

2

Wabi-Sabi

By Peter S. Adler



Gary Snyder, a fine poet and essayist, says, “Good stories are hard to come by, and a good story you can call your

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own is an incredible gift.” Why? Stories are ancient and enduring avenues of human exchange and one of the ways we make discoveries. Stories create hypotheses, explain things, and sometimes connect us to each other and older enduring narratives.

In the world of conflict management, the right stories, done at the right time with the right people, asked for and spoken in the right way, can crack open a problem and create new possibilities. Science, law, politics, planning, and culture are stories that sometimes harbor larger truths. Many conflicts are built on these. The world is also made of stories with smaller day-to-day truths, and all these stories make the world what it is.

At the most mundane level, I think part of my job is kick-starting and managing often-difficult discussions that enable the telling of old stories and the creation of new ones. I do this case-by-case and project-by-project. Thomas Jefferson reputedly said, “Peace is that brief glorious moment in history when everybody stands around reloading.” That’s when I do my work.

I think of myself as a “*Tertium Quid*” specialist, someone who can assist people to negotiate new third stories made up of two or more older conflicting stories that resolve old problems or create new value while they are reloading. I like helping people try to create a story of the future.

How I got this way isn’t fully clear in my own mind. I grew up on the south side of Chicago near the steel mills. My parents were immigrants out of the Holocaust. Most of my other family members went into the ovens. A few made it to Palestine. By design, serendipity, and luck, my parents evaded Hitler, came to “Amerika,” worked hard, and became doctors, the first in their families to get college-educated.

Growing up, they found that their World War II experiences were always close to the surface and rubbed off.

Nonetheless, Dr. Richard Adler and Dr. Alice Blau made a reasonably good life and wound up with a clean house, two Studebakers, and enough food, clothes, and school supplies for three little boys. I went to a high school on the south side not far from the mills where my father, beyond his general doctoring, practiced industrial medicine, and then to Roosevelt University, which is where some of this narrative begins.

Before and during college, I was convinced life was completely binary. “Binary” wasn’t a word I would have used then, but I was fully persuaded that the world was made of dichotomous choices controlled by switches in our brains. In that early world, my switches were always on, and there was a crystal-clear distinction between right and wrong, good and bad, strong and weak, smart and stupid.

This was the tumultuous era of the Vietnam War, which the Vietnamese call “the American War.” Life in the United States was churning with politics and full of countercultural caffeine, alive with fresh ideas and every sort of rebellion imaginable. I was part of that turmoil, full of certainties and never confused about how the world worked and where I and everyone else stood in it.

At the time, I thought I was going to be an aquatic biologist. I vaguely envisioned a life working in the cool waters of the Great Lakes and their tributaries with sturgeons, lake trouts, invasive mussels, and lamprey eels. The first disruption came in a strange encounter in a mandatory literature class with a professor named Robert Cosby, who became the first of several mentors.

There is a truth to it: When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

I went to Cosby’s class with reluctance. I was far more interested in the comparative lives of carp and bluegills, the inner organs of dissected frogs and fetal pigs, and the way plankton blooms support rapid population explosions

of bugs, snakes, birds, and raccoons up the food chain. Poetry was not in my bundle of sureties.

Cosby's main mission in life was to teach undergraduate boneheads something about literature, language, and writing before we were released from college. He did this with passion and precision. He was a decorated World War II veteran and had played a part at the Nuremburg trials but now waxed eloquent on Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson one minute, then veered into split infinitives and the odd and subtle moods of the subjunctive tense.

His specific field was 19th-century writers like Ambrose Bierce, Bret Harte, and Mark Twain, but his love of native writing went hand in hand with his cutthroat knowledge of dangling participles and misplaced adverbs. He was punitive about ending sentences with prepositions and would chastise us with Winston Churchill's purported line, "This is the kind of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put."

I found myself engrossed with Cosby's take on literature, its linkages to history, science, philosophy, and life, and his fierce insistence on applying critical thinking to whatever we were studying. None of this quite fit my assumptions about a "binary" world.

One day, for example, Cosby started a discussion by reading two poems by "Anonymous" that went like this. First, from *Beowulf*, written about 800-AD.

So becomes it a youth to quit him well with
his father's friends, by fee and gift, that to
aid him, aged, in after days, come warriors
willing, should war draw nigh, liegemen
loyal: by laudd deeds shall an earl have
honor in every clan.

A puzzle. The word for puzzle in Spanish is *rompecabeza*, which means “brain-exploder.” I had no idea what Beowulf (or Cosby) was saying.

Then this one by some Midwest farmer:

Carnation milk is the best in the land.
Here I stand with a can in my hand.
No tits to pull, no hay to pitch.
You just punch a hole in the son of a bitch.

More *rompecabezas* ...

Then he asked us to use our noggins and explain how and why these two poems might be similar or different and why they might be anonymous. He asked us to do these baffling exercises all the time. No hands went up. I bent my head low and inspected my shoelaces, which potentially might have needed retying.

“Adler!” he barked.

“Well, sir,” I said, “I think both writers were too embarrassed to put their names to them.”

People laughed. Cosby snorted. “You’re a dolt,” he said.

Then he turned to my best friend, Sewell Gelberd, who didn’t know if he wanted to be a chemist, accountant, or social worker and gave a long, windy explanation that made no sense at all. Cosby grunted again. “You’re an idiot, too—worse than Adler. The right answer,” he says, “is they have nothing in common other than being poems, but I could also convince you morons with sound logic that nei-

ther of them actually are. So there really are at least two or more answers.”

That, and similar exchanges, seemed to trigger the start of a series of pops deep inside my skull.

I’ve been told that the true sound of critical thinking at work is not “Aha!” but “Huh?” It was one of my first real moments of “Huh,” some kind of crunching sound in the world of binaries. “Huh” decoded is another way of saying you are baffled, which can also be a small triumph of curiosity over judgment. This, and other incidents, led me into one of the characteristics I would eventually carry into the world of conflict management. I became nosy. A snoop. A lifter-upper of rocks to look at wiggle worms and a potential wiggle-worm meddler.

Cosby became my adviser. Along the way, when I was weighing after-college options in the Navy and Coast Guard, he said, “Why don’t you look into the Peace Corps?”

I said, “Huh ... what’s that?”



Eighteen months later, in the summer of 1966, I joined 49 other freshly minted college graduates invited to train for a possible Peace Corps assignment to central India. Of the 50 who began training in a Texas border-town called Zapata, only a handful from my group—“The Dirty Dozen,” we were called—finished the two-year tour.

Our particular arrangement originated as part of a tough negotiation between Lyndon Johnson and Indira Gandhi. Gandhi wanted excess American wheat at a steep discount. Johnson wanted to get rid of wheat surpluses and create a nicer face for America as the war in Vietnam was accelerating. A bargain was made.

Our training was staged on an old ranch with an abandoned radar site, a windmill, and a horse trough in the desert along the Tex-Mex border. The training ran for three

months and required us to build our own village in the scrub and sand. Even as we built our little hovels, the first hints at what was coming emerged.

Language, construction, and culture classes went on all day followed by evenings of tutoring and homework. Camping out in the desert with the other college meatheads, our language and construction teachers, and a bunch of Peace Corps shrinks, I started to get a more detailed sense of India and the potential assignment we might be headed for in Maharashtra State.

The instructors who ran what were called “Value Discussions” had also been early Peace Corps volunteers to India. We called them the “the Culture Vultures.” India, the veterans told us, is kaleidoscopic, a land of preposterous and unending contradictions. It is physical, spiritual, ascetic, dirty, sensuous, crass, democratic, dictatorial, rigid, flexible, idealistic, corrupt, ugly, progressive, conservative, and beautiful.

Huh? How could a place on the other side of the planet be all these things?

The head Culture Vulture, a woman named Constance, warned us that in trying to grapple with the mental and cultural dilemmas India presents, we would all take at least one, if not several, predictable paths.

A few of you, she said, will learn to navigate your many dilemmas and thrive on the experience. Some of you will reject the complexity and retreat into the narrowest and most technocratic role you can. You will dig a well, stock a few fish tanks, teach some classes, build a building, and go back to your house and stay inside.

Others of you will pine for home, surround yourself with anything American you can find, and become intolerant of Indians and maybe even abusive. You will listen to the Voice of America all day, order magazines from the United States, and write endless letters home.

Finally, she told us, some of you will go native. You'll dress like Indians, wear *kurtas* and *lungis*, chew betel nut, and spend half your day sitting around smoking a hubbly bubbly full of hash, all in the name of cultural interchange.

That sounded perfectly fine to me, but more interesting was the long, often ponderous and head-scratching discussions about Hinduism. I always assumed there was one big God up there, probably an old Jewish guy with a white beard and a yarmulke sitting on a cloud looking down on us and directing traffic. Not so in India.

Hinduism, we were told, is a vast celestial ocean full of spirit-beings. Some of them are global and perpetual, personified by the big cosmic trifecta of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the stabilizer, and Shiva the destroyer. Others are more granular and particular, *devas* and *devis* who are powerful, divine beings below the supreme universal level but moving around above our earthly plane. Then there are those flitting around at ground level, little impish beings, some of them enablers of fresh opportunities, others demons who are sent to annoy us.

Meanwhile, we received extensive training in Marathi, the language we would speak, and in the construction skills and tools we were expected to deploy: blueprints, stone and mortar work, culverts, road sealants, earth-fills, and catchment and runoff calculations for water storage.

At the end of three months and after a humiliating "Night of the Long Knives," when a third of our group was unceremoniously dumped and sent home, we shipped out to New Delhi, from where I was then packed off with my roommate to a small town south of Mumbai and north of Goa called Khed. We then spent two years there killing rats, raising chickens, and building some one- and two-room schools.



My odyssey in India was a fork-in-the road experience—not the only one, but an important one. There were a lot of adventures and dozens of dark moments, but it changed my life and in part, led me to mediation and its many adaptations in ways that I am still puzzling out. I don't think it was culture shock. It was "life shock."

One of those moments happened when I first landed in my assigned village and discovered I was in the middle of serious corruption. Coming from Chicago, I should have known about all this, but I was sheltered and naïve. If you have worked in India or certain other South Asian countries, you know that day-to-day life runs on the reciprocating notion of *baksheesh*, which in its most limited sense means a "tip" for services either solicited or offered.

In India, this is a pleasanter way of describing a broad spectrum of graft, dirty dealing, bribery, extortion, bid-rigging, invoice-padding, insider knowledge, and protection rackets. *Baksheesh* might be overt or subtle, but I found it inspired and occasionally wondrous in its creativity. Here is how I first encountered it.

I am a new, pink-faced 22-year-old Peace Corps volunteer stationed in the boondocks. I am isolated, but I do get regular mail, even if it's slow. One day a little pint-size guy who works for the post office comes to my door in khakis wearing a peaked Nehru cap and starched shorts and says he is collecting contributions for the local chapter of the All-India Postal Workers Cricket Club.

I tell him, "No thanks. I don't play cricket."

The next day my mail stops. I wait. After 10 days of no mail, I go to a trustworthy friend, and he tells me he will look into it. A few days later he comes back and says, "A letter delivery man is going to come to your door and ask for a contribution to the local All-India Postal Workers Cricket

Club. Give him a few rupees. He will keep some and pass more up to his boss, who will pass some onto his higher-up.”

Sure enough, he came, I paid, and the next day my mail delivery started again. This was new stuff for me. The crack in my brain opened a little wider.

Another happened when a farmer’s bullock cart broke an axle just down the road from where I lived. The shaft splintered, the cart crashed to the ground, a wheel spun off, and vegetables, bags of rice, and large square tins of cooking oil spilled onto the road. One of the man’s two majestic Brahma bulls was on his side, moaning. A crowd gathered to stare, me included, lurking at the back, ready to skedaddle if something went bad, which often happens when cows are injured and crowds of Hindus and Muslims coagulate.

The farmer was looking at his bull and crying. Then a policeman arrived but didn’t do much. Soon, another officious-looking gent in clean pants and a nylon shirt arrived, examined the bull’s leg, and shook his head. Maybe he was a veterinarian or someone experienced with animal injuries. Or some sort of government official. He kept shaking his head and pulling on his mustache.

Meanwhile, the farmer wept uncontrollably, and the animal was in obvious pain. I stared at the bull and thought: *this poor creature needs help.*

But that didn’t happen. A small truck appeared, people helped load the farmer’s goods in the back, dismantled the remains of the cart, and then drove off. Pushing and shoving, they got the injured animal to the side of the road and left him there. The farmer walked off with his other animal. I stared, a waterfall of emotions cascading through my mind. I thought: *In the United States, we would put a bullet into this animal’s head to get him out of his misery.*

Sad but needed. But it's different here, I thought. This is a culture I don't have a grip on.

Later, talking with my friend Tukaram Khedakar, an educated man and yet another mentor, he said I did the right thing not interfering. That fine white bull was the reincarnation of someone from another life and must suffer more before being reborn. Or maybe it was the farmer who must suffer before his own rebirth. Or maybe both of them, plus some of those who were standing around gawking. Regardless, killing a cow in public in a Hindu community would be unthinkable. A riot would ensue.

Then I thought: Maybe it's me who has to suffer. When you are 22 years old, emerging from the bubble of American culture, and going through life shock, maybe that's your job. To learn to navigate through sufferings and find whatever joys are available.

There were many other moments, some ordinary and occurring in slow-motion, others more prominent that still remain in sharp relief. In the end, I came to terms with most of them. I helped build those few little one- and two-room schools in remote cliffhanger villages, helped some entrepreneurial farmers start poultry businesses, killed a lot of rats, introduced the Frisbee to central India, and during the long months of monsoon read a lot of the wonderful books I had missed in high school and college.

Most important in the longer run, I made friends, learned a new language, and absorbed some valuable lessons about the world in some of its more disjunctive, paradoxical, and potentially creative forms.

Maybe it was the worms, bugs, and infections that drilled into my body or the phantasmagoria of Hindu gods and goddesses that my Indian friends kept telling me about. It probably had something to do with the Vietnam War, which was raging a few thousand miles away, plus the suicide and mental breakdowns of some of my Peace Corps

comrades. It could have been the strange carrot-colored sunrises, the months of withering heat, the further months of drenching monsoons, the corpses and crabbed beggars in the doorways of buildings in Bombay, and the hypnotic twang of sitars' music.

In 1927 in Japan, Kenji Miyazawa, a man whose life and writings I especially admire, put it this way:

Yours is the kind of learning
 etched into yourself
 in the blizzards, in the spare free time
 between work,
 crying—
 which will soon sprout vigorously
 and no one knows how big it will grow.
 That's the beginning of new knowledge.

Miyazawa still speaks to my journey and the peculiar professional world I now inhabit. Those who do this same kind of work know we abide in an often-gauzy netherworld of human affairs, an interstitial trade zone between contending oppositions and powerfully different assertions about what the truth is. That is where we work and where we are occasionally privileged to do something helpful.



After the Peace Corps tour, I went to graduate school and studied sociology. I absorbed a considerable number of ideas about law, conflict, science, stability, change, symbolic interaction, social stratification, and small group behaviors. Much of this came from yet another mentor, Professor Daryl Hobbs. He plunged me into the works of C. Wright Mills, Talcott Parsons, Erving Goffman, and many others.

For a time, I thought the university might be a friendly long-term place for me to land. It wasn't. By the time I finished my PhD, I actually had no idea what I wanted to do, other than being clear that I didn't want to make an academic career. University life felt abstract, remote, and far removed from the kinds of problems I had dealt with on the ground in India. It might be perfectly fine for some people, but my temperament seemed more suited to doing something pragmatic.

That led me to what I thought would be a hiatus, a two-year stint as assistant director and instructor in Hawai'i's new Outward Bound School, which, in turn, included my first real exposure and training in conflict resolution. It was taught by certain Native Hawaiian elders in a small town called Miloli'i on the south Kona coast where we kept outrigger canoes for the ocean segments of our 24-day wilderness expeditions. We incorporated their teachings into the courses we were leading through potentially risky rain-forest, ocean, and mountain environments.

Ho'oponopono, this traditional indigenous method for resolving disputes in extended families, means "to make things right." It is millennia old and found in various forms throughout Polynesia and Micronesia. Like so many older cultures, many of which are disappearing, Hawai'i had its own way of managing conflicts, one developed over centuries of feudal and internecine fighting. This was how Hawai'i resolved disagreements while people were reloading for their next fights.

Ho'oponopono fascinated me. The idea of people sitting together under the guidance and choreography of an elder peeling back the substantive and emotional layers of a problem and seeking to restore harmony in families and communities struck me as sensible and highly productive.

Organizing and leading 24-day wilderness learning expeditions led me to "conflict management" and "ADR." I

applied for and won a job as executive director of one of the first Department of Justice-funded community mediation centers.

The newly created Neighborhood Justice Center of Honolulu (NJCH), established in large part by US Attorney General Griffin Bell in the wake of the 1976 Pound Conference, was advertising for an executive director. It didn't pay much and didn't have a real caseload or secure financial future, but it did have a small coterie of freshly trained mediators who were as enthused about mediation as I was about *Ho'oponopono*.

I considered myself lucky, maybe even serendipitously blessed. I went to mediation trainings and took to it fast. It seemed to combine the two worlds of ideas and actions perfectly. I learned quickly because I was intensely interested.

I also got fine advice from more mentors and business *consiglieres* and became reasonably proficient in navigating the braking and acceleration required in my new leadership role: caseload development; fundraising; managing a small professional staff and a coterie of volunteers; and marketing, not just for the NJCH but for the whole idea of mediation as a valuable addition to American law and society.

This then led to an offer and an appointment by the chief justice of the Hawai'i Supreme Court to help develop and direct a newly established Center for ADR. Our local courts knew they wanted this but didn't really have a way to push it. My job was to be a mediation catalytic converter.

Over the next decade, my organizational and mediation interests expanded and would eventually lead to a stint as president and CEO of the Keystone Center, which focused on consensus-building strategies for technically and legally complex energy, environment, and public-health controversies. I had started out thinking I would go into aquatic

biology, diverted into the social sciences, and now came back to those origins with new strategies and tools.

Over the years I have been especially intrigued by applying whatever mediation skills and experiences I have accumulated to public-policy matters and one particular strand of conflicts I'll call "SIPSIDS" which is code for "Science-Intensive Politically Snarky Disputes." Many of these involve major collisions over plans, regulations, and laws that seem to bring outraged advocacy groups, defensive government agencies, bunkered business leaders, and scientific and technical experts into sharp-elbowed fights.

I liked working on these kinds of conflicts and helping lawyers and experts deal with their inevitable conflicts, confronting the limits of their authorities, beliefs, and certainties and still looking for ways to avoid the risks and uncertainties of adverse political or legal decisions. It carried forward the basic notion of disputants trying to create mutual value and becoming the architects of their own solutions.

Most of these disputes are intensely political and imbued with actual or impending litigation. I have learned that careful processes, patience, better communication, and improved relationships are essential but insufficient to deal with many of these skirmishes. Coming to grips with the veracity of competing claims and defenses is often necessary, and finding a way to get a plausible set of facts on the table in the midst of highly charged debates is one starting point.

I have no delusions about any of this and don't believe scientific facts are the center of the universe. Matt Cartmill, a professor of biological anthropology at Boston University, put it well: "As an adolescent I aspired to lasting fame, I craved factual certainty, and I thirsted for a meaningful vision of human life—so I became a scientist. This is like becoming an archbishop so you can meet girls."

Still, confronting factual disagreements that are part of the conflict narratives people tell us is one door into the emotional and political center of many arguments about freshwater security, GMOs, agricultural practices, ozone depletion, hazardous geothermal energy emissions, and even helping disputatious native Hawaiians develop a vision of their future and a proposed new constitution for some future sovereignty arrangement.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a US senator, ambassador, and sociologist, famously said everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not to their own facts. Moynihan was wrong. In the now-instantaneous world of tweets, posts, blogs, memes, and accusations of fake news, everyone asserts that his or her own facts are the ultimate truth. When they learn their truth may not be fully triumphant or immutable, or may not win the day, small *rompecabezas* go off. Cracks appear, shifts occur, and opportunities become apparent.

Some disputes feel like tin cans or tightly capped bottles with highly pressurized contents. Sometimes, my job is to just be a good can opener, release the pressure slowly, and prevent unnecessary spillage. Or maybe even to use the contents to make a flavorful or at least nutritious meal. But I also have no illusions. Some of it is political sausage-making, stuff that is better not put on full public display.

In certain cases, I feel like I am working somewhere between extortion and bribery. One side wants something. The other side wants to offer something. It's an awkward dance. I help them with that as gracefully as possible.

To exert a positive force, I have endeavored to further evolve my craft, not just with a focus on facts but a certain style of communication and diplomacy. I want people to tell their stories. If they are in a rage, I let them do that and listen carefully until it's time to pivot. The pivot point comes when people are repeating themselves, when they

have actually not just “listened” but absorbed what their counterparts are saying, or when they are frustrated or exhausted.

I have learned to avoid embarrassing anyone in front of others. I ask hard questions in private. And living and working in a largely Asian and Oceanic culture, I am particularly sensitive to saving, managing, and assuring “face.” And though timing is important, I have learned to bring outside metaphors, analogies, and occasional humor to the table when they may have relevance to the problems at hand. I try to do this with subtlety and without detracting from the stories others are unfolding or substituting my own for theirs.

I also use silence. I have learned at long last to ask questions—and then shut up and listen. In traditional *ho’oponopono*, the mediator is called a *haku*, which is the braided lei many Hawaiian people wear on their heads for important occasions. *Ho’oponopono* has time outs, periods of intentional quiet, and moments when everyone must confront whatever responsibility they carry for the issue at hand. The *haku*, or mediator, must try to be the “braider” of their stories into possible solutions.

Like all my colleagues in this volume, I keep as one of my main goals helping people move beyond their immediate hurts, the self-righteousness of starting positions, and their overt or *sotto voce* hungers for revenge. And like others, I have learned to be a chameleon. Each situation is unique. In the words of Frank Sander (another mentor to many of us), “let the forum fit the fuss.”

That means having a few different mediation and facilitation choreographies at the ready for different fusses. It involves directing discussions as necessary and with carefully chosen trajectories and usually with a “less is more” attitude.

If I am working in the four corners of courts and litigation, I often lean toward more evaluative and muscular approaches to resolution. In business boardrooms, I change the vocabulary and talk the way many business professionals prefer when they have a dispute. Business people don't seem to care for the words "conflict" or "mediation" until they are in court. Until then, I will encourage "strategy development," "internal alignment," "project planning," or "analytic forecasting." In other settings, I may be purely facilitative in style.

The challenge is always to start with "huh," evoke stories, be patient, ask questions, keep both unwarranted optimism and unchecked pessimism at bay, and stay especially alert for places where pragmatic outcomes can be discussed. To be clear, there is inevitably a moment in all matters when people have talked enough and are dithering. This moment comes through from spoken words, facial expressions, body language, or direct comments. Sometimes, it's just my own gut instinct. If that instinct is wrong, the parties will tell me.

Then it's time for me to call the question and start the solution-braid. Built on what is coming through the noise surrounding a central conflict, that decision and its ideal moment in any choreography is often intuitive, simply a piece in the opaque, sodium-colored gray zone.

All these tendencies are now as much a part of my personal as well as professional life. I think it is what the Japanese mean by the realm they call *wabi-sabi*, an outlook built on "not knowing" but recognizing and taking comfort from the obscurities, asymmetries, and irregularities life presents. In Japan, *wabi* connotes a quality of solitude. *Sabi* is the acceptance of transience and imperfection. It is a far stretch from the dualities and "binary-isms" of my youth.



At heart, I am a dilemma manager, though I do other things as well. When I succeed at helping people tame a snarky problem, resolve a dispute, align into a new strategy, heal old wounds, or simply get on with their lives, I feel like a blessing has happened to them and me. Admittedly, plunging into other people's confusions is a peculiar, maybe aberrant way to make a living. Nonetheless, it is what I do, and by some fluke, I like doing it.

My satisfactions come in many ways. I like seeing people gain higher clarity on the problems they are experiencing. I like it when they move from judgments to "huh?" I feel truly useful when they get "unstuck" and move on with other parts of their lives. I like it even more when, in the right circumstances, old hurts are healed, vexed disputants create robust plans for the future, and people come away feeling that they accomplished something important.

Once, after helping a group of regulators, business professionals, and community leaders sort out a very complicated water problem, the group gave me a little plaque that said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall never be unemployed." There is a small truth to that, especially now that so many ex-judges and retiring senior lawyers have hung out shingles as mediators and arbitrators.

But in the end, it isn't about the money. Money calms the nerves but never brings happiness. I have come to relish working in the gray zone of human affairs, the wabi-sabi place that is neither precisely good nor bad nor right or wrong but always a mix of entanglements in which people struggle with human dramas and behave at their very best and worst.

In this yin and yang world, binaries still exist but have acquired enough plasticity that we can handcraft new third stories, which optimistically we believe can hold for a

time. One of my colleagues once told me to never underestimate the power of a new and better-expressed ambiguity to resolve old ambiguities that have grown tired or conflictual. That turns out to be sound advice.

While I sometimes secretly yearn for a life that might have more direct and tidy lines between causes and effects and life's good and bad days, I have become more porous and comfortable in a world of unknown-unknowns. I don't dream of a better place beyond this one. There is no Valhalla, no Elysian Field, and no shining city on a hill. Nor do I believe in eternal damnation, perdition, or rebirth. We are what we have done and now do.

In the face of adversity and uncertainty, my father-in-law used to repeat a Japanese proverb: *Shikata ga nai*. "It cannot be helped." I have no delusions that what gets done in the moments I am proudest of will be remembered. Still, it feels like honorable work that cannot be helped.