

Our quest for meaning in the face of nature's wrath: reflections on the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami

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Yoshiko Suzuki reflects on the enormity of the massive earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan's northern Pacific coast in March 2011. How does a whole nation deal with bereavement and grief on such a scale?

On 11 March 2011, a massive earthquake of magnitude 9.0 shook the Tohoku region in Japan. This was followed by a terrible tsunami that swallowed up and swept away everything before it, including over 20,000 human lives, and left 300,000 people homeless along Japan's northern Pacific coast. It destroyed all trace of townships in its path and left behind some thousands of tons of wreckage and debris. This was Japan's largest earthquake in the 400 years we have been recording seismic events.

The '3/11' disaster appalled and devastated the whole nation, even though we were already to an extent prepared for this kind of large-scale calamity, because Japan is an earthquake-prone country.

While we were still dazed from this first shock, a second shock was delivered by the threatened meltdown of one of the nuclear reactors at Fukushima No. 1 power station, where the control unit had been flooded by the tsunami, incapacitating the entire cooling system. The force of nature surpassed all our predictions, based on scientific knowledge and technology, as if to lay bare our limitations.

Now [early June 2011], nearly three months after the disaster, despite our desperate efforts, repair and restoration proceeds at a snail's pace, and the fight against the invisible – the fear of radioactive contamination – compounds the challenge of reconstruction. Some say this national crisis reminds them of the period following the end of World War II, when we toiled for many years to achieve our highly modernised, industrialised and luxurious life today.

Personally, in the days that followed, I have struggled to make sense out of the immense tragedy of so many deaths,



so suddenly, and on such a huge scale, if that is ever possible. I searched in vain the writings of our prominent opinion leaders, our philosophers, Buddhists and academics, looking for clues. They were equally awed, subdued and humbled in the face of nature's wrath.

Those who were not personally affected by the 3/11 disaster, including me, felt it was not our place to make any comment on this traumatic event, especially in the light of the unimaginable suffering of people who had experienced multiple losses – the deaths of loved ones, loss of homes, personal possessions, pets, jobs, and even their whole home town. Just bowing our head down humbly in awe and silence or praying for all the lives lost seemed apt for this occasion.

I live in the central part of Tokyo, 1,000 miles away from the epicentre of the earthquake, and the visible damage here was minimal. Nonetheless, the quake was so strong that I feared my

apartment building would collapse over my head and I would be crushed to death. But it stood, and I was safe. The city of Tokyo was on high alert. All subway and train services were shut down almost immediately after the quake. As the quake occurred in the mid-afternoon, tens of thousands of commuters were stranded. The pavements were jammed with people heading home on foot. Some walked for many hours to get home; others chose to spend the night in their office buildings. It was an extraordinarily cold winter night. But later, Tokyo residents realised that the trials and discomforts we experienced that day were nothing compared with what had happened in the Tohoku region.

Vicarious trauma

In the post-3/11 days, many of us shared this sense of humility: whatever our loss, it appeared trivial in light of the trauma experienced by the quake and tsunami survivors as their cries reached us from the abyss of despair. Day after day the TV reported the news from the disaster areas, often featuring interviews with survivors. Our eyes were glued to the screen.

We watched as an elderly woman, stressed out and weary, appealed to the reporter: 'My husband and my son, both are missing. They [the rescue workers] couldn't find them. They have got to find them quickly or I shall be stuck here. I can't move on to do what I should do'. This woman must have been torn apart, not knowing whether her loved ones were alive or dead. She clearly wished to be released from the endless torment of not knowing. For her, accepting their deaths, and completing her duties for the dead by having a proper funeral ritual and cremation seemed preferable to being stuck in the limbo of uncertainty about their fates.

A young father, in search of his little infant, had driven miles back to one of the areas polluted by radiation, from which all the inhabitants had been evacuated because of the danger from the nuclear plant. Standing in front of a 'Halt' sign, the young man told the interviewer: 'I've been looking for my three year-old daughter all day long but in vain. Finally I've come to my home town, but they won't even let me in. Even my right to search has been refused.' He was angry and frustrated by this secondary, man-made disaster of the radioactive pollution that had caused his home town to be sealed off.

Many evacuees fleeing the power plant disaster criticised those responsible and demonstrated their anger fiercely and openly. In contrast, no one pointed a finger at the tsunami or unleashed their anger against it. It seems people are more able to accept natural disasters part of the vagaries of life.

This young man spoke again: 'You know, at the evacuation center where I'm now staying, there's no electricity, no cooker, it's far from comfortable. But if I had all my family together again, I wouldn't mind a bit whether we have electricity or a house.'

The TV coverage went on and on, broadcasting as many grief stories as they could from the disaster sites. Our hearts went out to each of the bereaved, even though we didn't know them. Yet these stories were just the tip of the iceberg, in view of the tens of thousands of lives estimated to be either lost or missing. The

number of bereaved people is likely to be nearly ten times the number of dead and missing.

This exposure to all their stories was a strange experience for me, as a bereavement counsellor. Often, as I tuned into the narrative of a grieving person on the TV, I actually felt involved with them as if they were my client. After a while, a kind of compassion fatigue overcame me; exhausted, I decided to take a break. In fact, quite a few people developed vicarious trauma from over-exposure to the horrific pictures of the tsunami damage shown again and again on the TV.

The whole of Japan joined together in a state of national mourning. Out of empathy for the disaster victims, or survivor guilt, the whole nation reacted almost compulsively by offering help and sending money to contribute to the rescue work. Many felt guilty about treating themselves to luxury items, eating out, or travelling for leisure. A social trend to 'Save money for the earthquake victims' has set in. The national relief fund reached its target very soon, which is extraordinary in a culture such as ours where there is no tradition of fundraising, as in some western countries. Japan does not have a tradition of charitable giving.

Indeed, I have never seen so many people so enthusiastically take up activities to provide support for those in need. I wondered if this sudden development of the spirit of altruism among us was simply a manifestation of trauma reaction or of enhanced human goodness in the face of adversity, or was it that people were trying to make sense of life's absurdity by taking action when words fail? Whatever the case, by the time the Emperor Akihito addressed his condolences to all the victims and called on us to unite against this adversity, his message was already congruent with the mood of his people and the spirit of unity, self-denial, and caring for others that spontaneously arose.

At a global level, Japan suddenly became a focal spot, and attracted media attention worldwide. I had a flood of emails from friends overseas asking about my own safety and that of my family. Such words as 'You are not alone' and 'Let us know whatever help you need' supported me in this troubled time.

Bereavement care

Some of my friends from the International Workgroup on Death, Dying and Bereavement, specialists in trauma and crisis intervention, were of great support. They sent me valuable resources for trauma care that were badly needed here. I had just started providing support to a team of psychiatrists, school counsellors and health care personnel working in Iwate, one of the most severely damaged prefectures. The team was supporting the police officers involved in the rescue work, and local teachers and students, many of whom were highly traumatised and some of whom were bereaved. The Iwate team needed backup advice on trauma and bereavement care, which I provided mainly via the internet. Eventually I began to receive updated information about the rescue work at the sites.

Among many things, I was most struck by the stressful conditions under which those police officers were forced to work non-stop for excessive hours in search of the missing. Some

officers had lost a loved one or a colleague to the tsunami, but they had to set aside their personal problems to cope with the pressing demand from the families of the missing. Of course we know they are trained to be 'tough' but they are also human. We were deeply concerned that some might develop PTSD sooner or later.

In this way, I found a modest role in indirectly supporting the disaster victims by helping the helpers. After all I was no exception – like many others I had been restless with the urge to 'do something for the victims' in response to their suffering. Although my contribution in this sense might be only a drop in the ocean, this involvement with the Iwate team helped me calm down. Albert Schweitzer knew this condition well when he said: 'The purpose of the life is to serve and show compassion and the will to help others. Only then have we ourselves become true human beings.'

Repression or reserve?

One day I gave a telephone interview to a journalist from the National Public Radio, a US radio station, who had been sent here to report on the Tohoku earthquake disaster. After visiting a couple of disaster areas and talking to evacuees through interpreters, he wanted me to comment as a bereavement counsellor on what he had observed about the way people were behaving. He was overwhelmed by the enormity of the destruction, and astonished by the contrasting calm composure and dignity of the survivors. He had witnessed politeness, consideration for others, self-discipline and elaborate good manners. He asked if he could attribute this behaviour to spiritual stoicism or the extraordinary resilience of the Japanese people.

Responding to this question was not easy, as I believe various factors need to be taken into consideration. First, we can assume that these people are suffering the effects of trauma, and it may be that their behaviour reflects the numbed, emotionless state of the first phase of PTSD. Second, we can hardly expect country people, such as those living in Tohoku, to disclose their feelings to an outsider – this includes me, but would apply particularly to a foreigner – and they may have decided simply to be polite. Third, there are some cultural differences between those living in the country and those living in the city in Japan – how these people in Tohoku responded to their situation cannot be seen to represent the entire nation.

I told him what he had seen might have been indigenous to Tohoku people, who still maintain a sense of communality and respect for others. People living in Tokyo are more individualistic, rational and competitive, as are all those living in big cities the world over.

I also raised the point that quite a high proportion of the victims were fishermen or farmers, who probably are the most resilient of all the population against the rough hand of nature.

Living side by side with nature, they are accustomed to its lore: 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away' (Job 1:20).

How well I convinced my interviewer over these cultural issues, I am not sure, since the general tendency of the world's media has been to focus on Japanese resilience and good manners generally. Who am I to challenge this positive appraisal of our national character? However, the other side to this stoicism and self-denial is the danger inherent in bottling up all emotions. Indeed, my interviewer raised this precise question, and asked me how long anyone can contain emotions such as anger, regret, fear and guilt, and what the psychological effects might be in the course of time. He was concerned about the mental health of these highly self-disciplined survivors. We agreed with the hypothesis that pent up emotions need to be ventilated before they reach the point of explosion. This is a basic lesson all bereavement counsellors learn.

We should not underestimate these psychological effects. Japan has a very high suicide rate; Iwate has the highest suicide rate and Akita the second highest of all the 47 prefectures in Japan, and both are in Tohoku region. The causes of suicide are multifaceted; we cannot attribute these high rates simply to the values that the Tohoku people share, but the potential link between extreme adherence to such values and suicide needs to be studied. Several suicides have already been reported among the survivors of 3/11, to our great concern.

In mid-April, five weeks after the earthquake and tsunami, I finally had the chance to visit Iwate and meet the members of the Iwate team with whom I had been working. My main mission was to raise awareness of the importance of providing bereavement care among the professionals in immediate contact with the disaster victims. In the past few years I have been working hard to promote this awareness from my base in Tokyo and had been feeling quite pleased with the results. However, I realised its ripples had barely reached the Tohoku region. Most Japanese people live in highly concentrated urban areas such as Tokyo and Osaka; my friends in Iwate are culturally and politically isolated, and find it difficult to obtain the resources needed for this kind of work. Yet here, there is a higher demand for bereavement care than elsewhere in the country.

School teachers and counsellors in Tohoku are in urgent need of training in bereavement care in the face of so many bereaved children. At the moment those children are left without any special care or support at school.

I was asked to offer counselling to a young disaster survivor at one of the high schools I visited in Iwate. He was suffering from both trauma and loss after witnessing the upcoming tsunami and people drowning. He told me: 'The worst thing is that no one ever asks me how I'm coping or if I'm OK, even though they know what I have been through. My teachers and classmates, they act as if nothing serious happened to me.' We must do something to help these bereaved children so they are not left to suffer needlessly, alienated and betrayed by us adults. ■