

Surviving the Great Tohoku Earthquake

By Mukesh WILLIAMS



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We are all survivors, if we are alive. Those who read this essay have survived the great tsunami and nuclear disaster of March 11. Survival implies to continue to live and endure. We are conscious of the fact that somehow we owe our existence to so many entities and processes. If we are alive after the event it is a fortunate accident, just as those who are dead are victims of an unfortunate happening. Therefore, there is both a sigh of relief that we have survived and a national mourning that so many have died. The tsunami has also been the story of real survivors who have been close to primordial life, who have challenged overwhelming forces of nature by their sheer willpower and ingenuity and emerged victorious. To ride a ferry in a tsunami swell or stay afloat on wrecked homes for days are acts of courage that draw our admiration. Such people possessed those natural skills that their aboriginal ancestors once possessed in order to stay alive. They escaped the tiger's jaws, the serpent's fangs, and the spider's web, to live. They extracted from the heart of suffering a promise of their own survival. But those who struggled and died have lost the voice to express their suffering. We inherit their burden to articulate their suffering, and a responsibility to rebuild our happiness.

The Tohoku happening has made us conscious of death and this has helped us to escape its anxiety. We affirm life in the sorrow of its denial. Life overcomes itself with pure rejoicing, like a Nietzschean dance song. Survival does not imply embracing death or living in the shadow of regrets. It affirms life unconditionally. It takes us beyond life into a world of real intensities where we explore life's enormous possibilities. Here we accept others. We accept their individualities and their rights. We use reason not only to debunk violence but also to relax amongst friends. We use instinct to play and use the strategies of play to survive. Both reason and instinct are harnessed in the service of survival. This and much more has been the post-Tohoku discourse.

Discourses about 3.11

There are so many discourses about 3.11 – yes, 3.11, an imitation of 9.11 – that it depends on what you read and what you believe in. Is it a man-made disaster like 9.11, nature-made or a combination of both? Or is it to let America know that we too have our great national disaster? Obviously Japan has got doomsday reporting from some of the international media, a secretive disregard for the truth in its own media, a lot of pseudo-scientific analysis from professionals and an intense skepticism about a bright future from the public at large. All these perceptions have shaped our response to the event and have either disturbed us or given us solace.

Undeniably the Tohoku earthquake-cum-tsunami has resulted in a paradigm shift in Japan and the world at large, seismically, psychologically and intellectually. It has not only devastated infrastructure and communities by shifting great land masses but also created an awareness of others by altering our way of looking at the world. It has led to apocalyptic disaster forecasting in business, education and politics offering a negative prognosis of Japan. At the



Shipwrecked atop the roof of a private house, Hiromitsu Shinkawa waves at a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) boat as he awaits rescue, about 15 km off the coast of Futaba-machi, Fukushima Pref.

same time it has resulted in assertions of spiritual resurrection and economic recovery. Here are some responses to the Tohoku earthquake.

Media Glut Created Confusion

The Fukushima nuclear disaster in the wake of the tsunami stirred the digital media to provide a surplus of highly specialized information about the hazards of nuclear contamination, which was rather difficult for the public to understand. There were many nuclear experts in the media providing pseudo-scientific information on nuclear contamination and its effects on the human body. So much specialized information, often politically suspect, created knowledge confusion. It was quite difficult for the ordinary public to understand specialized words such as millisieverts, radioactive iodine, containment vessel and nuclear meltdown. This generated a general panic and exodus from cities as far away from the epicenter as Tokyo. Embassies and foreign workers relocated to the Kansai region or returned to their countries to escape radioactive iodine in drinking water or plutonium particles in the air.

Nuclear Boy Humor

The best way perhaps to deal with the crisis is with some bathroom humor. Exasperated by confusing media reports about the nuclear disaster, Japanese media artist Kazuhiko Hachiya created the animated cartoon called *Genpatsu-kun* or *The Nuclear Boy* to represent the Fukushima nuclear crisis. The Nuclear Boy tries to hold on to dear life even after a stomachache and reeking flatulence. The animation accompanied by banjo music explains in simple and comical terms the effects of nuclear radiation on the human body, especially on those living in Fukushima. It ends on a note of hope as it points out that it is not as bad as the Three Mile Island or Chernobyl accidents. The Nuclear Boy became an instant hit on YouTube and helped people to assuage their anxiety about nuclear hazards.

Resurrection of Japan

Some intellectuals like Donald Keene have stated that Japan will be reborn and emerge more beautiful and stronger in the aftermath of this earthquake. Keene, a Japanologist and professor at Columbia University, has recently expressed his desire to relocate to Japan, become a Japanese citizen, and be with the people of Japan in their hour of need. Keene's eulogy of Japanese self-restraint and tenacity to survive is now being used by the Japanese media to endorse positive values in Japanese society.

Self & Others

Calamity often brings people together. The Tohoku earthquake has shaken people to the very core and made them understand that, without the help of others, they cannot survive in times of crisis. This has resulted in a shift from a total absorption with the self or *muen shakai* to concern for others or *kizuna shakai*. In the early days of the calamity people in Japan reacted with awe and bewilderment as Internet videos captured with unerring clarity the havoc of the tsunami. The death toll ran into thousands as entire village communities were wiped out in Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi and Yamagata Prefectures. This was followed by the breach of the Fukushima nuclear reactor and radioactive contamination increasing the already existent confusion. Soon people began to understand the intense sadness of others, often forgetting their own. They no longer wanted to just encourage others with words like "gambatte" ("keep on going") and "odaijini" ("take care of yourself") but also wanted to help them overcome the crisis. This has inadvertently led to moving outward and a concentration on national rebuilding.

Fears of Japanese Neo-isolationism

The Tohoku earthquake is the biggest challenge faced by both the government and society. For once everyone agrees that reconstruction is the most urgent need of the hour. Other issues ranging from the Futenma Base relocation to the Senkaku Island dispute have all been shelved for the time being. There are fears that intense crisis management could lead Japan to a neo-isolationism where Japanese business, technology and education would shrink from global investments and ultimately weaken Japanese global presence in these areas. But these fears are voiced by foreign media, not the local media.

Sadness & Self-restraint

In the aftermath of the tragedy there has been a general sense of national mourning and self-restraint or *jishuku*. As people watched with



Volunteer work in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture

frustration the search for dead bodies in tsunami-hit areas, their sadness grew. Children were particularly affected by tsunami news. *The Mainichi Daily News* of May 1, 2011 reported the story of a seven-year old girl who asked Pope Benedict XVI on Italian TV why children in Japan had to feel "so sad." The Pope responded by saying that he too was looking for an answer but encouraged her with warm support springing from divine love and companionship. Adults too felt it was their duty to restrain themselves. Some prefectures advised their citizens not to indulge in *sakura*-viewing revelry. With the consciousness of many deaths, images of people living in evacuation shelters, loss of livelihood, power shortages and the threat of nuclear meltdown, people were expected to restrain themselves from celebrating spring festivals or buying consumer goods or complaining about the lack of entertaining TV programs. In Tokyo, which is 250 kilometers away from the affected area, people were unwilling to let go. Some criticized this overt mourning and self-restraint. *The Daily Yomiuri* editorial of April 8 criticized this self-control as being an obvious hurdle to economic recovery. It exhorted people not to exercise "excessive" self-restraint but rather to buy, travel and stimulate the economy.

Unilateralism to Cooperation

The earthquake also affected bilateral relations. The recent Japanese unilateral assertiveness and political independence in foreign relations with the US and China has given way to an alliance with the US, Europe and South Asia. The US's Operation Tomodachi and The National Disaster Response Force from India that helped Japan in the wake of the tsunami and nuclear crisis have done a lot to cement Japan's relationships with these nations. Japan has realized that it cannot cope with multiple disasters without the help of the global community. The helplessness gets further compounded by the fear that Japan may not be able to handle territorial disputes with China and Russia without the support of friendly nations. Some are concerned that natural calamities coupled with human errors could ultimately weaken Japan's economy and international clout, turning a global superpower into a basket-case. All these factors have brought Japan closer not only to the US but also to countries in the India-Pacific region and ASEAN. Let us hope that our fears are unfounded and Japan will emerge stronger from this crisis. **JS**

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