



## OIDEYASU!

# “HEIBON IS BEST”

Finding Beauty in the Ordinary

Jackie J. Kim

Hawai'i Herald Columnist

The normally quiet Ōmiya shopping street was bustling with activity. Shoppers moved about hastily, their hands clutching grocery bags filled with long *gobō* (burdock root), *daikon* (radish) and green onions. Their alert eyes searched for the freshest produce laid out at the open-air vegetable and fruit stands. The mochi shop displayed round rice cakes of all sizes — small, medium, large and extra large. The *miso* (soybean paste) stand could barely keep the special Kyōto-style white miso from flying off the shelves. Every prefecture has its own style of *o-zōni* (mochi soup) and in Kyōto, rice cakes cooked in thick, creamy white miso is a specialty.

The air was crisp from the cold, although mild in comparison to last winter. In front of the fish shop, the neighborhood cat roamed back and forth, licking its whiskers, enticed by the smell of freshly charcoal-grilled sea bream fish, a symbol of luck and fortune. I, too, salivated, pondering whether I should cough up the hefty 2,500 yen (\$23) for the whole fish, which was a bit larger than the size of my petite hand. I decided against it and instead settled for a small piece to grill at home. There was a zing in the air as people rushed about, shopping for their traditional year-end culinary treats for their family and loved ones. But in another sense, it seemed as though many people wanted to quickly say good-bye to 2011 and welcome 2012.

On my way home, I thought about a radio interview I had heard recently on NHK. A Japanese psychologist who has been visiting the site of the March 11, 2011, Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami was speaking about his efforts to bring mental healing to the survivors. He told the story of a woman who lost her 8- and 4-year-old children. When he spoke to her for the first time right after the tsunami swept her children away, she told him she wasn't sure how she would be able to survive. She could barely whisper her words, although no tears came. He promised her that when he returned in six months, she would feel better than what she was feeling at that moment. When the psychologist went back and spoke with her again, she shook her head and told him that she felt no better.

The psychologist also had visited a man who lost his only child, a 12-year-old son. The mourning father asked the psychologist if he could teach him how to smile again because he could not remember how to smile. The doctor was at a loss for words. The only thing that came to his mind was the words of a philosopher who said that we smile not because we are always happy, but because by smiling, happiness may come. When I heard this, it took a while for the words to settle in and I pondered long upon it.

I cannot imagine the kind of emotional hardship the many people in Tōhoku must be going through as bright and festive Christmas decora-

tions and lights sparkle and carols of “Joy to the World” or “Jingle Bells” blare in grocery stores and shopping centers throughout Japan. With many merchants shouting in competition, people shop for their New Year's feasts of fresh fish eggs that symbolize many children, and *konbu* (dried seaweed), representing *yorokobu*, or joy. Meanwhile, Tōhoku victims improvise in makeshift temporary shelters after losing their homes and lives that were once so normal and familiar.



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As parents shop for the best toys and gifts for their children, how do those whose children were crushed or who drowned deal with words like “joy” and “peace?” As children wait in anticipation of the New Year's feasts and treats that mothers make, how does one deal with suddenly becoming motherless or parentless?

Indeed, within 365 days there is always a combination of good, not so good and even, unfortunately, bad. I am certain all of us have experienced a combination of these things that life offers. But as we usher in the new year, we can't help but be filled with hope and wishes for a better year than the last. Perhaps hope is what we celebrate with much mirth and excitement.

But as I listen quietly to the echoes of the traditional 108 bells tolled at the nearby Buddhist temple to drive out the evils of worldly desires, the words of a friend from long ago, Kenji Tanaka, come to mind. Back then, we talked about a Japanese word that personally had the most meaning. He said that for him, it was the Japanese word *heibon*, meaning ordinary, commonplace, even mediocre. I couldn't hide the puzzled look on my face. Kenji-san continued to nod his salt-and-pepper head steadily, repeating, “Heibon is best.”

At the time, I wondered why a person would prefer just the ordinary over something more grand, spectacular, exciting or extraordinary. Kenji-san said firmly, “Being content with ordinary life is happiness.” Back then, the word ordinary seemed unattractive and “nothing special.” But now I find myself able to understand a bit of what he meant.

On New Year's Eve, my husband and I walked quietly towards the sound of the bell, joining a crowd of people at the Imamiya Shrine, famous for the god of health. We shared a cup of sake and ate a small piece of dried seaweed and cuttlefish, which are said to bring joy and abundance. On our way home, we happened across a small neighborhood shrine, neither as famous nor as grand as the Imamiya shrine, where four or five elderly men sat around a bonfire, chat-

ting quietly amongst themselves, waiting for an occasional passerby who might want to visit and say a prayer. When we walked towards them, they greeted us, pleasantly startled but happy. The elderly priest and temple caretaker offered us a homemade brew of warm *amazake* (sweet fermented rice wine) with freshly grated ginger. As I swallowed the rich, creamy liquid, I felt my body instantly warming up from head to toe. The priest poured me a small cup of *umeshu* (plum wine). He grinned and said proudly that he had made it himself from the plums plucked from the trees at the shrine. I smiled at the tangy, playful taste of the sweet wine. Aside from the hushed chatter of the men around the crackling fire and the distant echo of a singer on the annual New Year's special on TV in the priest's small room, the night was quiet and

still. It was a calm, slow-paced beginning of a new year. I was content with its ordinariness.

The Year of the Dragon 2012 is said to be special, as it celebrates the water dragon. The next cycle that will usher in the water dragon will be in 60 years, in 2072. The new year is predicted to be a prosperous and fruitful one, bringing wealth and abundance. The dragon, much celebrated within the Chinese zodiac, is loved for its strength and power. The water dragon, especially, is said to be more calm and tranquil, bringing balance.

As I sit in my warm *o-furo* (bath) and listen to the distant steam-whistle of a small truck passing by as the driver calls out “*Yaki-imo* (roasted sweet potatoes), fresh and warm *yaki-imo*,” I wonder what the new year will bring. I am hopeful — not for the wealth and prosperity it predicts; not for great celebrations, excitement or adventures, but for being able to find contentment in the ordinary and seeing the beauty of normalcy. ■■

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of “*Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan*.” While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of “*Hidden Treasures*.” If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she explained that “*Oideyasu!*” means “*Welcome!*” in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by e-mailing her at [jackiejkim@hotmail.com](mailto:jackiejkim@hotmail.com).