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Dare to be Japanese!

While I know I'll never be completely Japanese, after so many years in Japan I have adopted, after my own fashion, certain aspects of how people here live and think. The ultimate example must be the humility I've acquired when discussing my nearest and dearest. Take this instance. Yesterday while lunching in Paris with some French acquaintances, I was asked what I do in Japan, and so gave a brief explanation. I mentioned in passing that it is my Japanese husband Tatsuji Nagataki who translates my articles and books from French into Japanese. And to pay him a slightly understated compliment, I added that while no genius, the old chap does have something of a way with words. My compatriots around the table were horrified. "What a thing to say!" they protested. I felt a need to vindicate myself by explaining further. To wit, in Japan, where I've lived now for almost fifty

years, people place great store on the attitude known as kenson: modesty or humility. For example, a man might refer to his better half as his gusai, literally "foolish wife", and his child as a "piglet", even if he believes them to not be the slightest bit stupid or porcine. Having brought up this subject, the discussion turned to the oft-covered territory of honne (what a person is thinking) and tatemae (what they actually say). Now this is a subject big enough to write a book about, and not a few have done just that. Here though I prefer to consider the concept of "wabisabi", which is underpinned by a sense of impermanence, the notion that everything, living or otherwise, has its time and will pass. Because this too is related to the idea of being humble.

Things that are wabisabi

- Intuitive
- Relative
- Handmade
- Valuing the here and now
- Adapting to nature
- Organic (soft forms)
- Extolling the virtues of nature
- Natural materials (wood, stone...)
- Becoming more attractive with age
- The obviously unfinished (a crooked matcha tea bowl...)
- Calm acceptance of ambiguity and contradictory elements
- Warm
- A love of shadow
- Utility not always a priority
- Non-material things ranking highest
- Tolerance for natural wear and tear and the passing of the seasons

Things that are not wabisabi

- Logical
- Absolute
- Mass-produced
- Future-oriented
- Adapting to technology
- Geometric (forms without ambiguity)
- Extolling the virtues of technology
- Unnatural materials (plastic...)
- Deteriorating with age (concrete...)
- The obviously sleek and smooth (a porcelain teacup...)
- Abhorrence of ambiguity and contradictory elements
- Cold
- Overly-bright lighting
- Utility as no.1 priority
- Materiality is the ideal
- Faith in things that don't wear

The following are just personal thoughts, but in my view, right now--when the mind-boggling impact of the tsunami has made a people overly proud of their technological sophistication realize that they are just as powerless before the wrath of nature as their ancestors--is the perfect opportunity to take another look at the Japanese idea of wabisabi. And not just in Japan, but all over the planet. Why? Because an emphasis on wabisabi is precisely what we now need in a world that smugly believed everything was controllable. The sensation of wabisabi is hard to explain. Even for the Japanese, who are skilled at picking up unspoken nuances, describing wabisabi is a tall order. So to help you construct a clearer picture in your mind, I'll start by providing a list of what is wabisabi, and what is not. Allow me to give a very specific example of wabisabi in everyday living. A few years ago, I was invited to a tea party at the home of former prime minister Morihiro Hosokawa, a man for whom I have the utmost admiration. He currently lives in a house in

Izu that his maternal grandmother (of the Konoe family) used as a holiday villa. A bookcase occupies one whole wall of the living room, and supporting its shelves are tree branches. While straight enough to serve as vertical pillars, they still have their bark, are gnarled and knotted, and are obviously just tree branches, pure and simple. The kind of wabisabi expressible solely by nature can be breathtakingly elegant. My conclusion is simple. Now that Japan has experienced a nuclear accident; now that the world is beginning to turn to slow food and sustainable energy, this must surely be the moment for Japan to start promoting the wabisabi lifestyle largely forgotten since the Meiji Period, when Japan copied not only the best things about Western civilization, but the worst as well. By doing so Japan can bring a more modest approach to the world: an attitude the world could do with plenty of in a century that has started with so many challenges.

