.

Sato-san often complains that his sons don't pay attention to him, that he is lonely and that he has regrets that he will likely take to the grave. But he feels strongly that the spirit of his wife can see him for who he really is and loves him.

His case underscores the importance of love in people's lives as they grow older.

RD: Nakamura Ichiro and his wife live in a 200-year-old traditional style wooden machiya in the center of Kyoto. Nakamura, 67, spends his day fulfilling obligations to the ancestors of his household. The couple wonder if they will be remembered after their death.

JD: Nakamura-san and his wife loved the local traditions, including the festivals and religious events. Some might think of them as nostalgic, but this is only because the pace of change in their neighbourhood has been so rapid.

As the eldest son, Nakamura-san was taught by his parents and grandparents to carry on the household traditions. These sorts of traditions do not come with a manual, and they are not strictly Shinto or Buddhist. These traditions may have developed over a dozen generations. It is hard for him to see them being lost. Neither of his two sons appear interested in carrying on most of the traditions.

Nakamura-san will most likely have to sell their centuries old house in order to pay for long-term care costs. I think the major project for him in old age is deciding how to best pass on his legacy so that he does not have to feel shame in front of the ancestors. And at the same time, he does not become a burden on his children.

RD: In your closing chapter, you write: "Living out one's natural life means having the agency, the creativity and the resources to endure loss and maintain positive

bonds to others." These are challenges that we all face. What can we learn from these older adults?

JD: There is a lot to learn from Japan about mourning and memorial. I think one of the more fascinating aspects of Japanese culture is the way they embrace contradiction. One can experience loss, grief and worry but, at the same time, feel alive, connected and caring all at the same time. This is what memorial is about.

Growing up in the suburbs of Detroit, this is not something I learned. You didn't talk about death. And visiting the dead for a chat would have been reason to call for a therapist, but this is the everyday world for many Japanese people.

When I lived in the United States, I met an older woman who told me about a vision she had of her late spouse who died suddenly in a hospital. He was surrounded by a white light and let her know that she did all she could. She was weeping just thinking about it. But she couldn't tell her family, and it wasn't something she felt matched the religion she was brought up in.

In Japan, these kind of stories are passed around all the time among older people. It is through them that old age can become something not to be avoided or feared, but a time of developing a new aesthetic sensibility, a sense of wisdom and warm-heartedness.

I have learned a lot by doing this research. Currently, I am examining aging in Japan through the eyes of the carer. I am sure I will continue to learn for a long time yet.

Study: The Changing World of Grandfathers

A new U.K. study has found men charting new territory as they respond to the challenges and opportunities arising from being a grandparent today.

The Contemporary Dynamics of Grandfatherhood Project draws on interview data from 60 grandfathers in Britain, ranging in age from 48 to 94.

This specific study, led by Robin Mann from Bangor University, focuses on five cases from the larger study. It offers a telling glimpse into the real world of grandfathers.

The findings appeared online in the journal of the British Sociological Association, *Sociology*, on March 19, 2015.

Changes in society

The study found that changing family patterns and lifestyles are making an impact on how men experience grandfatherhood today.

Alan

Alan, 71, has three grandchildren: a 12-year-old granddaughter from his older daughter, and a 10-year-old granddaughter and eight-year-old grandson from his son.

When his oldest daughter first became pregnant, she was unmarried and Alan and his wife stepped in to help. Although unsettled by the situation at first, Alan quickly developed a close relationship with his granddaughter.

He described himself as a "surrogate father," who oversees his grandchild's school work and fosters a "right sense of family."

"I did spend an awful lot of time with her. I mean I taught her how to ride a bicycle. I took her on bicycle rides, encouraging her in her sporting athletics and even started her playing golf for a while," he said.

Now that she is 12, he is learning that he must "stand back" and let her pursue her own interests.

Alan sees less of his other two grandchildren who do not need him so much. "They're busy with school activities . . . they come along give you a hug and they're off again."

Brian

Brian is also intensely involved with his 10-year-old grandson because "dad's not there."

Indeed, his grandson has never met his father, Brian's biological son. He has lived with Brian and his wife, since he was four years old.

A 64-year-old former secondary school physical education teacher, Brian is deeply involved in caring for his grandson. They play a lot of sports: football, swing ball and wrestling.

When something is broken at school, his grandchild tells his class mates: "Oh, Grampy will fix that."

Like Alan, he is less involved with his other grandchildren who do not "need" him. He sees them a few times a year.

Will

Divorced, and recently re-partnered, Will has four grandchildren and one step-grandchild from his current partner.

The 68-year-old former art teacher described his own grandparents as distant: "I mean my grandparents never took us for walks or played with us. They were quite authoritative."

In contrast, Will enjoys a wide range of activities with his grandchildren, including:

- playing imaginary games
- learning drawing techniques
- gardening, and
- sitting and watching children's television shows.

He also spends time with his brother and his eight grandchildren: "We play constantly with them, go on holiday with them and look after them when mums and dads are either ill or got to go to work."

Chris

Divorced and remarried with two grandchildren, Chris also has one step-grandson. The busy 51-year-old professional works long hours.

His daughter first became pregnant when she was still at school. Chris worried about the impact of motherhood on her education and career aspirations.

Nevertheless, he has developed a warm bond with his grandchildren, especially his granddaughter. "We see them about once or twice a month and they stay over on weekends, so we do spend quality time."

Chris also supports his children and grandchildren financially, purchasing items such as nappies and push chairs.

Still, he wishes he had more time with his grandchildren: "I mean, pragmatically, we both work long hours and it is difficult to really give the amount of time that we would like."

Stuart

Stuart and his second wife have seven grandchildren. Most of them live several hundred miles away.

Because of the distance, he sees his grandchildren only a few times a year: "We see them when they come down here and when we go up there."

Between visits, they keep in contact by phone and email. "I think it is important to have good conversation skills and develop a good rapport with them," he said.

Stuart, 65, does not see his grandfather role as a responsibility. He views his post-retirement years as a time for leisure and travel. "I think we are still looking for excitement and stimulation in our lives and not just settling into old age," he said.

Grandpa wears many hats

As families and lifestyles change, so too, the roles of grandfathers.

For Alan and Brian, the absence of dads meant greater involvement in their grandchildren's lives. Notably, both men became grandfathers post-retirement. This allowed them to engage with grandchildren in ways which were not available to them working long hours as fathers.

However, younger grandfathers in particular may have other responsibilities and interests. Chris, for example, struggled to weave time for his grandchildren into a busy schedule that included demanding work, a new partner and a desire to spend time with friends.

For Stuart, being a grandfather is only one dimension of an active life. "We don't want to be just grandparents," he said.

All the participants rejected the image of grandfathers as distant and passive. These men see themselves as sensitive, hands-on granddads, eager to develop special relationships with their grandkids.

Guest Column: Marginalized, Or More Connected?

In this issue, author and lecturer Maxine Hancock shares her "take" on digital technology and aging. Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology at Regent College (Vancouver, BC.), Dr. Hancock lives with her husband, Campbell, near Canning, Nova Scotia.

We were in Calgary visiting family when we happened to find ourselves near the Apple store on the day of the release of a new iPhone. The mostly young crowd buzzed with excitement, like bees around a hive on a sunny late-August day. There was a determined consumerism mixed with an almost reverent attentiveness that I had never seen before.

I suddenly understood that, whatever the new digital age was, I would never fully belong to it. Despite using a computer for writing since the mid-1970's, digital technology would be for me merely about tools, not about identity or lifestyle.

And yet, even as I write, I realize my life is continuously affected by the digital revolution. I am, for example, sitting in my home in rural Nova Scotia, finishing this article so that I can be ready to watch my 15-year-old granddaughter swim in the Illinois State Senior Championships, live-streamed on-line. Our family lives scattered across

North America, yet we have frequent visual, audio and textual contact by way of texting, Facetime, Facebook, Instagram and email.

I was recently asked to comment for CBC's *Cross Country Checkup* on the question: "Does digital technology — with the smarts of the techno young privileged over experience and wisdom — contribute to the marginalization of the old and their store of experience and knowledge? Or may it, in fact, be a gift to the aging?" I found the answer to be "both . . . and" rather than "either . . . or."

Without doubt, the rapidly changing world of technology has created new dimensions and new challenges for older adults. It may be easier to see the negative potential of the new technologies than to note the positive, as all of us have faced the frustrations of learning and relearning ever-updated programs and systems. We always feel a little bit behind, maybe even "stupid." The danger, however, may lie more in becoming unwilling to learn new things than in the pressure to do so.

But I think there may be bigger problems than refusing to try to learn new things. We may get tricked into substituting "virtual community" for real community, resulting in ever-increasing isolation. A favourite cartoon has been pinned up on my bulletin board for some time: the scene is a funeral home chapel, with rows of empty chairs and only two or three people in attendance around a casket. One woman says to another, "I thought there would be more people here. After all, he had 3000 friends on Facebook."

The point is clear: keep some friends who are present in flesh and blood, people you can go for lunch with or who can drop in for a visit, who can give you a hug or reach out and hold your hand. People who might be able to come to your funeral.

Of course, the flip side of this is that through such social media as Facebook and Instagram, we are able to keep in touch, if only in a fleeting way, with a wide circle of friends accumulated over a lifetime. The function once served by mailed Christmas cards and personal letters is now served swiftly and directly by the Internet.

Skype allows for a kind of conversation with friends, colleagues and loved ones. Facebook means that we have frequent updates and glimpses of people we care about. Nonetheless, if I had to choose between posting or responding to an update on Facebook, and going for lunch with a friend, lunch will win out every time.

When, a few months ago, my husband had major heart surgery, Facebook friends sent me words of encouragement and "likes," all of which we appreciated. But it was friends close at hand who brought soup and cookies and casseroles and gave me a hug when I needed one. Glad as I am to keep in touch with distant friends, it is friends nearby who sustain and support us physically.

I have found that when I am finished a Skype conversation, I feel as though I have *nearly* met my friend or student or colleague, but that, after all, the representation is not the person. And there is really very little comparison between the experience say, attending a

symphony concert and watching the camera watch one; or of participating in worship with a local congregation and watching a televised church service. The technology necessarily alters the experience. As Marshall McLuhan told us a long time ago, "the medium is the message."

It takes an act of will and physical energy to stay connected to human community through sharing actual experiences, but failing to do that to whatever extent we are able, results in incalculable loss. We are, after all, not just thinking machines, or bundles of nerves desiring stimulus: we are whole persons who thrive only in connection with others.

A very costly effect of technology is the alienation of the young from the old, and perhaps even of our own selves from our store of experience. The dream of sharing stories with our grandchildren, or of baking cookies together, or going out for a walk in the woods has, for many of us who are grandparents or great-grandparents, largely faded as children have discovered the instant "brain hit" of electronics.

And this touches on another subtle effect of digital technology. For our own aging brains, living in the sound bite and "jolts-per-minute" world of technology leaves — not only for the young but for ourselves — an ever-diminishing space for reflection or for such activities as journaling. We are in constant danger of missing out on the reflective side of old age, perhaps sharing in our culture's under-valuing of the accumulated experience of life and world that is ours.

Our own brains, as well as those of our grandchildren, are under the assault of constant stimulation and the 1001 digressions that hypertext links offer. These all work against thoughtful reading, mediation, prayer and reflection.

But of course, there is a flipside to this discussion. I am glad to have connection through social media with former students and friends from other eras of my life *and* to be going out for lunch today with a friend. I am happily writing this article digitally, knowing that when it is done, I can push a button and send it in a few seconds to the editor. I can allow my concerns about technology to silence me, or I can recognize a new forum where "people of age" can tell stories, find new conversation partners, explore ideas and represent aging as they are living it, with all of its gifts and losses.

But right now, I have to click onto YouTube to watch my granddaughter swim.

Study: Emotional Support Lowers Stress for Gay Men

Research has shown that social support reduces psychological stress among gay men, and bolsters their sense of well-being.

Social support comes in many forms. So are some forms more effective than others?

A recent study by Anthony Lyons, a senior research fellow at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, has found that emotional support packs the biggest punch.

The study, published in *Research on Aging* on June 19, 2015, drew on data from an national online community survey of 242 gay Australian men. The men were aged 50 years and older and came from a range of socioeconomic and other backgrounds.

Types of social support

The author examined three different types of social support:

- emotional support, such as having someone to talk to about problems.
- belonging support, such as having someone to do things with, and
- tangible support: having someone to provide assistance with everyday tasks.

In addition, the participants indicated:

- whether they lived alone
- if they were in a regular relationship
- number of current friends, and
- if they felt close to the gay community.

Sources of support

The study found that men received support from five main sources:

- relationship partner
- family
- gay friends
- straight friends, and
- community or government agencies, such as a counselor or gay organization.

The findings showed that distress was lower among men who received emotional support or had a sense of belonging.

Also, distress was lower among those with a greater number of close friends and those who received support from gay friends or family.

Not surprisingly, friendship proved to be particularly important. Many of these men first came out when at a time when homosexuality was more stigmatized than it is today in countries like Australia and Canada. Some lost relationships with their families.

In this study, around two-fifths of the men reported little or no support from their families. In contrast, men received a lot of support from friends.

The study revealed no significant links between psychological stress and whether the men were in a regular relationship, living alone or felt connected to the gay community.

Emotional support trumps

The study identified emotional support as the only significant independent factor for psychological distress after other factors were taken into account. Moreover, it did not matter whether the support came from friends, family or others. In short, emotional support or having someone to talk to about problems can make spirits soar.

The author stresses mental health programs for gay men are more likely to be effective if they promote strategies to boost emotional well-being such as helplines and counseling services. He suggests online therapy for men reluctant to use traditional health and social services.

Roundup

I HAVE HEARD THE BLACKBIRD. I HAVE LIVED: So wrote best-selling novelist Henning Mankell about coping with lung cancer in *Quicksand: What It Means to Be a Human Being*. The book was published in English shortly after his death at the age of 67 on Oct. 5, 2015.

Mankell revealed that he felt sucked down and swallowed up by quicksand when he was diagnosed in January 2014.

The Swedish crime novelist, theatre director and political activist struggled for 10 days and nights to stay "afloat". Finally, he began to leave the quicksand behind and his zest for life returned.

But Mankell could not stop thinking about his illness. He searched for ways to cope.

Books

Over the years, books had been his refuge. He turned to them when he failed to meet a deadline, when love affairs ceased and when theatre productions went wrong.

Now books still brought him comfort, distracting him from thinking about his illness. But *only* familiar ones worked: only those he had read many times before. In his study, he made a pile of the books he wanted to reread. He started with *Robinson Crusoe*.

Pictures

When Mankell began his first cycle of chemotherapy, his eyes became irritated and it was difficult for him to read. He began to alternate reading with looking at images of works of art, one picture a day.

Again, he started with his favourite artists. Caravaggio, born in Milan in 1571, and known for creating a strange dramatic world. He also looked at the work of Honoré Daumier, a political caricaturist, painter and sculptor who was born in Marseille, France in 1808.

As Mankell wrote, "Every picture that means something special to me also has a story to tell, even if they open different doors to the ones opened by written texts."

Music

His third way of thinking about something other than his illness was music. He started going through his record collection: jazz, classical, African folk, blues from the southern states delta. Most of all, he listened to Miles Davis and Beethoven and occasionally to the liturgical music of the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt.

Mankell maintained a strict routine: he read books, looked at pictures and listened to music.

He was a person who had been diagnosed with a serious illness, but he was also the same person he had been before: "It was possible to live in two worlds at the same time."

MORE MEN SEEK COSMETIC SURGERY: Increasingly, men are lining up at doctor's offices, looking for a little nip and a tuck.

According to the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons there were 51,140 cosmetic surgery procedures in the United Kingdom in 2015. Of those 4,164 procedures were performed on men. This is almost twice the number of men who had cosmetic surgery a decade ago.

Instead of facelifts, more men are opting for non-surgical treatments including, Botox, laser treatments, facials and prescription skincare regimes. Designed to plump, smooth, lift and tighten the face, these treatments require regular touch-ups.

Men report they use anti-aging procedures for career reasons, to appear younger and to remain competitive in the workforce. Others say they just want to look as good as they can.

Americans spent more than \$12 billion on cosmetic surgery in 2014, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Surgical and nonsurgical procedures for men were up 43 per cent over the past five years.

OLDER CANADIANS TOUT SUPPORT FROM PEERS: Falls are the leading cause of injury among older Canadians, according to Statistics Canada.

So where do Canadians turn for help after a fall?

Researchers put that question to 20 older adults who visited the emergency department, as a result of a fall. The participants lived in a city in south-western Ontario, and were aged 65 to 88. The majority of people in the study did not require hospitalization.

Here are three things to know:

1. Most older people would prefer not to ask for help.

Why?

They cherish their independence, and they said asking for help made them feel:

- devalued
- indebted, and
- they were afraid of becoming a burden to others, and especially their grown children.

A woman told researchers: "Quite honestly if [the cleaning lady] had not been here when I had fallen I probably would have waited till I felt like it and then just crawled back into the house and not said anything."

2. Older adults excused family members from providing assistance, saying they have their own families and work commitments.

Participants were also reluctant to seek help from family because they feared been viewed as needy dependents.

There were other reasons, too.

For one thing, participants disliked having to conform to other people's schedules. Some got around this problem by establishing a routine whereby friends or family were available on specific days to help with errands. "Like my son takes me out every Wednesday. It's our day out," one woman explained. "So you know I try to arrange any appointments that I might have."

3. Older people preferred to rely on close friends instead of their older adult children

One woman put it this way: "Oh, it would be easier to ask a girlfriend [than my son] because we are good friends you know . . . They're all around my age and they're kind of like me, independent."

Similarly, a married man remarked: "You know we [as neighbours] help one another back and fourth all the time. There's nothing involved in asking for help."

In this study, reciprocity, or a sense of "give and take" among peers, trumped other factors, when older adults sought help.

Studies report that family members are the main source of informal care for older relatives in Canada. According to Statistics Canada, over eight million individuals or 28 per cent of Canadians, provided care to a family member or friend in 2012.

Patricia Miller and colleagues reported full details of their study online in the February 2016 issue of *Ageing & Society*.

THE GREAT SPIRIT PRAYER

Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the wind, whose breath gives life to all the world.

Hear me; I need your strength and wisdom.

Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset.

Help me to remain calm and strong in the face of all that comes towards me.

Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.

Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes.

So when life fades, as the fading sunset, my spirit may come to you without shame.

Note: This is the abridged version of *The Great Spirit Prayer*, by Yellow Hawk, Sioux Chief