Volume 10 | Issue 54 | Number 48 | Article ID 4653 | Dec 31, 2012

Why I love Japan even more since the earthquake

David McNeill

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

地震後なぜこれまで以上に日本を好きになったか

By David McNeill

A week into Japan's crisis, when many of my spooked friends had already decamped west, south or abroad, I urged my pregnant partner Nanako to leave Tokyo for the apparent safety of Kansai. She wasn't happy and for good reason: I was staying behind, her parents were in Tokyo and she knew nobody in Osaka. Two days before, my sister and boyfriend had cut short a holiday in Japan and flown to Hong Kong after a painful haranguing from my mother in Ireland.

Before Nanako and I left for Shinagawa Station there was another strong earthquake, a report on the radio about potentially catastrophic radiation from the Fukushima plant and a warning by the Irish Embassy in Tokyo that pregnant women should avoid the capital.

Exhausted and emotional after Nanako's tearful departure, I headed for a coffee shop in the station where four perfectly turned-out waitresses serenaded my entry with a singsong "irrashaimase!" and fussed over my order with typically attentive service.

"Take your time," said a beaming young woman as she passed me my coffee. At which point I started crying.

Admirable ability

I wrote something later that day for The Irish Times, pondering this admirable and mysterious ability of many Japanese people to function normally as the scenery collapses around them. How black-suited salarymen stayed at their posts, housewives calmly queued for water and fuel, and waitresses still acted as though the most important thing in the world was my ¥280 order.

Some say that these people are just falling back on routine because they don't know any better.

"Robots," said one of my friends disparagingly, after I told him how a video store clerk kept

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466012038363 Published online by Cambridge University Press

calling during the week to remind me to return an overdue DVD.

But I don't agree. Those waitresses are human beings with families who worry about radiation too. I like to think they stay focused because to not do so is to let down others, and that invites chaos.

Uprooted communities

I traveled north twice to visit refugee centers in Tohoku, and was often moved by what I saw. In Rikuzen-Takata, the muddy deluge of March 11 has torn the town from its roots, leaving a gaping wound of smashed cars, pulverized wooden houses and twisted metal girders.

Car navigation systems still direct visitors to the post office and the local government building, which are no longer there. But in the makeshift refugee center, you could clearly see why this community will bounce back.

Local people in a school gym had organized themselves into temporary neighborhoods tagged with signs identifying the now destroyed "ku" to which they belonged -- an infinitely more resilient structure than the flimsy wooden houses washed into the sea.

Food, water and baths were carefully and seamlessly rationed. Housewives, teachers and firemen stepped into leadership roles. Older children told younger children what to do during aftershocks. There were no fights about who got what.

Outside the town, a hot springs resort had been converted into another temporary shelter, housing old people and families.

Every day, hundreds of people were bussed in for a bath, a vital psychological boost. Everyone got 30 minutes, roughly once a fortnight.

Anyone who knows the importance of baths in this country will appreciate how much endurance it takes for people to restrict themselves to that meager ration. Yet nobody, not even the people who ran the resort, broke the rule. "If I did that, it would get around and the system would break down," one worker told me.

In it together

Above all, what will stay with me after these communities are rebuilt, the Fukushima plant encased in a concrete coffin, and the iodine, cesium and plutonium have stopped seeping from its bowels, is the way Japanese people carried themselves during this crisis.

I'm thinking now of the smiles I saw around Iwate, of the many old people and children in the prefecture who shoved food into my hands and told me to keep going.

I think these qualities are social, not genetic, built up over generations, and possibly stronger in the northeast where life has traditionally been harsher. But whatever the reason, it

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466012038363 Published online by Cambridge University Press

works. And I'm staying.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466012038363 Published online by Cambridge University Press