

After the Disaster: Ghosts of the Tsunami



Author Roland Kelts

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The Forgotten Lessons of 3.11

Seven years ago Japan underwent its most devastating national crisis since the end of World War II. On March 11, 2011, the *genpatsu shinsai* triple natural and industrial disasters of an M9.0 earthquake, a tsunami that rose to 128 feet and flooded 217 square miles, and a meltdown and radiation leak at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, is now cited as the costliest such catastrophe in the world, running to an estimated \$400 billion as of 2017.

At the time, the impact reverberated nationwide — physically, in the form of aftershocks that rattled buildings throughout the night, and logistically, as distribution and transportation routes were hampered or shut down entirely, leaving some store shelves periodically bare. Japan's network of nuclear power plants went offline, and the term *jishuku*, denoting a measure of self-restraint in the face of others' suffering, was manifested in the form of reduced electrical use (switching off appliances at home and lighting fixtures in offices and convenience stores) and the cancellation of that spring's traditional *hanami* cherry blossom-viewing parties out of respect for the victims. On television, a relentless series of public service announcements presented by the Ad Council of Japan urged viewers not to hoard consumer products, waste energy or overburden lines of communication with unnecessary chatter.

But in 2018, *jishuku* is nearly a forgotten concept. The lights are back on, blazing late into the night in Tokyo skyscrapers and inside convenience stores across the land. In the summer, air conditioners pump breezes into subway cars and entire underground stations. In the spring, the *hanami* parties roar back to life as soon as the cherry trees begin to bloom. Four of the nation's nuclear power plants are now online, and last year Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), operator of the damaged Fukushima Daiichi plant, received initial permission to restart two reactors at Kashiwazaki-Kariwa — the largest nuclear power plant in the world.

Overall, the Japanese economy, while hardly booming, has stabilized. The unemployment rate recently dropped to 2.7%, its lowest in 25 years, while the jobs-to-applicant ratio spiked to 1.56, the highest since 1974. The growth rate is low but sustained: the economy grew for the seventh consecutive quarter near the end of 2017, its longest streak in two decades. Foreign demand is up, as is business confidence, and there are early signs that both wage and price deflation are easing. More retirees and women have joined the workforce, and the college graduates I've interviewed are cautiously

optimistic about their futures. "I have quite a few job offers," a student at Toyo University told me. "So if one or two of them don't work out, I feel comfortable with my options."

The Power of Prose

Given the relative calm and steady progress of Japan seven years after the *genpatsu shinsai*, the setting in of a kind of cultural amnesia may be understandable, especially in the relatively insulated confines of Tokyo, hundreds of miles away. Each anniversary of the event is marked by memorials and media reportage, of course, usually featuring reporters standing outside the gates of the exclusion zone or visiting the remaining temporary shelters and issuing target dates for returnees (2020, 2022, and so on). Local residents and officials are interviewed, expressing a solemn mix of resolve and thinly concealed dismay. And footage from the day itself is trotted out to remind us what it looked like — film that now seems to have about as much impact as old newsreels from World War II.

Today it is the power of prose that jolts us back to the experience of the disasters, forcing us to undergo a personal reckoning with what they mean, beyond the redundant imagery and updated statistics. A new book called *Ghosts of the Tsunami* brings us closer to the human drama of what happened in Tohoku, and to all of Japan, and how the *genpatsu shinsai* has in fact reshaped the nation's soul without crushing it. The book also reminds us that roiling emotions lie just beneath the surface of apparent placidity.

Overseas, Japanese were admired in the aftermath of the 2011 disasters. Videos showed lines awaiting water, being turned away, and heading home peacefully without selfish rancor. But *Ghosts* reveals an undertow of rage and distrust in unforced, metaphorical lyricism, as when its author describes a river suddenly swollen into violent life by the tsunami wave: "The surface of the water was bulging and flexing like the muscles beneath the skin of an athlete."

Global Crises Are Personal

I flew out of Tokyo two days before March 11. There was a mild tremor as I packed, causing the overhead lamp in my kitchen to sway. I crouched over my suitcase, arms extended in my usual high-alert stance, but the earth soon resettled and I went back to folding my socks. Mild side-to-side rocking and the occasional vertical jolt are standard stuff in Japan, the most earthquake prone country in

the world.

During the days of the disaster and its immediate aftermath, I was in Oregon and California, giving university lectures and an NPR interview about, of all things, Japan's obsession with apocalypse in its art and popular culture. I would not have remembered that tremor on the 9th had it not been for what happened on the 11th. I first learned of the quake over dinner at a gastro-pub in Eugene, Oregon, minutes after it struck, via the quavering voice and halting sentences of my Japanese girlfriend calling from her Tokyo apartment.

For two weeks, I slept poorly and woke early in my hotel rooms. Each morning dawned with news of expanding crises. My family, friends and girlfriend emailed updates from Tokyo on the aftershocks, rising contamination levels and diminishing supplies.

The Japanese government's increasingly desperate emergency responses exacerbated my addiction to dread. Six days in, footage of a helicopter deployed to dump water over the nuclear plant's smoking dome, water that was fast dispersed by the wind into contrails of white vapor spraying far from its target, looked to me like the anti-climax in a theater of futility. ("I really think Japan is sinking," one Japanese journalist told me over Skype.) If, as the American novelist Don DeLillo wrote of televised calamities, "each disaster makes us crave a bigger one," Japan's 2011 triple whammy kept on giving.

As a resident of Tokyo and New York, I felt a chilling bout of *déjà vu* as I watched the news and frantically emailed friends and family across the Pacific. On 9/11, 2001, I had just landed in Tokyo from New York, and went through the same mindless routine: watch online video streams from thousands of miles away, email and phone friends and family helplessly as one of my hometowns suffered catastrophe. It was like banging my fist on a shop window whose display featured all of my personal photos and letters going up in flames.

The Observant Outsider

The visuals of Japan's devastation played out on TV, smartphone and laptop screens, and they now loop endlessly on YouTube as epic animations of apocalypse. Yet while the clips and photographs provide ample evidence of what the disasters looked and sounded like, they do little in the way of conveying the experience as it was physically felt, and the emotional carnage it left behind.

Ghosts of the Tsunami is the third and latest book by British

author and journalist Richard Lloyd Parry, who wisely sidesteps the quake and meltdown and focuses on the black wave. Of the three, the tsunami caused the greatest loss of life (roughly 18,500 perished, of which some 2,500 bodies are still missing), leveled entire towns and smashed through the seawall around the Fukushima reactor. Damage from the quake was mostly cosmetic by comparison, and despite hysteria over the nuclear meltdown (much of it rising from outside of Japan), not a single death has thus far been ascribed directly to radiation.

It would be hard for Lloyd Parry to stand out any more in largely mono-ethnic Japan: he is tall and lean, with pale blue eyes and raffish light brown hair. He has lived in Japan for 22 years, long enough to manage the verbal niceties and physical gestures that ensure smooth relations between *gaijin* (outside people) and Japanese nationals. He's not a fluent Japanese speaker (he credits his "excellent interpreter" for the candor of his subjects), but he has acquired a kind of fluency in Japaneseness — a way of being and behaving that helps put his subjects at ease, enabling him to prod them further without appearing rude. These are stereotypes, to be sure, but the English and the Japanese share a few similar traits: island peoples known for their unique garden aesthetics and social discretion (stiff upper lips), with a sometimes acute sensitivity to etiquette and emotional restraint.

"I wanted to write about the tsunami because its stories were so personal," Lloyd Parry tells me over a dinner of sashimi and *ankimono* (monkfish liver) in Yoyogi Uehara, a neighborhood in western Tokyo. "The Fukushima nuclear story was more political, as it is to this day. It was clearly a man-made disaster. And the earthquake was damaging, but relatively brief. But the tsunami lives on." Its power, destruction and casualties are almost unimaginable, he adds. "Insurers call it an 'act of God'. I really wanted to know how that felt."

Okawa Elementary School

He first traveled to the damaged northern coastline the day after the disaster as the Asia bureau chief for *The Times* of London. In those early weeks of urgent rescue efforts, he was culling stats and quotes and filing daily bulletins. But as the catastrophe faded from global headlines, Lloyd Parry wanted to find the story of the event that would speak to readers beyond the Japanese archipelago. How to transcend the linguistic and cultural divides? Where to find the

points of empathy?

“You have to do the reporting, of course, but it’s not enough to set down the bare facts,” he says. “You have to use other techniques, many of which come from the domain of fiction. You have to use more imaginative language that engages the deeper emotions of the reader.”

The peculiar and mysterious calamity at Okawa Elementary School has been recounted in other media as a microcosm of the tsunami’s horror. Japanese schools are built to strict and exacting architectural safety standards to withstand the land’s geographical vulnerabilities: earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons and volcanoes being the most damaging. Children are a high priority in a nation buffeted by numerous ‘acts of God’ and school buildings are among the safest places to be when one strikes. As Lloyd Parry notes, of the 18,500 total casualties, only 75 were children who lost their lives while attending school. Seventy-four of them died at Okawa.

“There’s something almost unbearably pure about natural disasters,” Lloyd Parry says. “They have always happened, and they will always happen again. Part of the fact of being born Japanese is dying in natural disasters because of the perilous seismic plight of these islands. I wanted to investigate a disaster that was in one sense unavoidable. As soon as I learned about the Okawa school, I realized it was going to be the central story. Those children didn’t die just because of an act of God, but also because of the failure of human beings. It’s those two things, the act of God and the human failure, that give the story its power.”

He spent three years returning to the region to interview and earn the trust of local residents, government and school officials, parents, children and Buddhist priests. The result is a book that unveils a rural Japan alien even to many Japanese, let alone Tokyo expats or foreign tourists, a novelistic narrative whose character-driven suspense is reminiscent of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* — another story written by an urbane outsider decoding small-town life.

Learning from Tohoku

Okawa is in Tohoku, a mountainous northern prefecture of farmers, fishermen, craftspeople, monks and innkeepers, better known for its folktales about spirits and goblins and hearty perseverance than what Lloyd Parry aptly calls “lacquered” Tokyo. My now deceased grandparents were both Tohoku natives — my grandfather from Esashi, a village south of Morioka, one of the

region’s capital cities, and my grandmother from Akita, on the Sea of Japan. I stayed with them as a child and visited frequently as a teenager, finding echoes of the New England where I was raised: the grassy overgrown pathways, barren hills and constant close proximity to the sea.

I have since returned as a writer and journalist to interview tsunami survivors, and I learned more about the pragmatism of the locals, their uniform jeans, overalls, flannels and baseball caps, and the unfussy openness with which many describe their still-raw pain and outrage over what happened to their communities. “The tsunami happens every day,” a farmer named Takayuki Ueno told me in the coastal town of Minamisoma, roughly 200 miles north of Okawa. Ueno lost four family members, his parents, son and daughter, to the wave. “It happens every night, too. In my dreams.”

Lloyd Parry is doubly an outsider in Tohoku — removed both from his native land and language, and his urban Tokyo environs. In *Ghosts*, he renders the natural landscape with the fresh eyes of an explorer: “Much of the beauty of Okawa derived from the many things that were not there — those everyday uglinesses unthinkingly accepted by city dwellers. Even as we drove in that September afternoon, I was conscious of their absence. Between the outskirts of Ishinomaki and the sea, there were few traffic lights, road signs, vending machines, or telegraph poles. There were no strip-lit restaurants or twenty-four-hour convenience stores, no billboards or cash machines. Most transforming of all was the character of local sounds: the song of birds and cicadas in the trees, the low noise of the river, the slap of waves, and a subtle, pervasive, barely audible susurration, which took me days to identify — that of air passing through reeds.”

He pursued three subjects that he cast as the story’s main characters: Naomi Hiratsuka, who learns how to operate an excavator to find the remains of her daughter in the rubble; Sayomi Shito, who resorts to licking the mud from her daughter’s corpse when two towels become saturated; and Junji Endo, a middle-aged teacher at the school who survives, dazed, but whose personal accounts of his escape don’t add up. Endo is the cipher at the core of the book’s inconsolable narrative: he saved himself amid a catastrophe, children died on his watch — and he is unable or unwilling to talk about it.

“The characters were the key,” Lloyd Parry tells me. “If any of them had said no, I’m not sure I could have done the book.”

Intimations of Apocalypse

Ghosts is further enriched by Lloyd Parry's literary erudition, which raises it beyond mere reportage, giving the reader an artful feel for Tokyo's paradoxical *mise-en-scene*. In delineating the city's spider-web-like interstices and elevated structures, he cites Italo Calvino's vision of vertical skyscraper wonders suspended acrobatically mid-air in *Invisible Cities* — the converse of which are Tokyo's persistent reminders of gravity. Quoting British author Peter Popham on the city's edgy allure: "Far from being dull to the dangers, acute awareness of them gives Tokyo people's lives tone and brio. The satisfaction of being a cog in the most elaborate and well-oiled machine in the world is given an almost erotic twist by the knowledge that the machine is poised over an abyss."

For the West, in the post 9/11 world, living with an awareness of imminent catastrophe has become *de rigueur*, especially in major cities. But the terror in "terrorism" emanates from human sources, perpetrators whose goals are political and/or religious, and whose acts of societal rage have roots in a logical design, however twisted, targeting specific victims. *Ghosts* succeeds most in enveloping its reader in Japan's psychological membrane, where a largely peaceful and reserved people coexist with intimations of apocalypse, and whose deepest spiritual devotion is to the ubiquitous presence of the dead.

Addressing what he calls Japan's "common sense" approach to death, Lloyd Parry quotes UCLA religion scholar Herman Ooms. "The dead are not as dead as they are in our own (Western) society," Ooms writes. "It has always made sense in Japan as far back as history goes to treat the dead as more alive than we do ... even to the extent that death becomes a variant, not a negation of life."

Ancestral Rituals in a Chaotic World

Whenever I visit the homes of my Japanese relatives or my girlfriend's parents, the first stop is the *butsudan*, or family altar, a polished, towering mahogany testament to the deceased, adorned with fresh fruit and other gifts, and a photo or two of the dead. A bell is rung, hands are clasped and heads are bowed in prayer. The moment is ritualistic but alive with simplicity: we're all "home". We light incense sticks and let them burn as we talk and prepare to dine. The message is clear: the dead are here with us, and we are giving back to them what they continue to give to us.

Living alongside the dead means ghosts, of course, and Japanese lore is chock full of them, from *yokai* (goblins) to *yurei* (haunted dead spirits). During the country's iconic 500-plus-year-old summer festival, *O-bon*, ancestors return to their family altars to be honored by the living, and are then sent back to the otherworld with flames to light the way, most dramatically in Kyoto, where massive bonfires in the shape of kanji characters are ignited at dusk in the sides of surrounding mountains.

The ghosts Lloyd Parry finds in post-tsunami Tohoku are both mundane and exotic. Some are simple shades of the dead, hailing taxis to homes that no longer exist and disappearing upon arrival, or sitting in on tea and leaving moist tatami mats behind. Others are grotesque nightmares. One unemployed man whose home was spared sees Hieronymus Bosch-like parades of dying and disfigured humans and animals trudging and crawling through river mud, driving him mad until his demons are exorcised by a local priest, after which viscous pink jelly flows from his nostrils. No one knows why.

In his review of the book, author Pico Iyer, another longtime expat based in Japan, writes about "how profoundly primal beliefs and atavistic rites" undergird even the sleekest of Japan's postmodern surfaces. This strikes me as the essence of the Japanese people's inner strength, their core sense of continuity and self-identity. Despite Japan's many disasters, both man-made (the atomic bombings during World War II; the 3.11 Fukushima meltdown 66 years later) and natural, and the great disruptions and transformations of its native historical narrative by outsiders, its people maintain a spiritual faith in practices that span centuries, rituals that are tied to no distant religious authorities (Vatican City, Mecca), but are instead unquestionably embraced at home.

Upheaval and disruption have always been endemic to Japan — "part of the fact of being born Japanese", as Lloyd Parry says — which is the principle reason, I believe, that societal stability is so highly valued by its people and institutions, whatever the economic costs. To paraphrase a Japanese scholar explaining to me the culture's belief in both Buddhism and Shinto, and the supreme importance of ancestors to each: the only true religion in Japan is being Japanese. **JS**

Roland Kelts is the author of *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* (2007). He was a 2017 Nieman Fellow in Journalism at Harvard University and is now working on a new book.