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# Japan's gods of Nature

Catherine Marshall, *Eureka Street*: March 21, 2011



A typhoon was bearing down on Tokyo. As we sped along an expressway 250 km to the south-west, late last year, my guide, Yoshiko, was gentle but determined in the face of potential disaster.

'It will hit the centre of Japan tomorrow night. It will hit while we are sleeping,' she reported. 'If I get any more information I will introduce you to it, but it is out of my control. All I can do is make a prayer and kick that typhoon out of Japan.'

It was a scenario all too familiar to Yoshiko and her countrymen. Strung out like a levee alongside Asia's distended midriff, Japan faces the full wrath of the vast and mercurial North Pacific Ocean.

And the fault line that runs beneath the Japanese archipelago is as inescapable as an error written into the genes: there is no knowing when it will unzip and send the islands above it tumbling into themselves, and no telling whether the ocean will respond to these tectonic antics, pouring

itself over the land like some hateful monster.

As we neared the city of Hamamatsu, Yoshiko pointed out Lake Hamanako, whose broad, fresh waters were turned to brine by an earthquake-induced tsunami in 1498. Today, eels thrive in these brackish waters, and the city has built its culinary reputation on the popular, nutritious foodstuff.

Not much of a silver lining, but enough, perhaps, to mollify a nation that has suffered its share of humiliation and tragedy: occupation, atomic bombings, recession, typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis and, now, potential nuclear fallout.

The natural disasters — those events that Yoshiko says are 'out of my control' — must surely leave the Japanese with the feeling that they are living in an abusive household; they can never be certain that their unreliable motherland won't turn from love and beauty towards anger and violence.

But Yoshiko's calm, pragmatic approach might hold a clue to the workings of a nation squired by moody geography and shaped by conflict both foreign and internal. To the casual observer, the Japanese seem to carry the demeanour of a people resigned to catastrophe, and ever alert to the exquisite tension between pleasure and pain.

Here, goodness seems to organically inhere in everything, a notion informed by Shinto, the indigenous religion to which more than

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80 per cent of the population adheres.

'Shinto is a nature religion: we give thanks to everything we have,' said Yoshiko as rain pummelled the earth and hats flew in all directions. 'For example, today we are giving thanks to the god of wind, the god of rain.'

A hotel manager expressed a similar sentiment a few days later, in the alpine village of Kamikochi, where mist obscured an active volcano, Mt Yakedake. 'When we are lucky we can see the fumes,' he said.

This expression of respect — gratitude, even — for the natural coexistence of good and bad is foreign to most of us raised in the west. So too is the unconditional acceptance of personal responsibility, an attribute which is sacred to the Japanese.

I discovered this when Yoshiko was forced to leave behind a journalist from our party who was running late. He caught a taxi to our next meeting point, and Yoshiko confided that she would have to pay the fare from her own pocket. 'It is my responsibility to ensure that everyone is on time,' she said. 'I might get fired if anyone is late.'

It is this remarkable attitude that comes to mind when I try to make sense of the scenes of resignation and capitulation that have seared our television screens since Japan's north-eastern coast was devastated by an earthquake and tsunami just over a week ago.

To be sure, grief and disbelief are etched on the faces of survivors huddled in evacuation centres and those roaming obliterated streets looking for God-knows-what.

But the shouts of blame and accusation so redolent of other disasters are strangely absent; there is no news of looting or violence, no demands for immediate evacuation and coronial inquests. People form orderly queues for scarce petrol and inadequate food parcels. From the outside at least, the conduct of a people trapped in an apocalyptic nightmare is nothing short of exemplary.

Perhaps the people of Japan tread softly and with deliberate respect in the hope that they won't disturb the god of geology, the god of the sea, the god of the fiery mountain. Perhaps, as Yoshiko did in the face of that typhoon, they put faith in their *tera tera bozus*, tissue or fabric dolls which ward off bad weather, unless you turn them upside down, in which case they invite the typhoon or tsunami right into your living room.

And perhaps, when the gods decide to show their wrath, these people simply accept that there is no human being big enough to shoulder the blame.

In Yoshiko's case, her *tera tera bozu* did the trick, for the typhoon made a u-turn and headed for Hawaii instead. But she was careful not to insult the natural forces that had set it in motion in the first place.

With bowed head she said, 'Thanks to the god of cloud and the god of rain.'



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# News from Forbes

## *Special Sports Day*

An Annual Event held at Red Bend Catholic College is the **Forbes Special Sports Day**. This year marked 30 years of providing people with disabilities the opportunity to participate in sports. This popular gathering accommodated in our gymnasium attracted participants from Dubbo, Orange, Condobolin, Cowra, Young, Parkes and Forbes.

Dianne Decker from OCTEC Services has organised these days for many years and with a generous band of supporters has seen the event grow in success.



A special medal was struck to mark the 30th anniversary and this is now a treasured possession of all who participated.

Our school community's involvement included providing a very suitable venue,



some catering, 25 volunteer students who facilitated the running of the day and some staff who took part in a wheelchair basketball match.

The success of the day was obvious and immeasurable - evident in the excitement of the participants, the pride of the winning team as they accepted the trophy, the joy of scoring a basketball goal and the delight in the face of the man who rode in the police car with sirens blaring and lights flashing. ( This caused a few moments of anxiety to some of our more regular inhabitants).

New awareness and appreciation was deeply felt by our student assistants. For our whole school community, the day deepened our awareness of special and supportive groups active in our wider community and expressing in an inspiring way our value of Family and Caring for Others.



**Student helpers on the day**

## Royal Easter Show - Sydney

In this year's **Royal Sydney Easter Show**, dedicated Red Bend students prepared, presented and paraded cattle and poultry and participated in Junior Judging. Results were outstanding with two of our steers being awarded First Place Silver Medals in Carcase categories as well as Second and Third places in Live categories.



**Student poultry presenters join Postulant Gerard Barklimore**

In the Poultry section the College was awarded a very rare 'Royal Agricultural Society President's Silver Medal' for the quality of our entries in the Waterfowl exhibit. Championship ribbons were awarded to our geese in the Waterfowl Pair and Breeding Pair sections.

We credit our success to the significant input from **Brother Tom Hughes** and thank him for his encouragement.



**Br Anthony O'Brien, aka Tony, Tex and now Chris, catches the mobile chair lift to attend the Friday evening community meal.**



**Br Julian Casey visits the community recently, welcomed by Ken, Bryan, Aidan, Laury, Gerard and Brian.**

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# Simplifying our Spiritual Vocabulary

**Ron Rolheiser, OMI**



Somewhere near his 75th birthday, Morris West wrote a series of autobiographical essays entitled, *A View from the Ridge*. In the Prologue of that book he suggests that at age 75 you need to have only one word left in your spiritual vocabulary, gratitude, and that maturity is attained precisely at that moment when gratitude begins to drown out and cauterize the hurts in your life. As he describes it: Life has served me as it serves everyone, sometimes well and sometimes ill, but I have learned to be grateful for the gifts of it, for the love that began it and the other loves with which I have been so richly endowed.

I agree with West, though it is necessary to add that the fruit of that maturity is forgiveness. Just as smoke follows fire, forgiveness follows gratitude. Gratitude ultimately undergirds and fuels all genuine virtue and is the real basis of holiness, and the source of love itself. And its major fruit is forgiveness. When we are grateful we more easily find the strength to forgive.

Moreover, just as gratitude undergirds genuine virtue, forgiveness undergirds genuine religion and morality. Thus, as we get older, we can trim our spiritual vocabulary down to three words: Forgive, forgive, forgive! To age into and then die with a forgiving heart is the ultimate moral and religious imperative. We

shouldn't delude ourselves on this. All the dogmatic and moral purity in the world does little for us if our hearts are bitter and incapable of forgiveness.

We see this, for instance, in the sad figure of the older brother of the prodigal son. He stands before his father protesting that he has never wandered, never been unfaithful, and that he has stayed home and done the family's work. But, and this is the issue, he stands outside the father's house, unable to enter into joy, celebration, the banquet, the dance. He's done everything right, but a bitter heart prevents him from entering the father's house, just as much as the lustful wanderings of his younger brother took him out of that same house. Religious and moral fidelity, when not rooted inside of gratitude and forgiveness, are far from enough. They can leave us just as much outside the father's house as sin and infidelity. As Jesus teaches forcefully in the Lord's Prayer, a non-negotiable condition for going to heaven is forgiveness, especially our forgiving those who have hurt us.

But the struggle to forgive others is not easy and may never be trivialized or preached lightly. The struggle to forgive, I suspect, is our greatest psychological, moral, and religious struggle. It's not easy to forgive. Most everything inside of us protests. When we have

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been wronged, when we have suffered an injustice, when someone or something has treated us unfairly, a thousand physical and psychological mechanisms inside of us begin clam-up, shut-down, freeze-over, self-protect, and scream-out in protest, anger, and rage. Forgiveness is not something we can simply will and make happen. The heart, as Pascal once said, has its reasons. It also has its rhythms, its paranoia, its cold bitter spots, and its need to seal itself off from whatever has wounded it.

Moreover, all of us have been wounded. No one comes to adulthood with his or her heart fully intact. In ways small or traumatic, we have all been treated unjustly, violated, hurt, ignored, not properly honored, and unfairly cast aside. We all carry wounds and, with those wounds, we all carry some angers, some bitterness, and some areas within which we have not forgiven.



The strength of Henri Nouwen's greatest book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, was precisely to point out both the hidden cold places in our hearts and the mammoth struggle needed to bring warm and forgiveness to those places. So much of the lightness or

heaviness in our hearts, most every nuance of our mood, is unconsciously dictated by either the forgiveness or the non-forgiveness inside us. Forgiveness is the deep secret to joy. It is also the ultimate imperative.

Andrew Greeley, writing a review of Frank McCourt's book, *Angela's Ashes*, praised McCourt for being brilliant, but challenged him for being unforgiving with words to this effect: Granted, your life has been unfair. Your father was an alcoholic, your mother didn't protect you from the effects of that, you grew up in dire poverty, and you suffered a series of mini-injustices under the Irish social services, the Irish church, the Irish educational system, and the Irish weather! So, let me give you some advice: Before you die, forgive! Forgive your father for being an alcoholic, forgive your mother for not protecting you, forgive the church for wherever ways it failed you, forgive Ireland for the poverty, rain, and bad teachers it inflicted on you, forgive yourself for the failures of your own life, and then forgive God because life isn't fair ... so that you don't die an angry and bitter man, because that's really the ultimate moral imperative.

How true and how challenging!

**29-05-2011**

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# Children in Detention

The Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project Newsletter, April, 2011.



Almost half of the children currently held in immigration detention reached Australian shores without their parents. The numbers are: As of 4 February 2011, there were 6659 people in immigration detention, including 4086 being held on the mainland and 2573 on Christmas Island. Of these, 1027 were children. More than 3000 persons had been in detention longer than six months. Some of the children are orphans; some are fleeing war and persecution. Others are sent by family in the hope they will find not only safety in countries like Australia, but also a financial foothold for relatives. Most are Afghan boys.

At last count, over 1000 children seeking asylum were in detention - higher than the peak figure reached under the governments of Kevin Rudd and John Howard. Of them, about 465 arrived alone. We do not have figures for families in detention but obviously it is significant.

**There is a legislative principle that minors should be in detention only as a last resort. Immigration Detention Policy states that all**

**decisions taken by members of the immigration detention network in relation to minors must be in the best interests of the minor.**

Children arrive in Australia alone for many reasons. Department of Immigration and Citizenship figures show that in 2010, 98% of unaccompanied children were boys. Almost all of them are ultimately determined to be genuine refugees.

Last October, Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Immigration Minister Chris Bowen promised to move most children and vulnerable families out of locked, guarded facilities and into community detention by June 2011. But at the three quarter mark, according to the latest departmental figures, 256 people have been moved into community detention. We don't know how many of these are children.

The Australian community was obviously shocked by the story of nine-year-old Seena who was orphaned when his parents were killed in the asylum boat wrecked on rocks off Christmas Island in December. His plight has put sharp focus on the policy of moving unaccompanied children into the community. This may well be the moment in history that changes the practice of putting children in detention in this country.

Many of the children in detention are being held in overcrowded facilities. Once unaccompanied minors are granted permanent protection, they can apply to have their parents join them in Australia with split-family visas. This takes a long time because there is such a backlog.

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# Smile Awhile

## *Out of the mouths of babes ...*

Six year old grade ones each complete a proverb  
for the teacher

Don't change horses...  
until they stop running.

Where there's smoke there's...  
pollution.

Strike while the..  
bug is close.

Happy the bride who...  
gets all the presents.

It's always darkest before...  
Daylight Saving Time.

A penny saved is...  
not much.

Never underestimate the power of...  
termites.

Two's company, three's...  
the Musketeers.

You can lead a horse to water but...  
How?

Don't put off till tomorrow what...  
you put on to go to bed.

Don't bite the hand that...  
Looks dirty.

Laugh and the whole world laughs with  
you, cry and...  
You have to blow your nose.

No news is...  
impossible

There are none so blind as...  
Stevie Wonder.

A miss is as good as a...  
Mr.

Children should be seen and not...  
spanked or grounded.

You can't teach an old dog new...  
Math

If at first you don't succeed...  
get new batteries..

If you lie down with dogs, you'll...  
stink in the morning.

Get out of something only what you...  
see in the picture on the box

Love all, trust...  
Me.

When the blind lead the blind...  
get out of the way.

The pen is mightier than the...  
pigs..

A bird in the hand...  
is going to poop on you.

An idle mind is...  
the best way to relax.

Better late than...  
Pregnant



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