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A VISION FOR 2020

On November 25, 1970, the famous Nobel Prize-nominated writer, Yukio Mishima, committed ritual suicide after a futile attempt to take over the headquarters of Japan's Self-Defense Forces in Tokyo. I have no recollection of this event, for I was born exactly one week earlier in a hospital in the same city of Tokyo. However, I remember my parents later reflecting on this shocking incident in their first few months of residence in Japan. We may never know all of the reasons underlying Mishima's actions, but one assertion he made was that to die for a "great cause" was glorious and heroic, and that there were no great causes in Japan anymore.

Though Mishima's response to his assessment of contemporary Japan was brutal and extreme, the aspiration to greatness he embodied is something that people and societies have pursued throughout history and continue to pursue today. In a work entitled, *The Need for Roots*, the French Jewish writer Simone Weil critiqued her own society and called for a reexamination of their roots if they were to continue to aspire to greatness. Writing in 1943 during a moment of supreme testing for western Europe, she asserted that there were four "obstacles" to overcome, namely, a "false conception of greatness; the degradation of the sentiment of justice, idolization of money; and the lack of religious inspiration."¹ Instead of focusing on the immediate challenges of the war, Weil discerned a deeper need for a revitalization of society from the roots. In the same way, Japan does not simply need to reform politics or restructure its economy, but to find a renewed vision of Japan and its role in our world by rediscovering or reemphasizing some of the roots of Japan's greatness.

Mishima's search for a great cause in many ways reflected a desire to go back to the nationalism and militarism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Japan's sense of greatness during this time was well-deserved, as the first non-western nation to modernize and to rival the most advanced countries of the West. Undoubtedly, the greatness of Japan in the 20th century primarily stemmed from its "great power" status militarily and economically. Though Japan today is still seen as a powerful nation, Japan's greatness as a military power ended in 1945 and their economic power, though still formidable, has declined somewhat in recent decades. Thus, the history of the 20th century has shown that these definitions of greatness do not necessarily last, and may even resemble the false conception of greatness that Weil alluded to for Western Europe. What, then, is a truer and more lasting conception of the greatness of a civilization like Japan?

Perhaps the search for "great causes" is not the best way to discover the greatness of any society, including Japan. Some of those causes may have led to political, economic, and cultural growth, but others have been destructive, exploitative, and wasteful. In most societies, however, there have been alternative voices which have called for different paths to greatness. Ironically, many of these voices can be found in

¹ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* (London and New York: Routledge, 1952), p. 209.

those who were not necessarily trying to be great, but, like Simone Weil, were creative and committed to working for the greater good of their societies. In Japan, even during periods of great upheaval, there have been many such figures. In the 12th century, during the transition to samurai dominance, there was Saigyō, the Buddhist poet-monk whose journeys and writings provided a different view on life than the powerful Minamoto shoguns. In the turbulent 16th century, amidst the struggle of rival daimyo and the violence of war, stood figures like Sen no Rikyū, the revered *chadō* tea master. Though his life tragically ended at the hands of the political powers of his day, his cultural legacy lives on today in the tea ceremony. In the early 19th century, amidst famine and the government's obsession to keep Japan's doors closed, the self-educated "peasant sage" Ninōmiya Sontoku was an advocate for the needs of the common people. In the early 20th century, despite the rising tide of imperialism and war, there were prominent individuals like Takahashi Korekiyo who advocated the idea of a "small Japan," one that focused on trade in contrast to the prevailing view of Japan as a large expanding empire. Unfortunately, Takahashi's stand against the military expansionists led to his untimely assassination in 1936, but his courage in the face of opposition is admired today.

All of these previously cited individuals possessed elements of greatness that have endured. They made choices contrary to the "spirit of the age," but in their sense of justice, in their reluctance to worship money or power, and in their creative responses to the challenges of their turbulent times, they stand as beacons of light and hope in Japanese history. One of the most well-known Japanese proverbs, *Deru kugi wa utareru* ["The nail that sticks up will be hammered in"], may often be interpreted as encouraging social conformity, but one could also view these "nails" that stuck up as heroes who courageously dared to stand out. Despite the fact that many of them were criticized and opposed in their time, ultimately they contributed to the greater good of their societies and to Japan's greatness.

Japan today needs individuals like Saigyō, Ninōmiya and Takahashi to boldly face the challenges and problems of a dynamic society and world. I don't know if the world still expects Japan to be a world leader politically, and I think some would not be comfortable with Japan aspiring again to military greatness. But, Japan can and should be a leader in many ways. People throughout the world still expect Japan to play a role as a stabilizing force politically and economically in Asia. This includes not only supporting more just business practices and higher environmental standards, but also dispensing economic aid and helping to empower many lesser-developed societies in our world. For Japan, this provides a great opportunity to send a message of a commitment to policies that allow for freedom and are committed to justice for all. Politically, as the first modern Asian country to promulgate and enact a constitution, Japan needs to defend the notion that an elected constitutional government can continue to successfully promote liberty and the general welfare of its people. Japan must guard the freedoms in its constitution, and any legislation that removes or threatens such ideals should be rejected. Not only do such laws threaten the rights of Japanese citizens, but they send a message that the citizens of many other East Asian societies have heard from their own governments, but which Japan's government in the postwar period has managed to largely avoid. Japan needs to face the future with hope, defending the strengths of their

present society and reforming the weaknesses. Japan also must face their past honestly to acknowledge where there have been abuses of power, miscarriages of justice, or exploitation of others. In such specific acknowledgements, Japan can renew their commitment to pursue peace, justice, and mutual respect among all peoples of the world.

Though Japan's economic, environmental and political challenges in recent years have been significant, these crises also provide opportunities for Japan to focus not on fleeting notions of greatness or on the "great causes" that often dominate our histories and newspapers. Japan must rediscover broader, more lasting sources of greatness. These sources of Japan's greatness are characteristic and ideals that, if fostered by all humanity, would not only make the world much richer but would lead to a greater vision for our shared existence on this globe. What aspects of their historical and cultural legacy does Japan need to emphasize and send as a message to the rest of the world? There are many possible aspects but I have chosen three: 1.) an emphasis on the *quality* of work; 2.) an openness to others, including outsiders; 3.) a willingness to change and adapt. In all of these areas, Japan's record throughout history has been inconsistent, but I think these three elements can be found in their cultural and historical heritage and should be embraced by Japan today.

The first aspect, an emphasis on the quality of work, is not difficult to find in many areas of Japanese society today, from its automobiles to robotics. Though at one time in the early 20th century, "Made in Japan" meant something that was cheaply made, this is no longer the case and I would say is contrary to the norm in Japanese history. One of the unfortunate results of our globalized economy today has been the tendency towards making shoddy products, from the "dollar" store (or "100-yen") merchandise to poorly-built electronic goods. Not only this, but in service industries, from retail to fast-food, the quality of the service and the attitude of Japanese workers is often much superior to that in other societies. This same approach can be seen in the quality of effort and attention given to nature, such as in Japanese gardens or *bonsai*. When I was in Japan a couple of years ago, I watched an elderly Japanese gardener devote two full days to trimming and thinning each branch of the pine tree outside of our house. Such a devotion to the quality of work as well as the accompanying aesthetic appreciation can be found in many parts of Japanese culture. These values need to be preserved and protected from the fast-paced and fragmented existence that seems to be increasingly familiar to much of humanity today, including Japan. Perhaps most of us do not have the discipline of that patient gardener, but we can uphold such qualities and strive to emulate them in some areas of our lives.

This emphasis on the quality of the product can even be seen in common items such as Japanese pens and erasers, which many of my students insist are the best in the world. Similarly, the Japanese-made rice cooker that I frequently use is 23 years old and has lasted much longer than the newer ones that my friends and family have purchased. In more recent decades, in the diffusion of Japanese *anime*, the films of Miyazaki Hayao have been hugely successful around the globe. There are many reasons for this, but much of it has to do with the simplicity and beauty of the films, as well as the quality and detail of the art. With Miyazaki's recent retirement, one hopes the future generations of

animators—both Japanese and throughout the world—will continue to possess a similar devotion to their work.

If more people adopted this attention to the quality of their work, it would help make the world a better place to live. Such ideals resonate with those found in other traditions as well, such as those of the American religious sect, the Shakers, whose simple furniture was built with such care, as if one were fashioning it for an angel to sit on. To simply concentrate on and enjoy the work at hand is an important message to a world that is too hurried and too focused on the pecuniary aspects of our labor. Enjoyment of the world and our life in it, is something Japan can offer, in their ideal of “*mono no aware*”—an empathy toward things, which stems from an awareness of the transience of all things and an appreciation of their beauty. One of my favorite times of the year in Japan is when the cherry blossoms bloom and it seems that even the busiest people take time out of their schedules to view the *sakura* in all their splendor. The timely advice that one should enjoy the little things in life—like viewing flowers or rock gardens, soaking in the *ofuro* or hot springs, and savoring sushi or *sake*—can enrich and refresh our lives as we fulfill our vocations and devote ourselves to the quality of the work we are doing.

The second aspect that I think Japan has to offer is one that may surprise some, namely, a willingness to be open to others and to embrace outsiders. One reason that this may seem surprising is that Japan has also often been more closed to outsiders, such as during the Tokugawa period. But even then, there were *rangaku* scholars and doctors who pursued knowledge from the West and welcomed the few outsiders who arrived. Ethnically, the Japanese are most likely mix of various peoples who arrived on the islands thousands of years ago from areas as diverse as Siberia, Polynesia, and Southern China. Even beyond its early roots, Japanese history is richer in this aspect than many people realize. There have been many foreigners who went to Japan and were eventually embraced by the Japanese, such as the Chinese monk Ingen Ryugen (Yinyuan Longqi) who started the Obaku sect of Zen Buddhism, and the English pilot, William Adams who worked as an adviser and retainer for Tokugawa Ieyasu. In the 19th century, Guido Verbeck, a Protestant missionary to Japan, served the government as a trusted advisor and *oyatoi*, and was given special Japanese passports from the Meiji Emperor. Most recently the scholar Donald Keene’s identification with Japan and his desire to become a Japanese citizen has received much attention in Japan. Though such “foreign heroes” might be rare in the history of any society, for Japan their existence needs to be highlighted to help foster a greater openness toward outsiders today.

I began this essay with a reference to Yukio Mishima, whose upbringing by his *shizoku* (former samurai) grandmother was formative and many claim contributed to his views on *bushidō* and Japanese culture. But the samurai tradition is a rich legacy that contains elements which can also foster other responses. A generation earlier, Sugihara Chiune, who was raised by his *shizoku* mother, embraced a very different road than Mishima. A diplomat in Lithuania during World War II, Sugihara managed to save some 6000 Jews by issuing passports for them. Though reticent about his actions and little acclaimed in Japan during his lifetime, he was honored in 1984 by the state of Israel as

one who was “righteous among the nations.” When Sugihara was asked why he helped the Jews, he replied laconically with a samurai maxim, “Even a hunter cannot kill a bird which flies to him for refuge.”² Sugihara did not set out to achieve great things, but when given the chance, he acted out of a sense of justice and duty that had much to do with his Japanese ideals formed in his youth. In many respects Sugihara’s response resembles Saigō Takamori’s famous slogan, “*keiten, aijin*” [Revere Heaven, Love Mankind]. Japan needs, and the world needs, more Sugiharas today, who use the wealth of their cultural inheritance to act decisively and courageously in responding to the needs of others.

Opening up Japan more to the world has many implications. Some observers today view Japan as insular and closed to outsiders. By opening up their society more, the Japanese can change these images, as well as challenge present policies and attitudes toward foreigners and immigrants in Japan. But, they should also realize that such openness is not unprecedented in Japanese history. On the contrary, when the Japanese have welcomed outsiders or ideas from outside Japan, these exchanges have often enriched both groups. For example Shinichi Suzuki’s embrace of Western classical music has led to a method of teaching music that has not only enriched music performance in Japan, but throughout the world. Another example is the way that the Kenyan runner and Olympic champion Sammy Wanjiru was welcomed in Japan. Wanjiru moved to Sendai, Japan for high school and lived in Japan for many of his remaining years before his tragic death at age 24. Though Japan has been inconsistency in their attitudes toward outsiders, as a foreigner who was born and raised in Japan, I know that the Japanese can be very welcoming to those who are outsiders. The bonds of friendship and cooperation fostered by such relationships can overcome the many obstacles that exist both within and without Japan to a greater openness between all peoples.

The third aspect of Japan that is an element of Japan’s greatness, is a willingness to change and adapt. Japan has adopted many elements of traditions outside of its islands throughout its history. Though there are a few instances of these changes being forced upon them—such as the postwar occupation reforms—even then, the enthusiastic participation of much of the Japanese population for many of the changes was a critical factor in their overall success. Two periods in particular where this feature of Japanese cultural adaptation can be seen is in the adoption of elements of Chinese civilization in the 6th-8th centuries and the adoption of Western ideas and technology in the 19th century, particularly in the early Meiji period. In both of these cases, Japan recognized superior elements in the civilizations that they borrowed from, and they made substantial permanent changes in their societies. But, they also adapted these elements in such a way that it was not simply a wholesale imitation but a cultural translation that provided what they needed to develop and prosper. This element of Japanese culture could be interpreted as developing out of a sense of Japanese inferiority, initially to China and recently to the West. But, I think ultimately it is rooted in a spirit that is open to change

² “The Sugihara Story,” *The Sugihara Project*. Accessed online at: <http://hkcsst.net/papers/japanIssue08/TheSugiharaStory.pdf>

and flexible in adapting to dynamic conditions. History shows that any society who rests on their laurels and thinks that they don't need to adapt or change will surely decline.

One dynamic social issue throughout the world today is the changing status of women. In Japan's history, there have been periods where the power and status of women has been relatively high, as well as others where their status has been comparatively low. The presence of women from Japanese history who are seen as cultural icons today—such as Murasaki Shikibu in the Heian period and Ema Saiko in the Edo period—shows a willingness of Japanese society to change and adapt their views toward women. In the Meiji era, figures like Yamamoto Yaeko and Tsuda Umeko made important contributions to education, led lives that challenged some cultural norms, and have rightly received more attention in recent years. But, there have also been a number of powerful women political figures in Japanese history, such as Hōjō Masako, the powerful wife and mother of the early Minamoto shoguns, and influential empresses from the somewhat mysterious Empress Himiko to the bold Empress Suiko. Are Japanese women today encouraged to emulate such models? If not, why not? Using their historical precedents and newer ideals, Japan could lead the world in empowering women. Japan has shown some leadership in some areas, such as the success of their women's soccer teams and marathon runners, but they can do more.

In education, Japan has a rich cultural heritage and has historically adapted both Chinese learning and Western learning to their society. But, perhaps Japan needs to reexamine some aspects of their highly-praised education system, including the “examination hell,” the rigid textbook examination process, teacher training methods, and the incorporation of non-conventional students into the schools. In all of these areas and others, Japan not only needs to revive aspects of its cultural heritage, but it needs to consistently reform and adapt them to the conditions and challenges that exist in our world today.

When I was growing up in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, it seems that the world expected much more from Japan than it does today. But, Japan has much in its history, its people, and its culture that can enrich the world today. Certainly, Japan is expected to be a stabilizing force in Asia, to take a stand against nuclear proliferation, particularly with its historical experience as the only victims of a nuclear attack and also the recent Fukushima nuclear disaster. But, they are not alone in facing the environmental challenges of our global age, just as they were not alone in dealing with the challenges of modernization and globalization in the 19th and 20th centuries. Japan can and should continue to be leaders in pursuing peace, as well as champions of clean energy alternatives. When I was in Japan a year after the Great Tohoku Earthquake, I visited a place near Sendai where my family used to vacation when I was young. Amongst the rubble, I saw evidence of the optimism and determination of the Japanese people. On the day I arrived, they had revived the internationally-renowned Shichigahama Triathlon, even though only part of the course was clear. Their enthusiasm and determination to restore their sense of community, even in this solitary athletic event, was inspiring.

Some may say that modern Japan, like the cherry blossoms, flourished for a short while and then declined. But such an argument ignores the fruit and leaves that are still

on the tree, providing shade and sustenance for all. Also, in the long-run all flowering trees, like all societies, go through various seasons. Thus, Japan should focus more on the long-run or the “big picture,” in which it is apparent that Japan still has a key role to play in our world. In the late 19th century, Guido Verbeck gave a lecture in Japanese in which he described an old garden in one of the former daimyo residences that was designed in the shape of the main island of Honshu. According to Verbeck, while walking in the midst of the garden, it was difficult to recognize this, but when one looked at it from the second story, the design became visible. The strength of Japanese culture has often been the focus on the details, which can be appreciated in their technology, art, poetry, as well as gardens. But, this can sometimes be crippling because the immediate problems—whether it is tensions over nuclear policy, government corruption, island disputes, financial crises, or social issues like bullying or *hikikomori*—can seem paralyzing. Thus, Japan needs also to look at the big picture to get a clearer vision of what they can do and be.

Japan faces many challenges as it looks to the future, but not insurmountable ones. When I was in Japan in 2012, I ran a race up to the summit of Mt. Fuji. At the start, I looked up at the peak and thought, “It’s too high, I’m never going to make it.” But, as I started, I took one stage at a time, always glancing up at the summit, yet concentrating on what it took to get there. Symbolically, it is very significant that in 2020 Tokyo will be the first non-Western city to have hosted the Olympics twice, and that event will provide an opportunity for Japan to reveal the sources of its greatness. I hope that Japan will display not only its laudable commitment to the quality of workmanship, but also an openness to others and a willingness to change and adapt. Coincidentally, the year 2020 will also be the 50th anniversary of Yukio Mishima’s death. It seems to me that Mishima’s vision was faulty in many ways, including his failure to embrace these last two ideals, and instead reviving a narrow, exclusive, and ultimately destructive sense of greatness. The proverb, “Where there is no vision, the people perish,” applies to a vision of greatness for any society. Japan, like most countries today, may not yet have clear or unified goals for their future, but they should embrace these laudable elements of their rich cultural and historical heritage in the pursuit of such a vision.