



An Attitude of Gratitude: Older Japanese in the Hopeful Present

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Abstract

In this article I explore ideas of a good and meaningful life in older age, based on ethnographic research with older Japanese people in the city of Osaka. Some of my interlocutors and friends in the field spoke about their approaching end of life. When speaking about the time remaining, many expressed their sense that the future will work out "somehow" (*nantonaku*). This statement of quiet hope acknowledged change, and encapsulated a desire to support others; it also shifted emphasis away from the future. This is not to say that the experience was, for my interlocutors, primarily marked by an orientation toward the past, through reminiscence and recollection. Inhabiting the moment was equally important. While reminiscing and narrating past events comprise a form of meaning-making, how does dwelling in the moment contribute to maintaining a meaningful existence? I will argue it allows for the cultivation of an 'attitude of gratitude,' which lends meaning to life. This attitude of gratitude binds together both reflections on the past and attention to the present moment in its fullness. It also, I suggest, opens up space for a particular kind of hope, one grounded in the moment. Thus, the sense of a good and meaningful life that these elders conveyed encapsulates an attitude of gratitude as a way of inhabiting the present, rather than dwelling in the past or leaping toward the future.

Keywords: Gratitude; quiet hope; aging; Japan; ends of life; meaning

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An Attitude of Gratitude: Older Japanese in the Hopeful Present

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The uniqueness of old age lies in its being the end period, the “meanwhile” that is to terminate radically within a time that, although indefinite, is proximate... Living is always planning, expecting—faturizing, one might say... During the “meanwhile,” to the extent our minds can be free of anxiety, they can also be free of time. And that is what I consider the state proper to old age.

Stanley A. Leavy (2011, 709)

What does it mean to hope at the end of life? What do people look forward to in their older age? Writing about his own experience with aging and time, psychoanalyst Professor Stanley Leavy, cited above, suggested that a certain liberation from the burdens of time can take place toward the “last of life.” The experience of time and the horizon of temporality are always entwined with morality, yet approaching the end of life brings these issues into relief. Moving through older age is, in this sense, a ‘moral timeline’ of changes (Long this issue). The aim of this special issue is to investigate the ends of life as a temporal horizon, but also in the sense of what lends life a sense of purpose (Introduction this issue). In this article, I explore the sense of temporality in later life among older inhabitants of an old merchant neighborhood in south Osaka.¹ My starting point is the observation that, despite evident difficulties, and in the context of widespread anxieties about aging (Kavedžija 2016), many of these people, particularly those in their eighth or ninth decade, have manifested quite hopeful dispositions. I found this striking because hope is so often understood as being future oriented: as the way one feels about what lies ahead. Authors have emphasized the potential that hope holds, the unknown nature of that which has not yet come into being, as in Ernst Bloch’s idea of the “not-yet” (1995 [1986], 13). In this sense, hope can be seen as a mode of anticipation (see Miyazaki 2006) or a prospective orientation (Reed 2011, 529), where one’s gaze is firmly fixed on the future that lies ahead. Yet, if hope is a prospective orientation, what form does it take in the later years, as one approaches the end of life? In this article, I explore senses of hope as expressed by my older Japanese interlocutors and their basis in what I term an “attitude of gratitude”: a diffuse sense of thankfulness for the various forms of care and support that one has received from others over the course of life. I suggest that, while sometimes bringing with them a sense of loss, the later years may offer an expanded scope for reflection on the life course and a heightened realization of interconnections with others. This, in turn, gives rise to an attitude of gratitude that is not merely restricted to reminiscing about the past, but also allows one to inhabit the present in a resolutely hopeful way. A world perceived as one in which much is owed to others is a quite different place than one from which much has been lost, even if the facts of life are the same.

So far, anthropological work on gratitude has primarily focused on expressions of gratitude and formal exchanges of gifts. For example, the fire hunting practices of Xavante, an indigenous people of Mato Grosso in Brazil, are interpreted as a source of gifts that are crucial for maintaining social ties and facilitating weddings. They are also seen as appropriate sources of gifts for expressing gratitude (Welch 2014, 48). Similarly, Appadurai (1985, 238) discusses gratitude as a social form among the Tamil in south India. While linguistic expressions of gratitude are often deemed superfluous or even inappropriate, appropriate gifts at appropriate times are in line with the broader hierarchical moral universe of duty and obligation. The emphasis on nonverbal expressions of gratitude and gift exchanges places gratitude outside the realm of discussions of authenticity and sincerity—if a gift is reciprocated with an appropriate return gift, it is deemed appropriate and the question of whether the gratitude is genuine or not is irrelevant. In other words, gratitude is not assumed to be an inner disposition of the actor (1985, 243–244). The Japanese, no doubt, have their fair share of formalized and beautifully organized gift exchanges, and the discussion of the hierarchical flow of duty and obligation in Japan is well described in numerous contexts. The performance of gratitude and its formal expressions are, in this sense, similar to the description in Appadurai's work among the Tamil people, with the exception that various forms of thanks are given verbally in myriad ways, formally and informally. Furthermore, gratitude in Japan can be seen to a large extent as a disposition: a recognition of how much one relies on others as one moves through life. This does not entail a focus on sincerity, but highlights instead one's own feelings of interdependence in the social world. In this article, I explore this aspect of gratitude and its cultivation as an attitude in everyday life.

This work is largely based on fieldwork I began in 2008 and continued through follow-up visits in 2013 and during four months in 2019, all in the Japanese city of Osaka. At the core of the discussion is the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted for 14 months in 2008–9, based in a community salon in a merchant neighborhood, which I call Shimoichi, in the south of Osaka. The Shimoichi salon was an open-for-all community space run by a non-profit organization that also organized various forms of support in the neighborhood: home-helper services; hobby activities, such as weaving or film screenings; and singing sessions, to name a few. The salon itself was a warm, welcoming space on a popular shopping street and offered hot drinks for a discounted and set price, allowing visitors to sit and chat or relax for a long time. Some would come regularly for several hours, while others might drop in briefly once a week or merely attend the organized events. It was favoured by older people living independently in the area. Most of the regulars were by no means affluent, but most owned their own homes. I was allowed to volunteer, making tea and coffee for the salon-goers, and had the privilege to be involved in a variety of activities run by the non-profit organization that started the salon.

During this time, I was also welcomed to the salon and visited on the days I was not volunteering. It was an easy place to either participate in conversations or simply listen in without interference, depending on the situation. In their conversations with me and between themselves, some of the regular visitors to the salon—many of whom I grew to know very well—would occasionally express concerns about their future. “I hope I won't get dementia (*boke*),”² said Okubo san, a lady in her early seventies. “Both of my parents lived very long lives and they both had it towards the end. I am worried that I will become a burden on my children.” The issue of becoming a burden and of losing the ability to take care of one's needs, was not uncommon among my interlocutors.³ And yet, when talking about their future, on more than one occasion, I heard people remark that things will work out “somehow” (*nantonaku*). Such statements were often vague, but were far from expressing a kind of passive resignation. The same people, while accepting the uncertainty ahead, were actively engaged in their wider community, and forged their own futures, at least to an extent. Their hope relied on the active cultivation of social ties. In fact, my friends were maintaining a social network of support that afforded a sense of security and

offered them some confidence that things will, indeed, work out somehow. This is what I refer to as “quiet hope.”

Quiet hope in an aging community

The community salon that became my *ibasho*, my place to be, is based in Shimoichi—an old, merchant, downtown South Osakan neighborhood. Here, new, shiny buildings and brightly lit stores line the avenues bordering the neighborhood, but smaller streets inside those boundaries remain quiet and residential. That year, I noticed that a couple of higher, ten-story buildings had been built since my last visit, making me even more aware of the fact that the neighborhood was still predominantly comprised of two-story family homes on the smaller streets. Here, people air their bedding and plant vegetables or flowers in eclectic assortments of pots lined up carefully between houses, parked cars, and bicycles. A large proportion, almost a quarter of its inhabitants is over the age of 65. At the same time, there are fewer people of working age and, as families have gotten smaller, the capacity of a decreasing number of siblings to care for aging parents has diminished.⁴ This kind of population structure is not exceptional in Japan, but it has serious consequences that are visible at a glance. For instance, some houses appear in need of repairs, which their older residents struggle to organize or afford. Many small shops are run by older people and face imminent closure, as their proprietors become unable to continue with their work and have encouraged their children to find more lucrative or prestigious careers. There seems to be a chiropractor every few hundred meters; there are few children playing in the streets. The neighborhood is beloved by most inhabitants and does not seem to be too quiet, in fact, the small streets pulse with life, albeit at a slower pace. This persistent sociality became apparent to me whenever I joined one of my older friends for a stroll or, more often than not, on a purposeful march to carry out someone’s many chores and social obligations. For instance, whenever I would walk down the street with my friend, Kobayashi san—a single woman in her mid-sixties—she would stop repeatedly to talk to people she knew in the street, perhaps helping to arrange a friend’s visit to the dentist, or to recommend a hairdresser. She explained that she enjoyed the social interaction but also felt that, because she had no close family, all she had were her friends and neighbors; so she helped them where she could, and expressed a vague hope that things will surely work out somehow, should she ever be in need of help.

Many other older people in Shimoichi, including volunteers in the salon (who were mostly in their sixties or early seventies), much like Kobayashi san, harbored a diffuse but enduring hope that things will all work out in the end, without necessarily expecting that the favors bestowed would be returned. Ueda san, one of the salon volunteers, who used to work as a home helper and now also organized karaoke gatherings for people in the neighborhood, mostly the elderly, told me she helped others partly to acknowledge the support her mother received in her later life. The attentiveness of her neighbors meant her mother could continue living on her own and Ueda san could continue working. Ueda san had no children of her own but did not exactly consider her care and support activities to be an “investment” in her future security. Nor did she have clear expectations or hopes as to how exactly things would work out when she grew older (she was in her early seventies when our conversations took place). But she was generally quite optimistic and believed that “if there is something,” some kind of community, then people would help each other and get by.

As already noted, a sort of diffuse hope that the future will be all right “somehow” (*nantonaku*) was widespread among this resilient group. Admittedly, many of them were still in good health and fairly

independent, but quite a few were living on their own and were by no means affluent, even if most of them owned their own homes. The hope expressed by many might seem, in some ways, like a fairly passive attitude: mere waiting, with an optimistic outlook that things will somehow fall into place in the future. Yet, as closer examination of the varied expressions of concern for others reveals, this attitude is anything but passive waiting. Instead, it is bound up in the subtle but proactive weaving of networks of support⁵, while avoiding the re-creation of a more traditional, “village like” community⁶ (see Knight 1996, 220), with its interactions of debt and burdensome “sticky” relationships.⁷ While some of these community-creating efforts were encouraged and supported by people working in local government and in the non-governmental sector, with varying degrees of conscious determination to bring about desired social change, for many it was merely an everyday practice borne of a hopeful attitude and providing a source of hope about the future. In other words, hope as an attitude is neither a passive optimism, nor is it necessarily an active, reflexive stance with a clear objective.

In his seminal piece, Vincent Crapanzano describes hope, in contrast to desire, as characterized by “passivism” and suggests that there is “a resignation . . . inherent in the notion of hope” (Crapanzano 2003, 5). Since its publication, there have been several notable contributions to the task of understanding and conceptualizing hope anthropologically (Hage 2003; Miyazaki 2004, 2006; Riles 2010; Moore 2011; Reed 2011). Miyazaki’s conceptualization of hope as a “reorientation of knowledge” has been particularly fecund, as it places in the foreground the link between hope and a shift in ways of seeing and acting in the world, in effect complicating the description of hope as predominantly passive. In his anthropological theory of morality, Jarrett Zigon introduces hope as central to leading a social life (Zigon 2009, 257). Based on his ethnographic work with Muscovites, he argues against conceiving hope as necessarily oriented toward a better life and acknowledges the contingent (or passive) nature of hope as something dependent on external circumstances, not merely on what one does. He suggests that hope has two (temporal) aspects in constant interplay: one that acts as a background to everyday life—for instance, supporting perseverance in the face of difficulty—and another that characterizes the intentional action required in moments of “moral breakdown”, when events challenge our standard ethical responses (2009, 254). Zigon’s work therefore encourages conceptualizations of hope that go beyond the passive–active dichotomy in an approach that resonates with the attitudes of my Osakan interlocutors. The elders in the neighborhood did not merely passively await the future that was to come; they engaged with others and participated in the neighborhood. Quiet hope is understated, yet practical. It is cultivated, relational, incremental, and modest and brings social worlds into being.⁸

Hope in Japan

Japan is becoming an impoverished country. A society where hope has turned scarce and the future has become bleak or inconceivable altogether (Allison 2013, 6–7).

Japan has, for some time now, been perceived as increasingly hopeless, in part due to demographic aging associated with increased responsibilities and burdens placed on a shrinking working population. In a now-famous book, Yamada (2004) describes Japanese society as an “Unequal hope society” (*Kibou kakusa shakai*), a society of hope-haves and hope-have-nots or those who cannot hope, where the gap between these hope “winners” and “losers” is widening. The increasing pressures on families and communities to care for its youngest and some of its oldest members, and concerns about working conditions, give rise to anxieties over an increasingly threadbare safety net. This wakening of support networks is associated with a growing gap between those with secure permanent employment and those without, those with savings and those without, those living comfortably and growing numbers of those falling into poverty (Hommerich 2012).

At the same time, empirical studies of hope, spearheaded by the Social Sciences of Hope (*kibougaku*) group at the University of Tokyo and led by scholar Genda Yuji, suggest that hope in communities is rather more resilient and deeply relational. One of the key words emerging from their extensive studies is *tsunagari*, or “connections”: hope requires and thrives on connections and links between people, organizations, and individuals (Genda and Nakamura 2009). Various contributions to the volume I edited several years ago on hope in contemporary Japan pointed in various ways to the importance of relationships and connections for the maintenance and emergence of hope, and its inverse - the isolating effects of the hopelessness of workers suffering from exhaustion, sometimes leading to death from overwork (North and Morioka 2016). Conversely, hope is rekindled through connections, for example, as fostered by ritual events (Robertson 2016).

If links, connections, and relationships with others are seen as fundamentally important for the emergence and maintenance of hope, how do older people remain or become hopeful in their later years? As years go by, many of those with whom they have moved through life—their “consociates,” to use Schutz’s term (also favored by David Plath in his description of the process of maturing in Japan)—are no longer alive. While the later years may be marked by loss, many older people become actively engaged in “rituals of concern” and strengthen their links with their ancestors by taking a leading role in the family practices of caring for ancestral tablets in domestic Buddhist altars (Traphagan 2004). In this sense, transcendence becomes an important aspect of hope in later years, particularly in the face of loss, as described by Danely (2016) in what he terms “lunar aesthetic.” “Lunar” hope is best understood as linking and transforming loss into transience and transcendence through ritual and attention to the spirits (*hotoke*) of the ancestors and those departed (2016, 16). Lunar hope among older Kyotoites relies heavily on the cultivation of links with the departed and ancestors. In this sense, it resembles the imminence described by Golomski in the South African context (this issue). The temporality of such a “lunar aesthetics” of hope is constituted less as a form of anticipation and more in cyclical terms, combining apparently contradictory feelings of loss and hope.

Quiet hope is cultivated through practice, through many small everyday acts. It links people and does not take place in isolation. The hopeful attitudes of others affect us, and hope thrives in circulation (Kavedžija 2016, 10). Vaguely stating that things in the future will turn out all right, that things will work out somehow, does not paint a clear picture of the future that one is moving toward, a scenario that is hoped for. Instead, it allows for unknown outcomes. It appears to shift attention away from the future, while at the same time acknowledging movement toward it.

If the temporal texture of hope is reconstituted as one moves through the life course, how does this change take place? I suggest that this move occurs with a gradual emphasis on being thankful and a careful cultivation of an attitude of gratitude.

Temporality in later life

In her ethnographic work on hospices, Julia Lawton (2002) points to an increasingly circumscribed sense of time. Bodily deterioration in the hospice was accompanied by a gradual “erosion of self” (2002). Drawing on the idea that the experience of space and time is related, Lawton suggests that the bounded space results in a shift of temporal perspective: “as patients’ bodies become reduced to a progressively inert state, their constructions and perceptions of space and time also appeared to become more increasingly bounded and static” (2002, 44). In contrast to much gerontological research pointing to an increase in orientation toward interiority, to reminiscing or thinking about the past, Lawton’s work points toward apathy and disengagement, to a loss of interest in both the future and the past. As a

consequence, “not only did patients lack a conception of a ‘future self,’ they had also ceased to preserve self in the present through the reconstruction and incorporation of memories from the past” (Lawton 2002, 100). Against the backdrop of such radically constrained experience in the face of bodily deterioration, the relative mobility and good health of my interlocutors stands out. Nonetheless, in their later years, their words were somewhat circumscribed, not least due to a shrinking number of consociates.

Shioya san and her older sister suggested I visit them in their house one afternoon. The quiet smiling and bespectacled seventy-nine-year-old had moved in with her ninety-year-old sister after a difficult surgery a couple of years earlier. The move was initially temporary, the older sister looking after the younger, but they seemed to thrive in each other’s company and decided to live together. Shioya san allowed her nephew to take over her own house. It was a hot and bright day, but when I entered, their old, narrow townhouse was dark inside. The room they led me to, at the back, behind two sets of sliding doors, was small and fitted with a low table and low armchair. A neon light and the TV were on—the room would have been cozy were it not for the brightness. The sisters were enthusiastic hosts and showed me around the house. They knew I wanted to ask them to tell me their life stories, but instead of settling down to talk, Shioya san took a different approach and insisted on showing me all of her possessions. Her house was no longer there to be viewed, but she had with her a number of selected items, not too many, as the house was her sister’s and already quite full. She started with her kimonos, folded away in large, shallow wooden drawers, separated with tissue paper. She showed me her furniture and her room but then decided the photo albums were really what she wanted to use. Describing the photos, she realized, was a good way to tell me about her life. “Look, this is me! I used to be round, always round—it was not until my surgery that I became this thin!” She spoke about her plumpness with pride, and later, after she and her sister told me about the hunger and hardship of the war and the post-war years, this apparently minor remark took on a different hue.

While her older sister had many children, Shioya san had none. She spoke of her nephews fondly and told me about her married life: “We travelled a lot, often with my husband’s work colleagues. Here, see, this is an *onsen* (a spa) we visited, and here we are in the mountains. We had such fun! . . . We did not have children, but we had many good times. It was a good life.” Shioya san stopped to think for a moment, and said, “I am grateful (*arigatai*).” A brief expression of gratitude and a pause. The pause of gratitude.

Many of my interview recordings, I later came to realize, captured the same space of silence before an expression of gratitude. I seem to remember, although I might be mistaken, that this was, in many situations, accompanied by a downward gaze. When Shioya san eventually resumed her narrative, she spoke about her sister and her husband, who had passed away.

The pause and the space between: *Ma* and gratitude

In many of the life history interviews with older people in Osaka, but also in some of the stories they shared with me or with others, expressions of gratitude were marked by a palpable pause in the life story narrative. In this brief moment, my interlocutors seem to have been taking a moment to look at their lives, to make some sense of them. The pause here does not feel like a break or disruption in the narrative, or merely an absence. Rather, it seems to be an important and productive space. As such, I believe it may be helpful to consider the significance of this quiet moment in light of the Japanese concept of *ma* (間), which refers to an interval or space between two things, persons or sounds: between two spatial or temporal entities. *Ma* is seen as pertaining to the religious and aesthetic domains and is a constitutive element of rituals and traditional arts, where, for instance, an opening in the physical

space in a piece of calligraphy might be important for the overall flow of the writing, or the way in which pauses contained in the performance of Noh theatre plays are understood to be one of their key features. *Ma*, therefore, refers to both space and time (Pilgrim 1986, 255–6). In this sense, it is not merely an absence or a break, but rather a space of potential.

The same character (間) can also be read as *aida*, which has slightly different overtones and emphasizes the relationship between the entities (Innami 2011, 114). *Aida* is used in the compound *ningen* (人間), or human, where it refers to the interpersonal space, the connections between or among people (Okuno 1983, cited in Pilgrim 1986). *Ningen* and *aida* stand at the center of Watsuji Tetsuro's *Ethics* (1996). This prominent Japanese philosopher locates the ethical domain not in the consciousness of a lone individual, but among people, *ningen*, who are already relational. The space between people, or what Watsuji refers to as *aidagara*, glossed as “in-betweenness,” is the space of all those relationships that constitute a human life. Watsuji's student, Yuasa Yasuo, states that “aidagara consists of the various human relationships of our life-world. To put it simply it is the network which provides humanity with a social meaning, for example, one's being an inhabitant of this or that town or a member of a certain business firm. To live as a person means . . . to exist in such betweenness” (Yuasa 1987, 37, cited in Krueger forthcoming, 4). While Watsuji's aim is to develop a phenomenological framework for ethics, his work captures something of the broadly understood meaning of *ningen*, a human in the Japanese context. *Ningen* encapsulates a sense of a relationship, a space in between oneself and the other (Krueger forthcoming, 6). The *ma* in the telling of the life story, I suggest, is thus not merely a break or rupture, nor an absence. The temporal pause of *ma* appears to be related to the productive space among people, a space between one person and another, containing all the affective potential of that encounter. Recalling who they are, my interlocutors cannot help but stop and say, “I would not be this person—indeed, I am not this person—without these significant others.”

An attitude of gratitude

My senior interlocutors and friends in the field were generally reluctant to talk about the good life in any ideal or abstract sense. It was equally difficult to elicit comments about how satisfied they felt with their lives. They were reluctant to label themselves as happy, probably because, for their tastes, this would come too close to bragging. They were even disinclined to use the word “satisfied,” *manzoku*: “I would not go so far as to say I am satisfied,” many told me. And yet, expressions of gratitude abounded. The phrase that I heard often was *arigatai*, “I am grateful,” and sometimes *kansha*, “gratitude.” Sometimes it was gratitude for having been able to lead a full life, having had a good husband who supported the family, sometimes for having understanding in-laws, or for an opportunity to work. Iida san lost two husbands earlier in life and brought up her son as a single mother. She had felt lonely and worried, but also lucky that her parents took her son on holidays and that she found stable employment through friends. Now she enjoys her retirement and the independent life of her adult son, taking up a range of social activities—“a light, cheerful life she was grateful for,” as she told me more than once. Like many others, Iida san told her life story as it related to other people in her life, who often opened up pathways for her that she otherwise would not have considered. She learned, pushed herself, and grew. Having suffered many losses, and now living alone in older age, she could have told me (and herself) a very different story, one of loss, mourning, and solitude. But having spent many mornings and afternoons walking with her, sometimes (at her choosing) around various Buddhist temples, I was impressed with her attitude of calm and appreciation.

This gratitude was not merely a transitory emotion, but rather a more consistent and enduring attitude toward the world. The idea of gratitude as an attitude can be approached through phenomenology, which draws attention to the temporal aspect of human experience and the way each moment bears

traces of the past, anticipates what comes in the future and is affected by the different attitudes of actors (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 88). In the words of Desjarlais and Throop: “From a phenomenological perspective . . . distinctions between subjective and objective aspects of reality, between what is of the mind and of the world, are shaped by the attitude that a social actor takes up toward the world, as well as by the historical and cultural conditions” (2011, 89). The world cannot be grasped in its totality, and we always turn our attention to particular aspects of the world and the reality that surrounds us. As we do that, other aspects fall out of focus. Our changing perspective and our shifting attitudes influence our perception or experience and, ultimately, our actions (2011, 90). I am interested in gratitude as such a mode of attunement to the world, which highlights relationships to others and what we owe them and for how much we have to thank them. As an attitude, it could further be understood as a form of temporal reorientation of hope.

Some practices in Japan are, in fact, explicitly focused on fostering such an attitude. A prominent example is *Naikan*, a therapeutic practice sometimes compared to psychotherapy (Reynolds 1980). It can be seen as an example of the powerful effects that gratitude can have on the way we inhabit the world. As Chikako Ozawa-de Silva (2006) writes in her insightful ethnography, *Naikan's* roots in Buddhist thought draw on the insight of “interdependent selfhood”: that we are not independent actors in this world but are here thanks to others. The person undertaking *Naikan* (literally “inner-looking,” an introspection), guided by a practitioner’s questions, is asked to quietly recollect their past while reflecting on three specific themes in relation to a significant person in their life: what they received from this person, what they returned to this person, and what trouble they caused for this person. The interviewer guiding the process visits them every few hours in a semi-secluded space and enquires about their recollections over the course of seven days, reconstructing or rearranging the memories of their life. This frequently results not only in an altered perception, but also in intense feelings of guilt and gratitude in relation to the care and favors received from others, which are seen to constitute one’s life (Ozawa-de Silva 2006). Despite the specific and peripheral nature of this practice, it is interesting because it very clearly shows the link between the recognition of dependence and wellbeing as a source of positive meaning. Even the most autonomous individuals will have to admit that we all owe a great debt of gratitude to a great many people, for all kinds of favors, support, and kindness throughout our lives.

This is an extreme example of an intervention that, in my view, aims to change the way people relate to the world by focusing on gratitude. Yet, gratitude was present in a myriad of small everyday practices that are less specific and more widespread in Japanese society, not least among my interlocutors.⁹ Thanks are given when eating or receiving food, even if the food is consumed alone, bought and prepared by yourself—so even a solitary meal places us within a complex network of obligation and debt. Yet, these relationships need not be viewed primarily as a burden or a source of constraint.

The subjectivity of grateful interconnection

I was a sickly child. My parents were not young when I was born, after the war, and I was weak when growing up. I am grateful (*kansha shiteimasu*) my parents looked after me with care. I was born with a purpose, I was their oldest son and so they looked after me well, perhaps better than after my younger sisters. Through all their efforts, I grew up healthy. I am grateful (*arigatai*).

Goto san, a carefully dressed man in his seventies, smiled as he spoke these words, recalling his childhood years. I did not meet him in the Shimoichi salon, but through a mutual friend. Later that day, he told me that respect is important to him and went on to discuss some of his professional successes,

while making clear that his story was not his alone. This proud man took ownership of many of his achievements—and yet his parents' support and expectations were ever-present, with his gratitude linking him strongly to them as he reflected on his life.

This propensity to include others in the life story was even more noticeable among some others with whom I spoke. People rarely described their lives as a series of events that merely happened to them, and even less frequently as a series of choices and decisions. Often, people explained the sequence of events and their causation by referring to others' actions and suggestions: "And right about time, that I have left my job due to health problems and to care for my mother, X-san mentioned this part-time work," or describing a difficult time after their partner passed away, "My friends introduced me to their friends and that is how I met current partner"; "My children were in school and I started thinking I would like to do something useful in the society. And sometime around then, X-san suggested that I could join a group that helps blind people, reads books for them." These moments in life could have been described in different ways: for instance, "I have decided that working full time does not suit my situation and switched to this other part-time work," or "I felt lonely and searched for another partner," and "I always liked volunteering work, so when the time permitted, I joined a group that supports blind people."

In this kind of narrative, the world is constituted by encounters, serendipitous moments, and connections with others. The word *en* (縁) refers to fate, opportunity, or chance, and at the same time indicates a link or a relationship. Some links are viewed as more fateful than others, and the role of some people shaping the flow of one's life is seen as more pronounced. Becoming an adult requires a recognition that one's life is intertwined with the lives of others, and that one is dependent (Goodman 2008, 60). The process of maturation is considered to be a lifelong process "in which individuals come to understand themselves first and foremost as social beings, as products of units and forces larger than themselves and without which they could not exist" (Lock 1993, 202), at least ideally. In becoming an adult in Japan, the notions of autonomy and dependency are not in opposition, but in a complex relationship: "independence leads to adulthood, but interdependence with others is necessary for full adulthood (*ichininmae*)" (Rosenberger 2007, 92). In his seminal work on maturity in Japan, David Plath (1980) links personal growth to one's consociates, people to whom one relates with a level of intimacy and who participate in the making of one's biography. A person moves through life with others, maturing as one "evolves through the long engagements of a web of intimate consociates" (Plath 1980, 222). The process of maturation continues into older age and towards the end of life and takes a different hue as many of one's consociates pass away.

Various aspects of Japanese language require its speakers to be aware of the flow of goods and favors. I could simply say that I volunteered in the community salon in Shimoichi, or I might—as polite Japanese language would encourage me to do—state that I was "allowed to volunteer" (*borantia sasete itadakimashita*), that I was given a chance to do so, as it were. This kind of phrasing is customary and habitual, but it also effectively attunes the speaker to the role of others in our actions and de-emphasizes the sole agency of the individual. Like the narrative structure of a life story, this might be a convention, but it nevertheless focuses on the relationship and attunes one to the flow of favors.

Apart from expressions of gratitude for large events in life, and indeed life itself, my interlocutors took time to express their gratitude for everyday beauty and kindness. "The sun came out, and it is so nice to walk . . . it is good to live in a place like this, so convenient!" Naka san said, as she headed toward the park. "You kite hurehatta," they would often say to each other, or to me, in their thick Osakan dialect: "How good that you came!" Stories of challenging experiences, including financial hardship or problems at work, or having to leave work to care for a family member were often recounted with a

reflection at the end: *II benkyou ni narimashita*, “I have learned from this”—a statement that could perhaps also be interpreted as a form of gratitude. If happiness was rarely mentioned directly, gratitude, on the other hand, seemed to underpin many of their statements. Whereas happiness is typically forward oriented, an elusive goal slipping ahead, gratitude appears more concerned with the past. It involves appreciation of what has taken place, of what we have and of what we were given.

Reflecting on One’s Life

After I told you my personal history, I was surprised how much it caused me to reflect on the path I have travelled so far. Having recalled that I have at various points in my life met people who have become important to me and have led me the way I become filled with a feeling of gratitude (*kansha no kimochi*). (Kameda san, 22 July 2019)

I opened my email one morning to find this message from Kameda san. She wrote it about ten days after our interview, in which I asked her to recall the events of her life. A youthful woman in her mid-sixties, who has a daughter that is my age and two young grandchildren, Kameda san still works full time and has a hobby to which she dedicates much of her time. As such, it is possible that she simply may not have had many opportunities to reflect on her life in such a concerted way. To think about her life as a whole, as I had encouraged her to do, was unusual for her—as she told me herself a few weeks later when I met up with her again, together with her friend, a mutual acquaintance who had introduced us. “It was a bit like therapy,” she said over a cup of coffee. I have met Kameda san as part of a different, more recent project on the meaning of work in older age. This allowed me to spend more time with younger “seniors,” mostly in their sixties, a much younger cohort than the older people I encountered during my previous fieldwork visits. The sexagenarians appeared much more surprised when I asked for their life story. This, in turn, made me more aware of how naturally narrating their life stories came for the older people I met in the Shimoichi salon, who were in their late seventies, eighties and early nineties. They told stories to each other, and narrating became an increasingly important part of their lives (Myerhoff 1980; see also Kavedžija 2019). Indeed, reflection and reminiscing increases in older age. My older interlocutors, those with whom I spoke for the first time when they were in their eighties and nineties, often and readily told me the stories of their life. Those whom I met in the community salon exchanged stories of their past, the food that reminded them of a particular time, and of trips to *onsen* or spa towns with their friends or work colleagues. As people become older, they tend to take pleasure more often in reliving some of their memories and sharing them with others. Yet, this does not mean that they were simply dwelling in the past. The storytelling takes place in the present.

Furthermore, it would be a mistake to believe that gratitude is a retrospective orientation alone, one that simply evaluates the past. When taking a moment to appreciate the kindness of others, or some particular challenge one faced, this takes place in the moment, and it affects one’s disposition to what might come ahead. In other words, the experience was for my interlocutors not primarily marked by an orientation toward the past, by reminiscing, and recollection. Inhabiting the moment was equally important.

Dwelling in the moment, as contained in that pause in the narrative I mentioned earlier, allows for the cultivation of an attitude of gratitude, often highlighting the sense of meaning in life as bound up with others. This attitude of gratitude entwines the reflection on the past with an attention to the present moment in its fullness. It also, I suggest, opens up space for a particular kind of hope that is grounded in the moment. My argument is that gratitude as a mode of attunement offers the basis for what I have described as quiet hope, whereby dependence on others is recognized not simply as a burden or potential source of embarrassment, but also as moving and deeply meaningful. The sense of the good

and meaningful life that my older friends conveyed thus encapsulates an attitude of gratitude as a way of inhabiting the present, rather than dwelling in the past or leaping toward the future.

Notes

1. I owe a great debt of gratitude to all the people in the field who allowed me to spend time with them and let me into their lives. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, and in the departmental seminars of University College London, University of Bristol, and the University of Exeter. The numerous comments and suggestions that ensued were invaluable. I am also grateful for the thoughtful comments of the anonymous reviewers. This work was supported by funding from the Japan Foundation.
2. For an account of dementia in Japan, see Trapahagan (2000) and Yamashita and Amagai (2008). Most of my interlocutors were in good health, as those who attended the Shimoichi salon mostly lived independently in their own homes. This choice of setting was well suited to my interests, as I wanted to give an account of aging outside institutionalized settings, such as nursing homes.
3. In the East Asian context filial piety remains an influential ideal, but the demographic changes have placed serious constraints on the ability of families to take care of their elders. This results in a tension between the ideal to care for aging for family members and the wish of those who may be entitled to that care to remain independent and avoid becoming a burden (see Traphagan 2000; Danely 2013; Kavedžija 2019).
4. For more about aging in Japan and its effects on communities, see Kavedžija (2020).
5. Networks of support were effectively crafted by the elderly each time when they enacted care for each other in numerous small way, by keeping track of each other's health and whereabouts, offering information or putting people in touch.
6. The latter was seen as a very cohesive social group, with responsibility shared by the membs of the community, for instance, through the local neighborhood association (*chonaikai* or *jichikai*; see Sugimoto 2003, 273–4).
7. Hope here seems to encompass a prospective character with retrospective elements, somewhat resembling a desire of inhabitants of Sarajevo after the war, as described by Stef Jansen: “ ‘normal life’ was what one had lived in socialist Yugoslavia, and it was an aspiration for the future. This does not mean that people desired to have exactly the same life again. In both its past- and future-oriented modalities, ‘normal life’ remained vague” (2014, 7). A hope for a functioning, working community in Shimoichi was similarly normative and vague, rather than a clear vision described and pursued by the activists and volunteers.
8. In this sense, hope can be seen as a political emotion, to which Martha Nussbaum (2013, 2) directs our attention when she suggests that emotions, particularly those in the public sphere, should be taken seriously when thinking about the functioning of societies and striving for justice. To the extent that the hopes and hopelessness of others affect us, hope—even quiet hope—does not merely pertain to an individual but can be seen as a potentially powerful political emotion, at times transformative and at other times preserving, nurturing, and stabilizing.
9. During the course of my fieldwork—in which I particularly focused on those who were able to lead a good life despite the challenges presented to them, those who were able to maintain a sense of wellbeing and craft a sense of meaning in life—I noticed they appeared to express gratitude readily. It may well be the case that their ability to emphasize gratitude as a positive orientation to the world allowed them a greater sense of wellbeing. Indeed, one psychological study with middle-aged women

in Japan suggested that those who felt a sense of gratitude upon receiving a favor from a friend generally evaluated that experience more positively than those who associated this with gratitude as a sense of debt, obligation, and/or burden, that has been placed on their friend (Naito and Sakata 2010).

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