



A letter written just after the Great East Japan Earthquake

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March 11, 2011 will mark the tenth anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Recently I have become particularly sensitive to the memories of that quake, recalling in great detail the actions I took and the feelings that crossed my mind that very day. I often find myself crying in my dreams and thinking about the people that disappeared right before my eyes. Sometimes I even feel like this past decade was only a day's length. Why so? I think it's because I am beginning to feel this strong and complicated sense of regret, that I should have thought more deeply for myself about what I could have done just after the quake, without being overwhelmed by the many things that happened around me. After the quake, the inexorable wave of economic activities that were encouraged for disaster restoration and governmental measures under the name of charity, subsidy, aid, or indemnity were no doubt thankfully received and saved many people and their communities. I even wonder—if the nation had been cornered to the point that we had to reconstruct our lives on our own with only the barest necessities, what kind of a decade would this community have gone through? The number of deaths surely would have risen and life would have been cruel in many ways. But maybe if we had had to do things on our own, suicides wouldn't have happened and our society would not have become so divided. Perhaps we could have better used the wisdom of the elders. Then again, the complete opposite might have happened. This sort of confusion strikes me. I kind of feel shameful of the current state of my mind and body, which I must somehow rewind back in time.



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* Translated from Japanese to English by Jeffrey Hunter

The Disaster

April 5. To everyone who has been worried about me

In the neighborhood where I live (population 370), fifty-three were killed and seven are still missing. The tsunami was nature in all its raw power. It was terrifying beyond imagining. When I think of all those who died, swept away in that unequalled terror, my mind simply stops working. No amount of caring for them on my part can reach those who, swallowed by the water, lost consciousness in such terrible suffering.

In one instant on that day, the value of time, life, death, emotion, and things was wiped out, and all was flattened into uniformity, as far as the eye could see. Then a heavy snow fell and a night of complete and utter darkness descended. Hearing on the radio that the bodies of several hundred people had been found on the coast, and the repeated reports of the nuclear accident at Fukushima Reactor No. 1, just 80 kilometers down the coast, as well experiencing the constant

aftershocks, I was prepared for the worst. I was so deeply distressed that nothing seemed strange. Numerous unimportant, random thoughts floated through my mind, and I thought, this will be my end.

Now, I think about bringing back that deep, dark, uniformly black night, and though I hope there is never another tsunami, I am also afraid at the same time that those hours will fade from my consciousness.

At the same time, I am relieved and reassured to have been to resort to the value of things, discussing together with the many strong older women with whom I lived in the evacuation center what we needed, and then requesting them as relief supplies, and distributing them to the right people; and when after looked eagerly I found a single photograph sticking up out of the mud, I was delighted. But not just photographs but also houses and people are buried in the mud. I am living in a reality when all things have been reduced to equal value. That is clearly linked inside me to that dark night. The value of things has been torn apart and stands revealed before me now. And that's fine.

What I feel compelled to confirm with my entire being is that what I started from November 2008, when I moved to Kitakama, is not over at this moment. If anything I have done in Kitakama up to now was rendered meaningless by the disaster, it was just the things that could be washed away. I was living amidst a pile of things, many of which I won't miss. If one aspect of the unease I felt at the convenience of daily life arose from my dependence on things, than perhaps it was just the useless dregs of my material desires that were washed away. I was shocked by this. But that dark night during which I experienced that brief but noble epiphany seemed to be telling me not to think of my life solely in terms of attachment to and dependence upon material things; I felt that what really mattered was the way in which I had tried to relate to society. Or at least that's what I said to myself.

There is still too little information about the nuclear power plant accident, and no one at the evacuation center talks about it. The media may not be reporting everything it should, but we are also avoiding the subject here. Perhaps we couldn't bear to see the images. I think we find it impossible to conceive of something worse than the present situation, and are just refusing to accept it. I look it as my own fault, because of all the electricity I used to use.

There's so much I want to write about that I'm afraid I could go on forever. I am very grateful for your concern.

I wandered around with a camera I had borrowed. The appearance of the neighborhood was changing dramatically day by day, so I was eager to record it before it disappeared. Making a photographic record was the only thing I could do. My belief that I must do that served as both a spiritual and practical support at the time. But at the same time, I was terribly disappointed. Taking photographs didn't offer me any inner fulfillment, and I didn't feel anything about the photographs I took.

One day we all got on a bus and went from the evacuation center to Kitakama. I went with the woman who lived next to me to see where our houses had been. She said, "Miso and shit were all swept away together, and you can't tell the difference between them." We both laughed boisterously. We talked about someone we knew who had just bought a new television and had only been able to watch it for fifteen minutes before the tsunami took it away. Talking with another person, we both complimented one another on how completely our homes had been washed away.

When I was wearing some clothes donated to us, one of my older neighbors said, "Very stylish," and another older man, putting on some jeans, shook his hips and, laughing, said he felt like he was young again.

When someone, no matter how old, came to visit one of us staying at the evacuation center, the volunteer at the reception area would jokingly announce their presence: "Mr. X, a beautiful young woman is here to see you." Everyone there would whistle and clap. There was great tragedy, but the residents of the evacuation center laughed to forget it. Someone was always joking, and this effort to keep up our spirits actually helped us.

At the same time, others reacted quite differently, wasting away, or starting to laugh and then bursting into tears, or sitting in a stupor, with an unfocused expression. In that wide range of emotions, we all got through our daily lives. Perhaps the power of nature was revealed to be so overwhelming that we didn't make the effort to resist or resent it, we just accepted it, and tried to act normally.

Standing on the hill where the main building of Shimomasuda Shrine just barely remained, one has a 360-degree view of Kitakama, which has been entirely flattened. The shrine caretaker said, "I wonder what this area looked like 1200 years ago, when the shrine was first built. When I stand here every day, I always think what it must have looked like 1200 years ago."

What does it mean to no longer be able to live on your own land? I had just moved there, and there was no way I could understand how parting from this land would affect the lives of the majority of its residents, who had lived in Kitakama for generations. I was commuting from the evacuation center and temporary housing, walking around the empty space taking photos, but what I first felt was that the fear of another earthquake and tsunami began to fade with each passing day. Today, completely forgetting the day of the tsunami, I sometimes stand on the piece of land where my studio once was with no feelings at all. I may actually be trying to forget what happened, but I am gradually feeling calmer and am able to think about other things again. At the same time, I am aware of the various challenges I still face, and that a real trial lies ahead for the residents of the area.

And all sorts of things have happened under the name of reconstruction.

One day a group of men in suits came riding up in a fancy car, talked to the residents about some fabulous plan for building a casino to revive the area, and promised that everyone would be better off, there would be jobs, and no one would have to worry about anything. "We want to help you," they said, passing out fancy lunch boxes. They visited us several times, bringing along a big screen, and showed us a dramatic video about building the casino, filled with images of the land that had been hit by the tsunami. Their actions and words were filled with good intentions. But my reaction was if we let ourselves get caught up in this plan for reconstruction, I was afraid we would have the power to decide our own futures taken from us. This was because since coming to live in Kitakama, I had learned how the wisdom and ingenuity of the people residing there has imbued every corner of their lives.

The local people had a mix of reactions to the idea of building a casino. Some were for it, some against, some too busy to think about it—naturally, there were individual differences based on the degree of damage they had suffered, their

financial situations, their hopes for the future, and so forth. And those differences did cause some splits in the community. The casino plan revealed the differences among people's values and cast a shadow over us.

I felt as if I had received a crash course in capitalism for the first time in my life. I learned how society works, the power of money, and the essence of government. And I also learned that these were the realities before my eyes. But the most frightening thing was that up to then I had participated in this social system without knowing anything about it. I knew nothing of how it was structured, and I never tried to find out. . . .

What had dominated me in such a way to make me into a passive participant in the status quo? And in accepting that role, what had I been trying to protect myself from? Poverty? Hunger? If it was hunger, then I was following not society but the Law of Nature. Then what did it mean to live as a human being? There is no boundary between the good and evil we perceive, or the boundary is complex and not clearly defined. Without good there can be no evil.

The newspapers, television, and the media were also relentless. I was forced to recognize anew how much power they exert. I began to notice how they edited reality and shaped it. Or how they didn't report on things, what they ignored. That kind of thing also creates subtle divisions among people.

The shadow over a community that is born in this way, among people who cannot return to their homes, gradually becomes bigger and bigger. I think that land is a matrix for naturally healing such gaps. Living in one place for a long time, and continuing to live in such a place, forges human relationships that can't be harmed by small things.

Yet my life takes place within society. From now on, I intend to think seriously about my relationships to society and the community. And putting the personal philosophy that I create from that thinking into practice for the rest of my life is the way, I think, to prevent myself from losing that moment during that long dark night when I experienced a freedom from every sort of unease. I was fortunate enough to be blessed with that opportunity, and I must not waste it.

At the evacuation center and in temporary housing we received all sorts of things from various countries and groups and individuals—monetary donations, refrigerators, washing machines, televisions, microwaves, electric thermoses, air conditioners, beds and bedding, carpets, dishes, hot water bottles, clothing, food, cameras, haircuts, exercise classes, a coffee shop, tea, massages, prepared food . . . more than one could thank everyone for. The reaction to all this varied among the residents. Some said they needed to get back on their feet as soon as possible to show their gratitude; others said that they no longer even felt like saying thank you, which made them ashamed.

I met a woman I had known in Kitakama who I hadn't seen for some time. She said to me that she loved Kitakama, so she wanted to start over from the beginning there, and she was going to begin by weeding. She started going from the evacuation center to the site of her former home and weeded the area. Without relying on any of the reconstruction plans offered her, she thought of this on her own and cleared away rocks, pulled weeds, and planted vegetables. Though she knew she could never go back there to live, she was still quite serious about it. For me, spending all my time thinking about society and my wants, and getting all twisted up about them, her actions, just carrying through on one small thing, without worrying about how she was going to live as a part of society, opened my eyes—to just naturally coming together with these people around me, who had lived such long lives already, and to the wonder of learning things day after day. In the past, when there was no food, they ate sweet potato vines. They made compost and then sold it to earn a living; they went to sleep when the sun set and got up when it rose; The flowers blooming by the roadside delighted and refreshed them. I am remembering the things that she told me in the past.

What effect did the earthquake and tsunami have on me? I learned how fragile my environment is—both the natural and social systems that support my life. While our society today is materially rich, we are facing a dead end. Whenever I am made aware of that in some respect, instead of feeling despair, I become very calm. By imagining a state of threat, I quiet something within myself. My desires fade like mist. Rather than all the things I lost in the tsunami, my life prior to that, with the things piling up around me, seems scarier.

I have no idea how this experience can be related to my art. The fact is that up to now I have made my living by producing works of art. In other words, I have lived

within that social system. I neither reject nor affirm this, I just want to find a way to connect the present reality before my eyes to the past and the future. I don't want to make my works up to now into some distant illusion. Rather than directly connecting my art to society, I think it is important to my work how it is linked to the society in which it is made.

Still, in the weeks following the earthquake and tsunami, I had no interest at all in taking photographs. I was just trying to survive, and the events taking place around me left me no time or energy to think about photography. After a while, at the evacuation center, I used to fall asleep thinking of a dance I loved, or a song lyric, or a scene from a film. When I closed my eyes, I felt as if someone was walking toward me, and it was exciting. What could that have been? Having lost my home and my studio, perhaps that was all the imagination I could afford. But in those few minutes before I fell asleep, I felt an unbounded freedom. Freedom was a concrete feeling within me, my mind was filled with images, and I was happy. It wasn't an escape from reality, it was a very human feeling.

Though it was frightening, I went to see the ocean at Kitakama several times. I walked there and back. To see the tragic, brutal, ridiculous mess of reality. To fill myself with the power engendered by that confusion.

The horrifying does not lie, so it made me honest.

It seemed beautiful to me.