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Interview: Japanese Flute Creates Harmony

An international team of scientists predict life expectancy will soon exceed 90 years (The Lancet, April 1, 2017). So how are we to spend our bonus years?

A new study finds that music fosters a sense of purpose among older adults. According to musician and cultural ethnographer Koji Matsunobu, music instills the feeling that people are still able to develop musically and spiritually.

The study was published in Ageing & Society (Feb. 27, 2017).

To learn more, **AHB** reached Dr. Matsunobu at the Education University of Hong Kong in Hong Kong.

Ruth Dempsey: So what is the shakuhachi?

Koji Matsunobu: The shakuhachi is an end-blown Japanese bamboo flute. It is believed to be a Zen instrument as it was once used by komuso monks in the Fuke sect of Japanese Zen for their meditation practice and when begging for alms.

Today, the shakuhachi has become a secular instrument. It is widely practiced for a variety of reasons outside Japan. Many people play it for fun. Shakuhachi music ranges from classical solo repertoire to ensemble and popular music.

I've met many shakuhachi lovers and practitioners in North America, Europe, Australia and Chinese-speaking countries.

RD: Why did you want to study shakuhachi practitioners?

KM: From a music education perspective, the shakuhachi opens up opportunities for learning music in late life and engaging in self-development.

People begin shakuhachi lessons at different stages of life: they rarely begin at school age. Some begin in college or after getting married. Many begin to play the shakuhachi in their 50s, 60s and even 70s. Shakuhachi communities have traditionally welcomed elderly players.

At this time of life, the purpose of learning is not primarily to develop musical skills but to explore the meaning of life. For this, the shakuhachi is a perfect medium.

RD: How so?

KM: Shakuhachi music fosters awareness, attention to detail and the player's breath. The music tends to be simple.

For instance, the very first piece we learn in our school contains about 30 notes. We play them in 19 breaths. The entire piece takes about three minutes to play. Every day, we play this same piece, much like repeating a circle drawing in Zen practice. By engaging in the same act everyday, we face ourselves and become aware of how we are, physically, mentally and emotionally.

The goal is to craft or perfect one tone (or one breath). We have this notion, *ichion-jobutsu*, or the attainment of enlightenment through perfecting a single tone.

Using a piece of music to accommodate one's mental, physical, spiritual and musical condition - often with other players - is unique to shakuhachi training.

RD: Your study focuses on Takeo, a 70-year-old carpenter. What drew you to him?

KM: I met with hundreds of practitioners, both professional and amateur, over a two-year period. I interviewed about 40 practitioners. Takeo stood out.

When I heard him play, I was struck by his deep tones. I was also struck by the depth of his life stories. His wife died 20 years ago. He has three grown children and seven grandchildren.

In his community, Takeo is respected and idealized as someone who leads his life through the shakuhachi.

I honestly feel that he is my role model.

RD: Takeo made many pilgrimages in his wife's honour. What did they entail?

KM: The most notable one was the *ohenro* pilgrimage. This is a 1400-kilometre route of 88 temples in the spiritual island of Shikoku. The route is believed to follow the footsteps of the eighth-century Buddhist monk Kukai.

The route can be harsh, if like Takeo, you use no public transportation. It takes about 50 days to complete the entire route.

Some temples are located on tops of high mountains. Many places lack accommodation. He often slept outdoors. One night, to avoid the wind, he slept in a public phone box with his legs folded. He believes it needs to be tough because his wife's suffering was even greater. He explained that she had stomach cancer, and it eventually spread to other parts of her body.

Takeo completed this pilgrimage four times. At each of the temples, he played the shakuhachi for the salvation of his wife.

RD: He took strength from the people he met along the way . . .

KM: This is true. Pilgrims cross each other's paths during the course of their long journey. Like Takeo, many pilgrims have spiritual reasons for taking the journey. They share hardships and forge strong bonds.

Local people offered him food. Some invited him to stay overnight or offered him a place to rest. He played the shakuhachi to convey his sincere appreciation. They could hear his spiritual being through the shakuhachi.

For many, his playing brought back memories of lost loved ones.

Takeo speaks of the importance of *ichigo-ichie*. This concept means "one time, one meeting." Each encounter with a person, a moment, a life is special and precious, as it never occurs again. It suggests that we must appreciate every encounter as if it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

He deeply regrets that the time with his wife was not always *ichigo-ichie*. Now he plays the shakuhachi in the spirit of *ichigo-ichie* as an offering for his wife.

RD: I was struck by how his teacher noticed a change in his shakuhachi sound when he returned from a pilgrimage . . .

KM: For Takeo, each pilgrimage presented a series of predicaments and significant moments.

His teacher noted his pilgrimage experiences seasoned his musical expression, allowing his spiritual being to shine through.

As Takeo put it, "I add a 'growth ring' to my playing and that manifests itself as I play."

RD: Takeo loved to make his own flutes. Why several flutes? Are they difficult to make?

KM: Modern shakuhachi players tend to have multiples flutes of varying sizes in order to play in different keys. Most purchase instruments from professional makers.

People like Takeo make their own shakuhachi using a minimalist approach. This allows them to explore the different sounds of each piece of bamboo. Some even harvest their own bamboo.

This is a special experience as each piece of bamboo is different, producing unique tones. Some flutes may exhibit very strong characteristics (e.g., very bright sound in the upper range, and a flat and weak voice in the low notes). Players don't necessarily aim for perfection but for the unique sound of each flute.

I find making this type of shakuhachi great fun. It's not very difficult.

RD: You say music became Takeo's life support, or "*ikigai*." Can you explain?

KM: The Japanese talk about *ikigai* or "purpose of living." It refers to the Japanese sense of spiritual well-being.

Takeo leads his life through the shakuhachi. From it, he derives sustenance and a deep sense of fulfillment. The shakuhachi is what makes his life worthwhile.

RD: So perhaps, it's not just the healthy diet of the Japanese that account for their long lives, but also their *ikigai* or life purposes?

KM: I tend to agree. Many believe that having an *ikigai* is crucial to positive aging.

Music provides people with opportunities to engage in social and artistic activities with family and friends. It also creates a space for personal challenges. Such activities allow individuals to embrace the richness of experience and feel fulfilled as they grow older.

Study: Male Retirees Bond Over Coffee

New research finds that older men's well-being improves when they engage in leisure activities, such as coffee groups.

Researchers led by Katherine Broughton from Western Illinois University, (Moline, Ill., U.S.A.), observed participants during a six-month period at two locations - a senior centre and a McDonald's restaurant - in a midwestern U.S. city. They also conducted in-depth interviews with 14 retirees, who attended the groups. Participants ranged in age from 64 to 93.

The findings, published in *Leisure Sciences* (Vol. 39, No. 3, 2017), give unique insight into how male retirees use social leisure experiences, such as coffee groups, to socialize, enhance their well-being and foster friendship.

Social engagement

Studies have shown that the period following retirement can be a time of far-reaching change in a person's life. Routines of everyday life are disrupted, and the externally imposed structure of life in the workplace and the social camaraderie are lost.

Coffee groups offer men a leisure activity that replaces work by providing a sense of routine. As one participant remarked, "It is a good start to the day and it becomes a habit pretty easily . . . It's kind of a substitution for going to work."

According to Broughton, some men arrived up to 60 minutes early for the coffee hour. And some stayed later and socialized outside of the group either with the receptionist at the senior centre or with other customers at McDonald's.

Aware of the importance of keeping mentally active, participants tout opportunities for wide-ranging conversations in the groups, spanning politics to world events to hobbies.

Emotional Outlet

Coffee groups offer men a supportive environment to express their thoughts and feelings.

As one participant put it:

The good side is, I think it is great to have a group of people and it's enjoyable and gives you a release for your emotions. You know, we cover such a huge variety of topics and everything, so that is good.

Significantly, the study found men were comfortable discussing personal issues, such as health concerns, with each other. Don, who was considering surgery after he hurt his knee, was able to discuss the procedure with another coffee group member, who had similar surgery. The discussion clarified things for Don and helped calm his anxieties.

Also, coffee group members supported each other in times of stress. For example, when Steve lost his wife of 62 years after a long illness, a buddy offered him support and friendship. Furthermore, the coffee group provided a place where Steve felt comfortable sharing his emotions and could reminisce about times he had with his wife.

Sense of belonging

In addition to an emotional outlet and a venue for socializing, the men valued the coffee hour because it provided a sense of belonging.

"Just being around friends and sitting down here talking and listening, it makes a big difference," one participant said.

Once the men arrived in the morning at the restaurant or the senior centre, they greeted each other with handshakes and sometimes with a handshake and arm on the shoulder. For the next 90 minutes or so, the men laughed, joked and teased each other, forging bonds of community and fostering feelings of connectedness and belonging.

Notably, the research found that most of the participants expanded their social networks through meeting new friends in the groups after retirement.

Book Excerpt: From Grieving to Surviving

*In this extract from her memoir, **Minerva's Owl: The Bereavement Phase of My Marriage**, Canadian author Carol Matthews explores bereavement - not as the end of a marriage - but as a predictable phase of an ongoing significant relationship.*

February 2012. Your death was sudden. Shocking. Just 17 days after you were admitted to hospital. Nine days in which we thought you would recover and then eight days in palliative care. I wept for your pain, vulnerability, the indignity of it all. I wish I'd been able to do more to help you, but know that, through the years to come, I will have to face all you endured. At length, helpless, without you.

They say our bodies are formed from stardust, and when we die we return to the stars. That sounds true. When my father died, I told my young daughter that I now thought her grandfather was up among the stars. I didn't believe in life after death, but it was easy to look up into the night sky and tell her that somehow, somewhere, he was a part of it. I would gaze at the Milky Way, the constellations of the horoscope, and think of deification. Apotheosis. The hero raised to a godlike stature.

On the day before you died, I read you a stanza of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, one that you'd recited to me in the first days of our courtship:

*Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the beaded axle tree . . .
The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars.*

As you lay dying, your dog asleep at the foot of your bed, our daughter Alison on one side of you and me on the other, each holding one of your hands, I assured you that it wouldn't be long until we'd all be together again in the drift of the stars. I didn't know what I was saying, yet, without intention or forethought, my words were full of conviction.

Did that offer you comfort? It doesn't console me. Nothing does. The grief is more intense than I could have imagined.

Our word "grief" is derived from the Latin *graus* or *gravis*, meaning "heaviness." Grief brings a heaviness to the spirit, the psyche, the body. I sleep deeply and at length, but dread morning. I am weighed down by the loss of you.

In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis notes that the sensation of grief is like fear. The same fluttering in the stomach, the restlessness, the yawning. For me, it is also nausea. Every morning, I wake disoriented, panic-stricken, nauseous; my whole being rejects the approach of another day without you.

The word "bereft" comes to mind, with its roots in the Old English *bereafian* – to deprive of, take away, seize, rob, despoil. Yes, you have been seized from me, ripped away. I am robbed, despoiled by my loss.

I turn to words for solace, but there are no words sufficient for this aching void. No way to describe it. And yet everyone tries. When a loved one dies, people bring the death books, and there are a great many. Even friends with whom you and I joked about the death books will find a way to bring words they think will be of comfort – a little book about loss, a distinguished author's account of bereavement, a collection of poetry, a manual on mindful grieving.

My inclination is to dismiss these books because I know in my heart that my grief is like no other, and yet I end up reading them. And I find, of course, the bereaved have much in common in their experience of loss.

I thought I was the only one who wrote letters to her dead husband until I read Natascha McElhone's *After You*. When her 43-year-old husband died, leaving her with two young sons and pregnant with a third, she said writing letters to him enabled her to "keep him here" long enough to come to terms with her loss.

Similarly, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion writes about trying to keep the dead alive "in order to keep them with us." As long as I can write to you, you are still with me, even though we are in separate worlds.

I hadn't previously read any of Daphne du Maurier's novels, but her essay *On Death and Widowhood* resonates with me. She speaks of how, to ease the pain, she wore her husband's shirts and used his pens in order to feel closer to him. I've learned that many grieving people wear their partner's shirts, sleep in their pyjamas, bury their noses in a favourite sweater to catch a hint of scent. We sit at their desks, use their pens, keep up the rituals, and try to capture threads of our partners' presence. It takes a long time to change the joint message on the telephone answering service. We don't want to let go.

In our later years, you and I sometimes talked about the predictable bereavement that one or the other of us would experience. A sort of Abbott and Costello routine like Who's on First? *Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third.*

It would be best if I died first. I wouldn't want to leave you, but I think it would be best.

That's silly. I couldn't manage without you.

I hate to think of you on your own, but you'd manage better than I would.

I wouldn't manage at all, you idiot! I'd die without you. Whereas you would be all right. All sorts of women would come around with casseroles.

I don't want their stinking casseroles.

Maybe we should do the long swim together. Plunge into the waves and head out past the point of no return.

No, not the long swim . . . not yet.

Maybe we should die together in a plane crash.

Yes. On a holiday.

On the return trip, our way back from a holiday.

Together. Or else me first.

That's nonsense.

A predictable transition, yes, and one we often discussed, but not one we could ever plan for. As P.K. Page said in her poem *Preparation*, what happens is never like what you prepared for: "It is where you are not/that the fissure occurs/and the light crashes in."

In those last years I'd turn to see your face on the pillow next to mine each morning and would say, happily, "Well then, another day." You always seemed so vital, so indestructible. I was sure you would outlive me. I thought you'd live forever.

And now I envision your face out there in the starry sky in the constellation of Cancer, which is in between Gemini, the sign for you and Alison, and Leo, for our granddaughter, Charlotte.

"Don't you find it strange, Nana," Charlotte asks, "that we're part of the Milky Way and yet we can see the Milky Way?"

A good question, I tell her. I feel that you are still a part of me, Mike, and yet I can only imagine you as being far away out there in the drift of stars.

Excerpt from *Minerva's Owl: The Bereavement Phase of My Marriage* by Carol Matthews (Oolichan Books, \$17.95). Copies will be available at local bookstores, through online retailers or by emailing Carolyn@oolichan.com.

Carol Matthews is the author of four books of memoir, including [*The First Three Years of a Grandmother's Life*](#) and *Incidental Music*, a collection of short stories. She has received the 2017 *PRISM international* Jacob Zilber Prize for her short story *The Boat, as it Happened*.

Study: Quilts for Wounded Warriors

Quilters throughout the United States and Canada spend countless hours quietly quilting for wounded service members and their families.

So what motivates them?

Researchers from Penn State Mont Alto in Pennsylvania (U.S.A.), put that question to 24 quilters, chosen from a list of names submitted by [The Quilts of Valor Foundation](#), an organization that focuses on wounded service people. All the participants were middle-aged women with the exception of one 28-year-old female and one 82-year-old male.

Although this study focuses on U.S. service members, Canadians also provide support for [injured service members](#).

The study, published online in the *Journal of Women & Aging* (Vol. 29, No.1, 2017) shows individuals have many reasons for making and donating quilts. They include:

- offering support to wounded members
- caring for family and friends, and
- providing a better homecoming for veterans.

The study also revealed quilting for others fosters personal growth.

Offering support

First and foremost, participants wanted to support service members wounded in combat zones.

Indeed, the study found that many quilters were opposed to American involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts, but that didn't stop them from reaching out to wounded service people.

Caring for family and friends

Nine of the 24 participants had family members in the military.

One quilter explained that her son had been a drill sergeant, and he was constantly calling or writing or e-mailing and saying, "Mom, I got a kid who doesn't get any mail."

Another woman reported that a suicide bomber had hit an oil tanker, during her son's deployment, sending five of his colleagues to the burn unit. He called and said, "Mom, get quilts."

Participants who did not have family in the military wanted to support friends and acquaintances who did have family involved in the conflicts, some of whom had been injured or killed.

For instance, one participant talked about making a quilt for the mother of one of her son's comrades, who had been killed. After she hand-delivered the quilt to his grieving mother, the two women became close friends.

Among participants, nine quilters were especially interested in reaching out to young service members. As one participant put it, "Like I say, I don't necessarily support war, but I know . . . so many of the people that are getting injured are very, very young, and many of them are very traumatized by what they've seen and had to deal with."

Positive homecomings

Seven participants had family members, or had known others, who were treated badly, on their return from the Vietnam War.

For example, one woman said her husband couldn't hold his head up high: "I got called a whore because I was a Navy wife looking for a job in a bank during Vietnam."

She added, "We've been there, we've done that. . . . I don't ever, ever want our servicemen to be treated like our Vietnam veterans were treated."

Similarly, another woman, whose husband was in the submarine service said they had to worry about people looking up the crew's names and harassing them, "I just couldn't face that again, where they were spat on and people turned their backs.

These quilters were determined to make homecomings more positive events for veterans.

Conveying meaning

How did quilters convey the meaning of their work to recipients?

The study found 13 participants imagined the needs of recipients, conveying meaning mainly through choice of fabrics and quilting patterns.

Several donors sent letters with each quilt.

One participant wrote:

I think quilts are like this: we start out with a whole piece, which you started out as. When we cut it up in little pieces, is what combat does. And then we put it back together again, this is what your recovery is. Our little cut-up pieces are now stronger than the original piece. And that's what you will become. So, use my quilt, not just for the warmth of curling up in it, but it's a statement about your recovery and just know that you will become stronger . . . than you were.

Some of the participants designed quilts to make members smile. Quilts with big pink flamingos or flip flops, for example.

Quilters reap benefits

Wounded service members were not the only ones to benefit from the donated quilts, there was payback for quilters, too.

To start, quilters derived satisfaction from feeling their gift made a difference in another person's life.

Quilting also allowed participants to develop their talents and express their creativity.

For a few experienced and novice quilters, the project was a source of healing - either of their own wounds, or those of others, not necessarily related to military involvement.

For instance, one quilter was grieving a sister, killed in a recent car accident.

Another described the way becoming a quilter and donating quilts had helped her 82-year-old neighbour to heal emotional wounds sustained in the Second World War.

Finally, the research found that quilting provided an opportunity for these middle-aged adults to express generativity.

According to Erik Erikson, our psycho-social development is a process that lasts a lifetime. This theory identifies eight separate stages of development which are characterized by specific psycho-social crises. Erikson suggests that adults in midlife face a crisis of generativity versus stagnation. Generative individuals overcome self-absorption by investing in family and community needs.

Research has shown generativity is key to positive aging.

Roundup

DON'T CALL ME A SENIOR: Numbers show adults 65 and over outnumber children in Canada for the first time since Confederation.

According to Statistics Canada's 2016 census figures, there are now 5.9 million Canadian seniors, compared to 5.8 million Canadians 14 and under.

Some say this is an ideal time to banish the term "senior."

In a letter to Nova Scotia's Advisory Committee on Aging, one person wrote:

We all have various identities in our lives - we are athletes, artists, musicians, labourers, professionals, carpenters, etc., . . . but we turn 65 and become a "senior," the term used for everyone from the age of 65 to 105 . . . It's like calling

the rest of the world "the juniors" and stripping away all other identities or titles which allow us to be individuals.

By 2030, more than one in four Nova Scotians will be 65 years or older. The province's [new action plan](#) for an aging population invites all citizens to embrace opportunities offered by an aging society.

ABORIGINAL PATHS TO AGING WELL: As the cohort of aging Aboriginal people in Canada grows, anthropologists are collecting their stories and expanding our understanding of aging.

Born in 1939, Marie Favel has lived most of her life in the Metis community of Ile a la Crosse in Saskatchewan, Canada. She married her husband Jimmy in 1958 and raised eight children. Favel became a teacher, community health worker and an advocate for her Aboriginal heritage.

She describes her aging journey this way:

I see that I have moved through the medicine wheel; that my pursuit of more education and experience has taken me through all four quadrants as a teacher (mental and emotional), as a religious educator and sweat leader (spiritual), and in community health education (physical). And having searched the wheel I found the last piece in health education. And this is where I feel I can make the most contribution to the health and healing of my community.

So today, I am still involved in many things that are about sharing my life experiences, about helping our youth stay in school, about helping our young people parent well and drawing on the old ways, and about dealing with the hurt that is still there in the high suicide rates among our youth.

Source: *Anthropology & Aging Quarterly* (Vol. 33, No. 1, 2012).

OLDER AUSSIES REDISCOVER THE "HIGH" LIFE: As Canada gears up to legalize marijuana, a new report finds substance use is on the rise among older Australians.

Victoria Kostadinov and Ann Roche of Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, analyzed data from the 2004 and 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey. Their findings show cannabis use, among Australians 50 years and over, increased from 1.5 per cent to 3.6 per cent between 2004 and 2013.

The study finds unmarried men aged 50 to 59 who also use other substances are at particular risk.

Much of this is attributed to aging baby boomers who dabbled with the drug when they were young. As cannabis becomes legal and more normalized, they are returning to it for medical or recreational use.

Cannabis use is also on the rise among older Canadians. A 2012 Statistics Canada Community Health Survey found that the percentage of older cannabis users has quadrupled since 2002.

Past studies suggest cannabis can place older adults at risk due to aging-related physiological changes.

Researchers say healthcare professionals need support in updating skills to effectively support older cannabis users. Age-appropriate interventions are also required to reduce and manage cannabis use among older adults.

Details of the study appeared in the March 2017 issue of the *Australasian Journal on Ageing*.

LATE RIPENESS

The land of old age holds both openings and closings for Polish Nobel Laureate, Czeslaw Milosz.

In "Late Ripeness," published in *Second Space*, he writes:

Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,
I felt a door opening in me and I entered
the clarity of early morning.

One after another my former lives were departing,
like ships, together with their sorrow.