

A Tohoku Journal



Michael Ryan Smith

August 5th, Tokyo

Morning -- Hot

Tokyo Again. I always feel lost here. The bus ride here doesn't help, of course. Especially when the bus my dirt-cheap travel agency chartered breaks down and the nine hour trip turns into twelve hours. I want a shower, but all the bath houses are closed. They don't open until the evening. Who would want a bath at this hour except a stranded traveler like me?

This journal isn't about Tokyo's bath-house operating hours or late-running buses. It's about my impressions of Japan, collected over a decade, and written during the week of volunteer work which I about to embark on. I hope that the unique environment in which I will live for the coming days will give me the inspiration to put my thoughts of Japan to paper. This will be my third opportunity to volunteer since the 2011 tsunami, and each time has given me new insight on myself and the country I now live in.

It's time to take my train. The pre-departure orientation for my volunteer association is held at their headquarters near Shinjuku. My job is to translate for the non-Japanese speaking foreigners in our group: About a dozen Australians funded and organized by the philanthropic efforts of their leader, the Benefactor. Because of my bus troubles, I wasn't able to meet with him yesterday as planned. I hope he is understanding.

Afternoon

Our lone bus is riding along a two-lane highway. We are near Tochigi now, moving north towards Fukushima. The roadside is lined with the bright green of the August rice, punctuated by the darker shades of Japanese cedar and crossed by small rivers dark in the setting sun. This is the kind of Japanese scenery that I'm accustomed to. Watching it go by for hours from my bus window reminds me

how much of Japan looks this way. I know that many people prefer the city, and feel isolated in the countryside, but for me these quiet hills are a reminder that we still have our place among nature.

Last year, there were ninety volunteers in three buses. This year, there are thirty. I wonder if this is because there is a lessening need or a lessening awareness. Among this summer's group there are many people who have volunteered three or more times. According to those who I have spoken with, things up north have not improved that much. There is something worth noting, though: The number of foreign volunteers has increased, and many of the returnees are foreign, including myself. I wonder what everyone's motivations are.

I know, in my case, my actions are a gesture- an attempt to repay Japan for everything it has done for me. Japan has given me the opportunity to improve my life, something which I never felt was within reach in my own country. It gave me a home when I was transient, and an avenue to succeed if I was willing to try. That in itself would have been enough to warrant my actions now, but then there were also the individual people: The teachers that educate me, the employers that support me and the friends that sheltered me and gave me a sense of belonging. They acted as my family when I had none. Some of these people have moved on, and I can't speak with them though I would like to. But I will never forget the contribution that they made to my life. It's for them that I volunteer. Not out of patriotism or a desire to be praised, but because it is the one gesture I can make to express my gratitude.

The road outside is dark now. The cedar trees' narrow trunks, now looking a dull purple, stand out from the dark of their groves. But as I write they fade into the dusk. The road is growing smaller, and my hand writing is getting worse for the lack of light and bumps in the ride. We will arrive in Ishinomaki City within an hour.

Night

We've arrived in Ishinomaki. Our volunteer leaders immediately took us to our lodgings: The second floor what was a Chinese restaurant before the tsunami. The owner has been kind enough to let our organization set up a base of operations in her home. This is in spite of her losing both her business and her husband in the disaster. Having come into contact with her and others like her, I can't help but be amazed at the kindness which these people display in the face of adversity.

The curfew is at nine, with 'lights out' at ten. I can't continue this entry any further because it's too dark to write. Our work begins early tomorrow.

August 6th, Ishinomaki

Dawn

I woke up at five this morning. Most of the other volunteers got up earlier than I did, though. Today, we'll be given our assignment for the week. The group of international volunteers which I am to lead will be going to the harbor. There, we will help the fishermen with their rebuilding effort. I'm not sure what kind of work that entails, but it's sure to be hot outdoors today. Everyone is very energetic and eager to begin work, however. I am anxious to begin helping people, too.

Breakfast today was a candy bar. I should have put more thought into what I packed.

Night

Today, we helped the fishermen. My particular group was sent by bus out into the distant harbors of the Ishinomaki peninsula. The bumpy ride over broken pavement and around collapsed shoulders took nearly an hour. When we arrived, we immediately went to work repairing fishing equipment: A sort of net, made of long strands of oyster shells, on which a type of edible sea barnacle- the "*Hoya*"- grows. The maturation of these barnacles takes about 4 years, according to the fisherman instructing us. Naturally, the tsunami washed away these fishermen's homes and equipment, but the nature of their crop means that they will continue to be financially affected for years.

We made a lot of progress today, despite a short thunderstorm in the afternoon. Our hosts, the fishermen, were kind enough to feed us a lunch of whale, pickled cucumber salad and other local foods. Dessert was watermelon. Many of the first-time volunteers were surprised by their hospitality, but I have come to understand that the locals of Ishinomaki are always like this. In spite of us being there to help them, they regularly help us.

August 7th

Morning

Last night was a bit cold, and I didn't sleep very well. So I was a bit late in waking up. Still, it's amazing how bright it is here in the mornings. Even at half past four, I already feel the need to wake up because of the sunlight outside. I didn't have time to bathe after work yesterday, so I am looking forward to going to the local bath house after today's work.

Today will be another day of helping the fishermen repair their equipment. We'll be leaving for

the peninsula soon.

Night

Today, my group of volunteers went to another fisherman's home. Or, rather, her property where her house used to stand. Since the disaster, she and her husband have built a workshop there to continue their work.

As we helped her with her *Hoya* trap-making, she told us how she escaped from the tsunami: She happened to be in her upstairs bedroom and, glancing out the window, saw tsunami washing over the roofs of homes in the distance. She managed to flee outside and up a nearby mountain. The mountain was on the leeward side of the wave, and it saved her life. Three of her neighbors had fled up the opposite side. They were caught in the swell of debris as it crashed up and over them.

Listening to her story, I stared at the mountain above her home where she had escaped. There was a line of dead trees thirty meters above her roof. This marked the high point of the tsunami. Seeing is believing, but I couldn't believe it. I could only guess from her story how terrifying it must have been.

For lunch, our hosts cooked for us once again. It was a local dish of curry with Japanese pumpkin. I was not expecting this for a second day in a row. And again, I wonder if our task is not to help these fishermen repair their traps and tools. Maybe we are here to make them feel like they aren't alone. If cooking supper for us provides them with that feeling, then I am only sorry that I can not do more.

After I came home from work today, I spoke to the leader of my volunteer organization. He has been here since the beginning. When I told him about my research, and how I planned on making the tsunami survivors the focus, he told me that what I am doing is important. The worst thing you can do in your situation is to become complacent about the suffering of others, he said. One thing that I was eager to ask him about was how the recovery was progressing. He replies that these are the hardest times for some who lost everything. A sense of normalcy is finally returning to many of their lives. The luxury of extra time which normalcy affords leads to thoughts of home, family and friends before the disaster. This leads to depression in many cases. And so, it has become his personal mission to permanently connect the members of our volunteer organization and the survivors of Ishinomaki.

Until now, I largely focused on the physical labor allotted to me, but now I know what my real task is: I need to listen to these people's stories closely and become a part of their live- even if its a very small part.

It's too dark for me to write any more.

August 8th

Dawn

I didn't sleep well last night. The man next to me- I haven't been able to learn or remember his name- spent most of the night tossing and turning. At one point, he flung his arm across me in his sleep, slapping me in the face. He is still asleep now, half inside of my bed. I decided to get up.

Outside, it is unexpectedly cold and overcast. It's nothing like the beautiful weather we had for our first two days. Today, they are calling for thunder and lightning. During my previous volunteer trips, rain meant cancellations. I hope that is not the case this year, especially now that I understand the motives behind this stage of our work.

Night

Today, I went to the same fisherman's home that I visited yesterday. This time, I was careful to spend time with them and pay close attention to their story of how they escaped the tsunami. Of the 150 homes that were originally in their village, only one was spared. All of the others were completely washed away. When they first escaped into the mountains, they were terrified that they may be the only survivors. Thankfully, some other families also made their escape by other mountain trails.

The fisherman's wife also told the tragic story of how her elderly mother-in-law lost her life in the tsunami. The couple had taken her to the local evacuation center; A large elementary school on a hill overlooking the ocean. Thinking to return home and prevent whatever minor flooding there might be, they were instead forced to run for their lives. They walked several hours through the mountain paths, only to discover something horrible: The evacuation center lay on ground that was too low and was completely destroyed by the wave. Several weeks later, on their mother's birthday, her body was found. Even this the couple considered a blessing, because the woman's face was relatively unmarred and easily identified. It was a difficult story to listen to. Those there who were present and could understand Japanese were moved to tears.

After work today, I crawled half-way up the mountain which the fisherman had used to escape. I stopped when I reached the concrete foundation of what was a tsunami warning siren. All that was left were some steel posts, cut off at the base by emergency workers. Even at this point, I was still standing 10 meters below the line of dead trees which indicated where the tsunami stopped. Inside the these

naked one could still see fishing lines, strings of buoys and nets tangled on branches 30 meters from the ground. Such an irresistible terror, a sheer alteration to geography and water, is difficult to fathom even when witnessing the aftermath. I don't know if I can ever understand how frightening the tsunami must have been.

August 9th

Morning

There was another small earthquake last night. We've been having a few this trip. I don't know if this is normal for this area to have almost daily quakes, or if this is a continuation of the 2011 earthquake. If the latter, I wonder just how long this will go on.

Today I feel raw and unrested. Yesterday's rain was not bad enough to cease work, but it was enough to give me a sore throat. Also, we have several very loud snorers in our group. They give the earthquakes a run for their money. I'll buy earplugs tonight.

Evening

Today, I finally had an opportunity to do something labor intensive: Gutter cleaning. For most of our trip, we have been in a cool, shady spot- sometimes indoors- repairing fishing equipment. To go outside, to work under the hot sun, to sweat and get sunburned, to get blisters and skin my knuckles on my tools; These are things I desperately wanted to do by our fourth and last day. Despite knowing that my real task here is not to dig gutters or fix nets, but to be here and listen to these survivors' stories, I feel an incredibly strong compulsion to physically exert myself, as if that could somehow ease the suffering of those around me. I know that is impossible, but it is a physical desire that I can't deny.

Night

Today was the last day of volunteer work. We celebrated by having dinner at a small restaurant near our lodging. The exertion and heat of the day made everything taste wonderful. Today was also significant because it was the Australian Benefactor's 27th anniversary. Instead of spending it together, they decided to come to Ishinomaki and volunteer. In our volunteer group, men and women must sleep separately. And so, they will spend their anniversary evening apart. The dedication that they have shown to Ishinomaki is inspiring, and I am glad to have met them. This is the Benefactor's fifth trip to Ishinomaki, and he says that he will come again in November. When he does, he wants me to come

again as his translator. I hope that I am able to come with him.

After coming home from the restaurant, the Japanese volunteers surprised the anniversary couple with a cake.

August 10th

Night

Yesterday was supposed to be my last day of work. That wasn't what happened. Early this morning, I told that I could volunteer to work at the "temporary survivor housing" on my appointed rest-day. I jumped at the chance, and that was how I spent my last day in Ishinomaki: Visiting people in their homes, cleaning for them, playing with their children, removing hornet nests from their roofs and- of course- listening to their stories.

Today I had one of my most emotional experiences since I began volunteer work. As my partner and I made our rounds through the housing unit, we came to the home of Mr. and Mrs. *Y*. Until now, our volunteer organization had no luck contacting them or getting them to answer the doorbell. Today Mrs. *Y* came to the door. She has suffered epilepsy and memory loss for the past ten years. She was only thirty-one when the symptoms began, but it cost her her job and her driver's license. When we first arrived, Mrs. *Y* had great difficulty in understanding who we were and why we were at her home. When we spoke, it sometimes took her minutes to respond because of the incapacitating medication her condition necessitates. But, at length, she found herself and began to tell us her story of her life following the disaster.

Her disability prevented her from escaping the tsunami, and the industrial chemicals in the water had harmed her when she swallowed some. Now, her husband works every day to rebuild their lives, but she is completely unable to go outdoors. Even in her condition, she said that she wanted to work using the nursing license which she earned earlier in her life. Her neighbors, however, have been less than understanding of her condition. Due to the close proximity of the temporary housing units, they have noticed that someone is always home at the *Y* household. This has led to misinformed rumors of Mrs. *Y* being a layabout, despite her obvious medical condition. The temporary housing community is very close knit, and even in her current state Mrs. *Y* is aware of and upset by these rumors.

Hearing this was too much to bear for me. When saying farewell, I grasped her hand and told her that I would write to her upon returning home. I don't want her to feel that she is alone in her struggle.

Tomorrow morning, at dawn, a bus will come for us. I will go back to Tokyo, and from there

take another long bus home. But I will return, I promise myself, and when I do I will visit Mrs. Y again.

Afternoon

Our bus ended up arriving five hours late, so we didn't leave Ishinomaki until noon. The new volunteers go off the bus looking very exhausted from their long journey. Without exchanging many greetings, we got on in their places and left. It was strange, but we are all part of the same effort and first time meetings are always awkward.

Now we're stuck in traffic an hour outside of Tokyo. It's the Obon Festival season, and everyone is rushing home to pray for their relatives and ancestors. It's raining, and the greens of the fields and pastures are dulled- if only slightly- by the overcast skies.

Coming back to Tokyo, one is struck by how different the small details of country life are. The bath houses in Ishinomaki left their doors and curtains wide open. Here, they're shut to prevent voyeurism. People in the countryside said "good morning" without fail. Here in Tokyo, commuters intentionally avoid one another's gaze. Despite being foreign, no one pays me any mind. This is the anonymity of the city, and it is a lonely feeling.

Here and now, I want to go back to Ishinomaki, or Kyoto, or Wakayama, or Shiga, or any of the other Japanese countrysides that I have known. They all feel like home to me. The people there make me feel so. I want to see them badly, and Ishinomaki has made me homesick for all of the mother figures and father figures and siblings and friends and lovers and that grandfathers and grandmothers that have passed away. Every time I return to them, my Japanese family grows, and the resulting desire to return to them when I leave grows likewise. They took in a family-less child like me, ignorant and full of anger at the hand I was dealt, and they taught me what I couldn't teach myself: Appreciate the life you are given. And that is why I will go to Ishinomaki again.

It's night time now, but Tokyo is still a tumult of life. My bus will come soon. It's time to go home.