

The Earthquake and Afterward

Miyagi Prefecture CIR Cameron Peek

The Great East Japan Earthquake was by far the largest challenge I have faced as a JET, as a PA, and generally in my entire life.

I was on the 13th floor of the Miyagi Prefectural office sitting at my computer when the alarm that an earthquake was about to strike went off. Moments later the shaking began. As a Prefectural Advisor, I was charged with the task of confirming the safety of the 70 members of the Miyagi JET Programme located all across the prefecture. A large earthquake having struck just two days before, on March 9th, I already had an idea of how difficult contacting people after an earthquake could be. My colleagues and I sent out e-mails to each person's e-mail address and cellular phone and started calling cellular phones. As the images of tsunami waves tearing across fields in Natori City and pouring over giant defense walls in Kesennuma City started to appear on TV, the reality of the situation sunk in. There was nothing we could do but keep calling, hoping to get through. For days we tried whatever method we could think of to reach the people on the coastline from whom we hadn't heard anything. three in Kesennuma City, two in Minami-Sanriku Town, one in Ishinomaki City. Moreover, false information and unconfirmed reports about missing ALTs came from all sources; third-party information from people in the U.S., rumors from other ALTs, even some embassy reports led us astray. Amid this confusion, I set out with my supervisor to Ishinomaki City, Minami-Sanriku Town, and Kesennuma City to gather first hand information. In the end we confirmed that all but one were safe; Taylor Anderson in Ishinomaki City had been caught in the tsunami. Taylor's loss, and the loss of all the other victims on that day, was tragic.

However, the courage of the people living along the coast, supported with the heartwarming aid from those all around Japan and all around the world, has allowed Miyagi and Tohoku to take its first steps towards recovery. In fact, what surprised me most was the level of international response; the sheer volume of goods and donations coming from abroad made me realize just how much the world loves Japan.

I can definitively say that the experience has changed me as a person, but it is difficult to define how. What I can say for sure is that it completely changed my perspective on being a CIR, in that it gave me a clear cut purpose for being here. As a CIR before the earthquake, sometimes I had felt doubtful of the usefulness of my position. My "purpose" was to promote "internationalization", but was teaching English to a group of retirees on Thursdays helping fulfill that goal? Was going to Elementary, Junior-High and Senior-High schools to teach students about Cowboys and their role in American Southwest culture an effective way to "internationalize". At times I would over-think about this, and only end up confused. But ever since the earthquake, I have forgotten this confusion. I just ask myself one question, "Is what I am doing helping Miyagi recover?" Now, this is all that matters, and this question gives me focus as a CIR that I had not previously felt. "Will organizing a fundraiser back home to raise donations help Miyagi?" Certainly. "Will contacting publishers of bi-lingual Manga in America to send Manga to affected areas help Miyagi?" Yeah! "Will translating English children's books sent to Ishinomaki to

Japanese help Miyagi?" It will certainly help those kids understanding of the world, and they are the ones who will inherit Miyagi. Especially with the massive amount of aid from abroad, I realized just how important the CIR position is. We provide the bridge between cultures for those that are interested and willing to cross.

Then of course, there is the question of how this disaster has changed Japan. I feel it has left a deep impression on the Japanese psyche, maybe in a similar way to the impression left on the American psyche after 9/11. However, defining that impression and predicting how it will shape the future are questions that only time, and very smart people with PhD's in social-anthropology can properly answer. Still, there are some specific changes I can think of, two of which stand out in my mind.

Firstly, I feel that there has been a change in attitudes towards volunteerism. Before the earthquake "volunteering" didn't seem to be something in which many Japanese frequently engaged. Back home in the United States, volunteering is almost treated as a requirement; a resume without some aspect of community service or volunteering typically won't open many doors. Maybe I just don't know the right people, but I never got the feeling that this was the case in Japan. Nevertheless, the volunteer response to the earthquake from the Japanese public was beyond amazing, and that it is still continuing even a year after the event is even more amazing. During Golden Week in 2011, the municipal volunteer centers were forced to shut down because there were *too many* people! I still see and hear about significant volunteer efforts on almost a daily basis, which is something that I hope will continue in the future as well.

Secondly, on a personal level, I have felt a change in how I am seen by people in Miyagi. Before the earthquake, as a foreign person living in Japan, the first questions I would be asked when meeting new people were either "Where are you from?" or "Are you an English teacher?". Being a young white male, these questions aren't so surprising. Yet on a certain level, that these were the conversation starters always reminded me of my foreignness. However, what I noticed after the earthquake was that this was no longer the case. The multitude of people I met going to and from the various municipalities around Miyagi were no longer primarily interested in where I was from or what I was doing here, but rather what my experience of the earthquake was and whether I was contributing to the recovery. "Where are you from" was replaced by "where were you when it hit?" and "are you an English teacher?" was replaced by "are you volunteering?" In a way, it was through this shared experience with the people of Tohoku that I felt as though I had become a part of the community. I felt as though when people looked at me they saw me in a whole different manner. Before they may have thought, "here is someone that is here to experience Japan", whereas now I feel they think "here is someone that is here to contribute."

And this expectation to contribute is in no way a burden. Rather, that a contribution is expected of me at all makes me feel accepted, makes me feel like a part of the community, make me feel like a "Miyagian".

英語

Portraying the Real Fukushima

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Do you know the historical figure *Nitobe Inazo*?

Many people are unfamiliar with this name, but I have known of and aspired to be Nitobe Inazo since my youth, for it is he who taught me how to think about international exchange.

Nitobe Inazo was the first Asian to serve as an Undersecretary General of the League of Nations and made significant contributions to the establishment of friendly relations between Japan and the world. I first encountered Nitobe, who is heralded by historians as “Japan’s bridge across the Pacific”, when I read his memoirs as a child. He has been my hero from my childhood and continues to be so this day.

Even as a child, I was impressed by the fact that Nitobe’s efforts towards diplomatic relations extended beyond the national level to the grass roots level, where he altered stereotypes about the Japanese people through his written works. It is for this reason that I felt such strong admiration for him. During a time in which there still remained bias against persons of Japanese descent, Nitobe served as a bridge of communication between countries, helping each understand the true nature of the other, through diplomacy and his works such as *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. Upon encountering his works, it did not take long before I found myself viewing Nitobe as a goal.

I feel that goal took its first large step towards realization through my participation in the JET Programme. Working as a Coordinator for International Relations from 2007 to 2010, I conducted approximately 20 classes each year on multicultural relations throughout Fukushima Prefecture, with the aim of doing away with biased views of foreigners among local residents. Being a conservative region, many such views still existed in Fukushima Prefecture, and I labored three years attempting to be a bridge of understanding, using myself as an example to help local residents see what those from other countries are really like.

I remained in Fukushima Prefecture following my term as a JET participant and currently work at Fukushima University where I promote regional internationalization, and it was while doing so that I experienced the unprecedented damage wrought by the Great East Japan Earthquake.

More than worry or fear about the damage caused by the triple threat of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear plant disaster, I was stirred up by my strong desire to protect my second homeland of Fukushima and find ways I could contribute to its recovery. I realize now that I felt so strongly thanks to my participation on the JET Programme, for the ultimate goal of the JET Programme is to develop *kizuna* (bonds or ties) with local regions. This fact was again brought to my realization in the aftermath of the disaster.

I did not know where Fukushima was until I pulled out a map of Japan to search for it upon learning of my placement there as a JET participant. Through three years of grass roots level international exchange activities, however, I found that I had obtained an irreplaceable possession, my *kizuna* with Fukushima. And I have developed a deep affection for the beauty of Fukushima’s scenery and the warmth of its people.

Therefore, in the year and a half since the disaster, I have participated in several recovery projects to assist with the recovery, believing that contributing to the recovery of Fukushima is a way for me to give back to the local community. I have done so in a number of ways, such as being

the contact point for support from overseas, participating in activities to deliver goods to disaster-stricken areas, and translating information regarding radiation protection announced by Fukushima Prefecture through the international association I was employed at while a JET participant. As a JET Programme alumnus, I also joined several current JET participants in various relief activities by launching a volunteer organization, supporting kindergartens in the disaster-stricken areas, and assisting with beach clean-up and searches for lost property.

It was while actively participating in volunteer activities and clean-up efforts that I witnessed a sight I will never forget for the rest of my life. On the coast, among the remains of homes washed away by the tsunami, I saw three *koinobori* (carp-shaped banners) waving in the sky.

Flying between the immense piles of grey-colored rubble and the bright-blue sky, the one adult and two children *koinobori* appeared more colorful than any I had seen before and seemed to be a symbol of the recovery of Fukushima. As I walked up to the *koinobori*, I noticed that chrysanthemums and children’s sweets were placed under the *koinobori* in memory of the children who lost their lives in the tsunami. Both the anguish of Fukushima and its resilience in moving forward to restoration simultaneously welled up in my heart as I witnessed this scene.

The nuclear plant accident focused the world’s attention on Fukushima, and in the face of occasional wanton coverage by foreign media and occurrence of harmful rumors at the local level, I desired to work as a bridge from Fukushima to the world to show the world Fukushima’s true self, just as Nitobe had done through his writings, and as I myself had done through my work as a JET participant.

Aiming to obtain this goal, I am currently engaged in the planning and implementation of recovery programs at my workplace, and I am making efforts to transmit information overseas in a variety of ways, such as by using networks I developed as a JET participant with local governments and NPOs to support overseas research requests and conducting short-term student exchange programs through which students from around the world perform volunteer work in Fukushima and see the real Fukushima.

In addition, I have participated in international conferences. Last year alone I exchanged opinions on Fukushima with many individuals at conferences in five countries. It is my sincere hope that through these activities I can help as many people as possible have a correct understanding of what Fukushima’s current issues are and how they can help.

In Fukushima, I often hear that there are three types of people who can bring to Fukushima the strength to recover. These are: *The Outsiders*, those who come from the outside of Fukushima; *The Youth*, those with the desire to continually assist with recovery activities; and *The Fools*, those who take the initiative and act, refusing to be caught up in stereotypes. In my opinion, JET participants, myself included, fall into all three of these categories. As foreign residents who love Fukushima, I believe that JET participants can be a force to local communities. The *kizuna* I developed as a JET participant is the driving force for me as I hope to continue to serve as a bridge from Fukushima to the world, like Nitobe Inazo.

英語