

VIRUS DIARY

By Yuri Kageyama

April 6, 2020

The department stores in Tokyo's glitzy Ginza are still open. The commuter trains and buses are still running. And laughing families are still out picnicking under the cherry blossoms.

If you didn't know it, life looks remarkably and deceptively unchanged from those days before the coronavirus pandemic.

Japan has lived with the scare much longer than the rest of the world. China, where the outbreak all started late last year, is right nextdoor.

It's typically ironic, if not sadly comical, the West suddenly woke up to the horrors of what had hit when cases began skyrocketing in Europe, starting with Italy then Spain, and later spreading to the U.S., most significantly New York.

In Japan, all this time, people were going about their lives, while reading the shocking headlines out of Wuhan about a still incurable sickness that had sprung out of bats, and about thousands of hospital beds springing up in empty lots. In Tokyo, most people continued to take crammed commuter trains to work. One friend told me her boss didn't allow her to stay home. Never mind there was virtually nothing for her to do. Her job was taking care of tourists, who had all but vanished.

Any day this week, more than three months after COVID-19 landed in Japan, the government is about to declare "a state of emergency." Despite repeated requests from medical experts and other concerned individuals for the declaration, the government has dallied, promising cash handouts and facial masks for households, but stopping short of a lockdown that has already emptied the streets of many other cities from London to San Francisco.

The emergency declaration will allow Tokyo to strengthen its request for people to stay home and businesses like pachinko parlors and hostess bars to temporarily shut down. Essential services, including grocery stores, hospitals and banks, will stay open.

Today, the cases in Japan total several thousand, a fraction of the more than 330,000 U.S. cases. Japan's nationwide deaths have still to hit 100 people, while U.S. deaths are nearing 10,000.

Yet I am seriously worried about what awaits Tokyo.

All we can do is our tiny part. But I have been repeatedly aghast, finding out that people around me, even supposedly smart ones, did not practice social distancing, went out to dinner with friends and showed up at the office despite clear orders to work from home.

Over the weekend, I learned one of my work colleagues in New York had died of the coronavirus. He was a good, kind person and a talented writer. He was in solid health, running dozens of marathons. He had abided by all the social-distancing restrictions.

The virus doesn't care who is good or who is evil. The virus takes the best of us, leaving the rest of us with broken hearts.

The virus also shows people in their true colors: who is selfish, who is shallow, who is greedy.

As I write this, I am in my fourth week of staying at home and working from home. I am resigned to the fate this will continue for a long time.

The world will never be the same. I am still not sure how it will be different. But I know it will not be the same.

I wrote this poem "I Am The Virus" on March 22, 2020, in honor of Ishmael Reed and his poem "I Am Not The Walrus," published in 1997, and again in the last issue of KONCH.

I AM THE VIRUS _ a poem in homage of Ishmael Reed

By Yuri Kageyama

I am the virus

I thrive on mossy envious egos

They keep showing up

Offices, clubs, picnics,

Choosing being seen over

Social dis-tan-cing

I am the virus

I fester in corona-shaped clusters

Commuter trains, cruises, crowds

Peering at the Olympic torch,

I love the naming “Chinese virus”

The taunts, attacks on slant-eyed people

I am the virus

I cower when folks stay in

Takeout food, work from home,

A meter apart on solitary walks,

Wearing masks, washing hands,

Mixing aloe and alcohol

I am the virus

The crazy evil devoured

By doctors, vaccines, canceled concerts

Turning into live-streamed music,

People who remember to tell those they love

How much they really love them

^ _____ <

April 7, 2020

As a writer, I must use the power of the word to send the simple message that people must stay home.

Those who stay home are invisible, while those who defy the rules, going out partying, are visible. They send a false message, giving the usually conformist and orderly Japan a poisonously comfortable but false sense of collective immunity from the deadly virus.

Doctors are trying to save lives in their profession. Delivery services are bringing food to homes in their profession. Garbage collectors are keeping the streets clean in their profession. Commuter train conductors are transporting people in their profession.

I am a writer and so I must write.

I must write to tell people to stay home. I must write to convince them that's not too much to ask. It is the only way we know how regular people can do their little part, or rather, not do something, to save lives.

Perhaps history will show this was one moment in which individualistic communities like New York and San Francisco will triumph, while Japan will pathetically fail _ a nation known for team work that's proving blind to reason, a society run by top-down rules based on aimlessly looking around to do what everyone is doing, not simply doing what is right.

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April 10, 2020

I go out every morning for about an hour on a slow run nearby, which is allowed under the state of emergency declared in Japan.

I notice almost everyone is practicing good social distancing.

Yesterday, I saw a woman wearing no mask getting personal fitness training outdoors from a young man who looked genuinely petrified. He was wearing one of those tight surgical masks.

What vanity and selfishness. Modern-day slavery. Train on your own please. You don't need him to tell you what he said last week and the week before that to stretch or whatever.

As usual, dozens of toddlers at day care are not doing social distancing at all. At least one caretaker is not wearing a mask; another has his pulled down on his chin. The children in

several groups, all wearing those floppy colorful hats, run around, laughing without a care in the world. Frightening.

“Izakaya” counter-bar restaurants will stay open during the state of emergency. It doesn’t seem to matter that izakaya is where Shimura Ken, a star comedian who died from pneumonia caused by COVID-19, got infected.

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April 13, 2020

We learned during these weeks of staying at home, poring over what’s being shared on SNS, how talented some people were, how funny they could be and angry, how we missed them and the outside world, all the everyday things, how even leaders you didn’t know would say the word spoke of “love.”

There are people who can’t stay home. Doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, grocery deliverers, firefighters, drug-store workers, bank employees, scientists working on a vaccine. Stay home for them.

People in some professions (advertising, theater, restaurants, etc.) have no work to do. We journalists are fortunate because our profession still requires us to write about the pandemic. And so we get to feel useful.

We owe it to the others. Stay home.

—

April 14, 2020

During this stay-home period, I see some people I know are cooking gorgeous food. I’m not one of them. I also see some musicians I know are practicing a lot and improving by the minute. I’m not one of them. I am working on this diary. It helps me collect my thoughts.

I see how I really wanted a cat and how I really do appreciate windows and how books can take you to another world while just sitting in the same spot and how and how and how and how.

May we get through this. May we all survive.

—

April 19, 2020

The film, completed in 2018, “NEWS FROM FUKUSHIMA: Meditation on an Under-Reported Catastrophe by a Poet” is screening April 15 ~ April 21, 2020, as part of the online ARTS X SDGS FESTIVAL, which brings together dozens of independent films from around the world.

The festival, organized by Create 2030 headed by filmmaker Lisa Russell, was originally supposed to be a physical film festival at the U.N. Plaza in New York.

It moved online because of the coronavirus pandemic. I am watching the other films, a great time to pass the staying-home time on weekends and evenings.

I am inspired by the many talented people in many places and how they share the same vision as I have about poetry, dance, music, the environment, equality, truth and humanity.

I have never met any of these people. But they totally get it. And I am surrounded by people I see everyday who are strangers.

It is reassuring and alienating at the same time.

Our future continues to be precarious, with the pandemic, the same way we felt imperiled by the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

I watch our film again.

It is my poetry, writing and vision.

It is about human weakness and human error on both personal and catastrophic levels.

I still like the film. Very much.

I am amazed at and feel grateful for the great job everyone did _ the performers of course, Takemi Kitamura, Monisha Shiva and Shigeko Sara Suga, as well as the musicians, Stomu Takeishi, Kouzan Kikuchi, Joe Small and my son Isaku Kageyama. Blu, the lighting designer, did his magic.

Everyone was great.

The filmmaker Yoshiaki Tago, who also took video of Fukushima. Our editor and sound engineer. Everyone.

And the person who made it all happen, Carla Blank, the director for the theater piece. All her ideas worked to tell our story. Intelligent, provocative, perfect.

Nothing happens without good people.

All happens when good people come together.

“Oh, my god,” Shigeiko emails from New York, after seeing the film for the first time.

“Some energy.”

I can’t agree more.

We impress ourselves.

The trailer:

<https://youtu.be/zUtc7BZ7pLk>

April 23, 2020

FOOD is essential and important.

That is a fact but how easily we forget what is fact.

FOOD is about all kinds of people working to make and move FOOD.

This will make us rethink FOOD.

April 25, 2020

This is a true story as told to me:

The baby girl looked so perfect, with a perfect nose, perfect ears and perfectly clasped tiny hands. But her heart had stopped beating before she was born. Hours later, her mother was also dead.

There was nothing George Yui OneManBand looked forward to more than becoming a father.

Yui, 35, performs on streets with a contraption of musical instruments, attached from head to toe, clanging, beeping, thumping, strumming and singing before crowds, often with children staring in wonderment.

The due date for his child was late March or early April. They had picked a name, Ayane, which means “colorful sound.”

His wife of six years had gone through fertility treatments to have their long-awaited pregnancy.

Most of all, throughout the 10 months, they had been extra careful to protect the baby from the virus.

The evening of March 28 was when the cramps and spotting started _ clear signs the baby was on her way.

No one anticipated what was coming. During the delivery, the placenta, which supplies the baby with oxygen and nutrients through the umbilical cord, got separated from the uterus, a rare condition that endangers both the baby and mother.

She had a Caesarean delivery.

The baby, weighing six pounds and 11 ounces (3,024 grams), could not be saved.

The small obstetrician’s office, where they had the delivery, was not equipped for blood transfusions and other life-saving procedures. She had to be rushed to a bigger facility.

“Perhaps because of the effects of the coronavirus, she was not accepted at a nearby major hospital, and she had to be rushed to a hospital that was slightly farther away,” Yui said.

“The ambulance became the last place where I saw her. She still held my hand there and squeezed it back. Now her hand is cold and no longer squeezes mine. At first, she was in a bed. Then she was in a coffin. Now she is in an urn,” he said.

“What has happened? Why?”

Still, Yui makes a point of not blaming the coronavirus, no more than he blames the doctors. He is convinced the doctors did their best.

Sometimes his chest feels so tight he can barely breathe.

“I know I will never experience a greater hopelessness,” he said.

He was determined to put on a splendid send-off for his wife's funeral.

But because of the fears about the coronavirus, he invited just a handful of family and close friends. He placed the chairs far apart for social distancing. He never took off his mask, even to bid his final farewell.

He isn't sure where to take his emotions. Until that day, his wife was smiling. They were going to have their dream little girl.

"Just a few hours earlier, she was moving inside my wife," he said.

All he knows is that his home suddenly feels too big.

"There are baby clothes, an infant carrier sling and a blanket with Minnie Mouse. But no one is here," he said.

George Yui OneManBand performing his music in this video clip:

<https://youtu.be/pTVVq1XEm5g>

April 28, 2020

Yes, I do resent the mentality of our profession to expect, even want, the worst to happen.

Vultures.

I mean, you who used to never or hardly be here but are here, waiting for an explosion of cases and deaths to happen in Japan.

I said it.

Let's stop if that is why you are here in Japan, or if that is why you are a reporter.

We are human first.

We wish for life.

As of today, there are fewer than 400 deaths and about 13,500 reported cases in Japan, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The U.S. has more than 55,000 deaths and about a million cases.

April 29, 2020

Instead of thinking You versus Me, let Us all think We are Us. As in Our people. Not Your people.

May 2, 2020

THE BIRDS _ a poem by Yuri Kageyama (an excerpt from “The River”) with cello by Hirokazu Natsuaki

The audio clip on SoundCloud as we play music and read remotely during the pandemic:

<https://soundcloud.com/yuri-kageyama/the-birds-a-poem-by-yuri-kageyama-with-cello-by-hirokazu-natsuaki>

Kabuki’s answer to the Pelican

The Flamingo, the Albatross,

The Heron swoops through the sky

Perches so perfectly on a pine _

Princess in mirrored waters;

The humble fish-gulping Cormorant

Dives in muddy waters,

Spreads battered wings to dry,

In flight, freed from slavery _

Transforms, a gliding Black Swan;

The Sparrow plays, chirping staccatos,

Small furs of speckled brownness,

They play, always searching

Like a lost forlorn child _
Unchanged from Issa's poems.

I waited all summer
For your return
Flutters of petal
Above the water
Buddha's wafting lily pads
Your squawks swim the salty breeze
Circling, swooping, dancing,
They say birds vanish before an earthquake,
A hurricane, an apocalypse;
It matters not you don't remember me
Your playful swoops
Silence screams of hate
Your presence is comfort
In this Atomic Age
You are back:
"I will not cry
Except in love" _
I wrote those lines
When I was very young,
And they are still true

As I die,

You are back

May 3, 2020

Places that used to be filled with people are suddenly abandoned.

The pool of water before the Lincoln Memorial.

The department stores of Tokyo's Ginza.

Unlike a month ago, when I started writing this, much of Japan is now staying at home.

And so even Tokyo, usually bustling with people, reminds me of the hauntingly beautiful, desolate streets of Detroit.

We are reminded of how it is the presence of people that gives life, energy, history and soul to buildings, streets, cityscapes, monuments and things.

May 4, 2020

More good news for our NEWS FROM FUKUSHIMA. It will air as part of the Select Showcase for the Guam International Film Festival on PBS Guam SAT June 6, 2020 9 p.m.

Film lovers and friends in Guam, please tune in.

We are in the great company of more than 40 films from 15 nations, launching in celebration of Asian American & Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

May 5, 2020

I started working on this song in February 2019. It's about how people like to talk about "what's happening" or what's going to happen. Most of the time, nothing happens. Nothing needs to happen. Now, the song is more pertinent than ever. I reworked the song to reflect that.

We must not forget how precious those moments are when horrible things that can happen don't happen, and we can just sit back and enjoy the passage of time, when utterly nothing happens.

I have connected with a beautiful singer who lives in Japan, originally from Trinidad and Tobago, who can sing in English and Japanese, and can also rap, in short, my singer made in heaven.

She says she is now in Portugal for a family emergency. I hope her family is OK.

When we finish this song, it will be a special victory for us.

Still a work in progress, the audio by Hide Asada:

<https://soundcloud.com/yuri-kageyama/nothing-happens-a-poem-song-by-yuri-kageyama-with-guitar-arrangement-by-hide-asada>

NOTHING HAPPENS なんにもおこらない

_ A poem/song by Yuri Kageyama

Nothing happens

Bombs aren't falling

Nations aren't killing

Nothing happens

Nothing happens

Women aren't screaming

Children aren't starving

Nothing happens

なにもおこらない

このきもち

なにもおこらない

しずけさ

Nothing happens

The stars will shine

Behind clouds that hide

Nothing happens

Nothing happens

Blossoms and birds remind

The passing of time

Nothing happens

(rap section)

Nothing happens

We took it for granted

Nothing is boring

Nobody up to no good

Looking for something

Something to happen

Before the coronavirus

Now we wake up to numbers

Pray the curb goes flattened

Pray it's no one we know

Waiting for a vaccine

Scared by the sirens

Italy, New York, Spain, Wuhan, Tokyo

Now nothing else happens

Nothing else can happen

Now you know it:

Now you wish you didn't wish it

Now you know for sure you like it

When Nothing happens

Yeah, nothing happens

Please, please let nothing happen

You know that's the view:

No news is good news,

It's so quiet you can hear it

Silence is the music

When Absolutely

NOTHING HAPPENS

なにもおこらない

Nothing happens

The Virus descends

Like a stranger of death

Nothing happens

Nothing happens

We can forget the rest

How we miss those days

When Nothing happens

May 10, 2020

Grocery stores are open. The ones in Japan are so small it is difficult to maintain social distancing.

Those who can afford it are turning to online shopping. It has grown so popular it is hard to find a time slot to get a delivery.

Some items, especially imports, have shot up in price.

A 10 oz. bottle of Purell costs the Japanese equivalent of \$70.

May 11, 2020

I just ordered \$20 worth of kimchee online.

I am also getting vegetables in deliveries from Japanese farms I would never have thought of buying otherwise _ like gobo, or Japanese burdock. The selection of the vegetables is left up to the farm.

So I made Kinpira Gobo, looking at an online recipe, which is gobo, carrots cooked in a sweet soy-based sauce, with sesame seeds sprinkled on top.

Kinpira refers to that Japanese style of frying sliced vegetables. You can do Kinpira with lotus root and seaweed.

May 12, 2020

It's interesting to contemplate what children might be going through without school. We know we rarely learn anything that great in school. But school is life with other children and being part of society that every child wants and misses if he or she can't have it.

May 15, 2020

No one can quite figure out why the coronavirus cases, still under 20,000 and at several hundred deaths, are low in Japan, compared to the U.S., South America and Europe.

Theories are getting tossed around that are ridiculous, crazily stereotypical.

Japanese take off their shoes inside. Japanese wash their hands often. They don't hug or shake hands. They wore masks even before the outbreak. Japan provides affordable health care. Japan has had a widespread vaccine for tuberculosis in the past that may or may not be helping protect its citizens from COVID-19.

The thing is: No one really knows.

And the other thing is: Some things happen for no reason.

Even if it is sheer luck or a fluke, we should be happy for Japan.

May 19, 2020

Today, I receive this news.

NEWS FROM FUKUSHIMA has been selected for the Tokyo Lift-Off Film Festival, set to take place online in June, an annual U.K. festival focused on Tokyo this year.

What's amazing is that the festival selected another one of my films, THE VERY SPECIAL DAY, a collaboration with stop-motion artist Hayatto.

He has worked so hard on our film.

He makes all the movable parts of the characters, objects and background, what you would call the set in theater, by hand, and by himself.

The items are moved a little bit at a time and shot, to create the illusion of movement on film.

A minimum of eight frames is needed per second.

He calls it a work of love.

May 22, 2020

I love to read and write so I've always been a homebody. I tend to find socializing exhausting. That doesn't mean I like this situation. Humanity and life are about People, not just one person alone. People gathering, mingling, connecting, celebrating, caring, learning, creating.

May 23, 2020

As reported new cases drop, Tokyo is gradually getting back to business as usual.

Sushi counters, bars and shoe stores are open.

If you didn't know how crowded the streets of Tokyo were before, you would even think this was normal.

It is still a cautious, fearful return to activity, mostly by people who shrug off the health risk as inevitable, perhaps so minimal it's almost safe.

People are dining at cafes, at the same table and in groups.

The "state of emergency" has already been lifted in most parts of the country. It will likely be lifted any day for Tokyo.

Today the number of confirmed coronavirus cases totaled just two in Tokyo, the ninth day straight the daily figure was below 20.

I wonder if people realize the number has come down only because we have stayed home.

If we venture out into the world, in multitudes, breathing, talking, touching each other, the numbers will jump back up.

And we will be right back where we started.

This cycle will come and go, again and again.

This will be our new normal: Crossing the street to avoid people walking from the other direction, not needing to buy lipstick because we are always wearing masks, holding our breaths in elevators.

May 24, 2020

The idea that saving human life is an absolute principle above all else and regardless of anything else is worth really caring and thinking about.

The pandemic has brought that idea closer than ever.

Let us think and let us care.

May 25, 2020

It's somehow fitting that the music to my poem about post-pandemic life came from a stranger and soulmate.

Lorian Belanger, a documentary filmmaker who works in TV, was inspired by my poem after I shared it on social media.

Please play his music as you read my poem.

I would like to learn how to play this.

<https://youtu.be/g2OeMLIVAz8>

LIFE SUDDENLY

_ a poem by Yuri Kageyama

life suddenly seems so bare,

absent of distractions and noise,

honed down to essentials:

food, water,

the daily dosage of exercise,

sleep, working from home,

buying online,

safety from disease.

you realize life

is still,

alone,

full of meaning that is

so fragile

and easily lost.

—