

Our Nightingales' Song from Tohoku

Michael C. Brannigan

In Hans Christian Andersen's magical tale *The Nightingale*, when the Emperor of Japan learned that a beautiful nightingale who inhabits the forest was a guest in the Emperor of China's famous porcelain palace, he sent him a gift—a marvelous wind-up bird decorated with gems. By simply winding the key, this bird would sing a pattern of songs in predictable fashion. The Japanese emperor attached a note to his gift which read, 'The Emperor of Japan's nightingale is poor compared with that of the Emperor of China's.'

Why was the nightingale more precious than the wind-up bird? Because the nightingale is real, her song is real. She sings a song of truth, of 'those who are happy, and those who suffer; of the good and the evil hidden around you,' of joys and sorrow, of loss and despair, and of discovery, promise, and hope. In contrast, the wind-up bird's song is programmed and predictable. It carries no verse of the unexpected. Its song removes contingency. And life is filled with contingency, with the unforeseen, the unplanned.

We are all familiar with the nightingale's song of truth. The island archipelago of my homeland, Japan, certainly is. When I visited Japan this past January, I again heard the nightingale's song. The visit was part of my research exploring the relationship between a culture's worldviews, values, and beliefs, and its sense of community, and how this may influence how people in that culture face and recover from a disaster, whether the disaster is natural, technological, or human-incurred. Indeed, regarding the latter I'm writing this from Norway, a small country like Japan, traumatized by the 22 July 2011 mass murder of over 70 people—mostly youths—by a lone psychotic gunman. Here in Oslo, I've been meeting with key persons involved in the tragedy's aftermath.

As we all know, Japan's 11 March 2011 earthquake and tsunami has left an indelible impact, and recovery will be slow. Nonetheless, healing and renewal is steady and sure. My encounters during my visit have convinced me that Japan and her people will rise from the ashes, and, as in the past, will grow even stronger in spirit. This is because her culture's spirit of resilience rests on the strength of community. Those with whom I had the privilege of meeting embody this spirit, and from each of them I learned the nightingale's song of truth.

First, none of this would have been possible without the generous guidance and support of Kunio Aoki, the Executive Director of East Japan Railway Culture Foundation. Ever since I first met Kunio and his wonderful family in Scarsdale, New York, we've kept our friendship alive. When I shared with Kunio my thoughts of meeting with survivors, he offered his usual wise counsel. He and his expert assistant Mizuki Naito graciously accompanied me throughout my visit to the stricken Tohoku and Sendai region. Mizuki possesses that keen ability to discern the heart of our conversations. She offered her invaluable translation and interpretation in measured fashion.

Hiroko and Tono

Our journey began soon after the Global Alliance in Bioethics (GABEX) conference in Tokyo, an extraordinary international forum organized by my friend and colleague Professor Akira Akabayashi, who directs the University of Tokyo's Center for Biomedical Ethics and Law. Kunio, Mizuki, and I headed to the mountain town of Tono in Iwate Prefecture. Tono, Japan's Eternal Home, is rich in folklore and cultural heritage, a delightful town of hard-working people like Mr Sato, manager of the Tono Station Hotel *Folklore Tono*, who embodies the town's work ethic of persistence and hope. The 11 March earthquake had collapsed sizeable parts of the hotel, yet he managed to rebuild and strengthen this comfortable haven for his guests, some of whom were recovery workers who journeyed daily down the mountain roads to nearby devastated coastal towns.

Hiroko Suzuki greeted us upon our arrival in Tono. Hiroko manages Tono's traditional Furusato Village (<http://www.tono-furusato.jp>). The enchanting Village preserves the area's precious legacy of *Nanbu Magariya*, L-shaped homes where people and horses lived under the same roof during the Edo period. Hiroko herself experienced many losses in this disaster. Despite her loss, however, she exudes a soft, serene, and wise nature with which she blessed us and, in many ways, sustained me, as she joined us on our travels.

Hiroko sang the nightingale's song, and we learned many lessons. For instance, we learned how physicians in Otsuchi, immediately after the earthquake, left the safety of

their homes to be with their bedridden patients at Otsuchi City Hospital. Within minutes, they, their patients, and nurses were crushed by monster waves and debris. Through Hiroko and others, like JR East Manager Mr Kawaguchi and Tono citizen Mr Unman, we learned how Tono citizens were the lifeline to coastal survivors. Since the powerful earthquake knocked out power lines, the townspeople had no inkling of the massive tsunami until a young man from nearby coastal Otsuchi struggled for hours up the steep mountain terrain and informed them of the immeasurable disaster. Tono citizens then gathered together and climbed down the treacherous mountain slopes to bring water, food, blankets, and particularly umbrellas during this rainy season. Without hesitation, Tono townspeople lived up to the region's historic *Maburitto* (protectors) tradition. Although surrounding areas, roads, and buildings were damaged by the colossal earthquake, Tono citizens risked their safety to provide relief and comfort to their neighbors.

Akiko

Akiko Iwasaki is the vibrant, ever-positive and caring owner of Kamaichi's Houraikan ryokan (<http://houraikan.jp>). Houraikan, nestled by a hill behind trees that overlook Kamaichi's stunningly beautiful beach, was badly damaged when huge waves reached the inn's third floor. When we visited Houraikan, it had recently reopened due to the steadfast work of Akiko and her loyal staff. Akiko lost three of her staff to the waves. Her staff also lost loved ones. Despite their losses, they dedicate themselves entirely to the well-being of their guests and resurrecting Houraikan so that it can be a beacon of light and hope to all. When she spotted the waters receding after the earthquake, she knew the tsunami waves would arrive. She immediately directed her guests to leave their rooms and belongings and climb to higher ground behind her ryokan. Without her vigilance and selfless concern, they would have perished. Akiko herself was nearly swept away by waves and saved when someone's hand reached in and pulled her out of the surge.

Akiko's radiant confidence shines through along with her deep faith and humility. She taught us lessons of promise and hope. Through Akiko, we learned of the Kamaichi students who, without pause or instruction, took it upon themselves to carry younger students and nearby elderly on their backs to higher ground behind the school. From Akiko, we learned a priceless lesson—true community can only come

when we think in terms of 'we', not 'I'. Akiko speaks from her heart, "We cannot say 'I'm recovered' as long as others are not recovered... . We must keep that in mind."

Jin

Jin Imai is a young, reflective husband and father who now devotes his time to lead a growing band of volunteers to help rebuild his broken Otsuchi. He leads tour guides to show visitors places that have once thrived but are now gone, and reminds them that what is now gone will be rebuilt with collective energy through preserving community (<http://www.kenpokukanko.co.jp/knp/>). His message is simple: The town's future rests upon what preceded it. The devastation can never destroy the spirit of 'we,' of solidarity and community engagement.

He learned this lesson the hard way as he was nearly swallowed by raging waves at his heels as he ran furiously uphill with co-workers, some of whom were overtaken by the sea. He tells us that all he could think about during those moments was his family. How could his wife and young son take care of themselves without him? This drove him to race even harder. His responsibility to his family gave meaning to his flight and to his life—to live on, for them. As Friedrich Nietzsche reminds us, 'If there's a *why* to our existence, we can endure any *how*.' After escaping the sea, Jin spent two anguished days searching for his loved ones, finally finding them alive and well.

With his passionately intense eyes, the young Jin reminds us of this precious lesson: true community does not come from connecting with each other through artificial devices like cellphones, but from genuine face-to-face



Kunio, Bunzo Kanayama, Mizuki at planted rapeseed fields

(Author)



Rapeseed flowering in what was once devastated Otsuchi

(Hiroko Suzuki)

interpersonal connections. He shares this same lesson now with the many young volunteers working with him to rebuild their towns.

Bunzo

Generations separate Jin Imai and Bunzo Kanayama, but they share a quiet bond in their love for their community. Bunzo, a retired truck driver, watched helplessly as waves engulfed his home and adult daughter, and as infernos erupted throughout the drowned town of Otsuchi when fuel ignited from overturned vessels. Explosive fires scattered throughout the area, like the one that engulfed the Buddhist temple where villagers customarily sought sanctuary. Villagers trusting the Buddha's protection may have felt safe in that temple as it had protected them in the past. No one was prepared for a tsunami of this massive force. We learned from Bunzo how high numbers of casualties came from those in such customary evacuation sites.

In the months following this tragic experience, Bunzo felt called to inspire survivors with hope and promise of renewal. He did this by planting rapeseed flowers throughout the ravaged areas. Their yellow flowers would signal to survivors that life remains and that the future holds new beginnings, just as the color yellow symbolizes hope and life in Buddhist ceremonies. At first, Bunzo was a solitary figure daily planting his rapeseed flowers. But soon a band of youths joined him, and then a growing army of survivors of all ages toiled together with him in planting seeds of hope throughout the area.

Now, Bunzo and his dedicated band of volunteers organize an annual rapeseed flower festival in late Spring to honor the victims and to celebrate hope and renewal (<http://www.facebook.com/nanohanaPJS>). Just before I left

for Oslo, Hiroko sent me a photo she had taken during her visit to the festival. Beyond any doubt, Bunzo's charisma and quiet leadership continue to inspire survivors and their families with this message— The victims' spirits live on in survivors' hearts, and Otsuchi will live on in stronger bonds of community that cannot be broken.'

Bunzo's example embodies the lessons I've learned from all with whom I met. Hiroko, Akiko, Jin, and Bunzo are my nightingales. Their songs teach me the most important lesson—not only the truth of what *is* but what *can be*. That with happiness there is sadness, that

sorrow accompanies joy. But at the same time, when there is loss and grief, we ourselves can plant seeds of hope, love, and life.

I believe these are lessons the Japanese people know especially well. I remain forever grateful to my nightingale teachers. Let us never forget their song. ■



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