



## OIDEYASU!

# 3/11 — A KYOTO PERSPECTIVE

“Shikata Ga Nai,” or Simply Indifference?

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I traveled to Tōkyō last weekend. In Japan's capital, the hustle and bustle of city life has not changed since “The Great Tōhōku Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster of 3/11” almost four months ago. People moved about as quickly and as busily as ever. Over the loud-speaker, a pleasant xylophone tune notified commuters that the subway would soon be departing for various destinations. People rushed and ran, bumping into each other in order to get on the train before the automatic door shut.

When I first visited Tōkyō over a decade ago, the noises were louder and shriller. In the train stations, conductors blew their whistles for the final call before the trains took off. Over the years, the noise factor in the stations has taken a positive turn: Shrill tones have been replaced with soft, popular music tunes. In some stations recently, the subtle melody of bird-chirping lets passengers know they should quicken their steps if they want to get on their train.

I'm not sure what I was expecting when I arrived in Tōkyō. Whenever I talk with someone from abroad, there isn't anyone who does not express concern over the radiation situation. Many are also curious to know how the disaster has affected the country, its people and daily life. From a Kyōto perspective, I give the natural reply: “Things are fine here in Kyōto. It's as if nothing has happened.” My response has been met with wonderment, disbelief and skepticism. A friend in Germany exclaimed with a sense of doom, “We read about the catastrophe in the papers almost every day. Probably you and the rest of the Japanese people are in the dark about the true situation. Do you really want to stay in Japan regardless of the risk of all that radiation?” I laugh it off. “Kyōto is far away enough. We are not affected at all.” However, I said it not with a sense of relief, but rather a tinge of guilt.

I remember 3/11 as clearly as if it was yesterday. It will probably be one of those days that I will never forget. I was at a conference at the Kyōto International Center. The meeting ended shortly before 4 p.m. and I went downstairs to head home. In the common hall, people were gathered around a large TV set. Some of the women had their hands over their mouths as they watched, wide-eyed. I went closer and asked what had happened. A middle-aged man who worked for the center quickly informed me that there had been an earthquake in northern Japan. I watched the images on the screen as I listened to his explanation. There was a close-up of a large, dark wave. The man continued almost casually, “It's a tsunami.” I looked at the image again and then went outside and called my husband as I walked to the subway station.

“Did you hear that there was an earthquake in Tōhōku?” I asked. “No,” he replied. “They said it was a pretty big earthquake. Someone at the

center said that there was a bit of a shake here in Kyōto as well.” “I didn't feel anything. A while ago, there was a small clatter, but I thought it was just the wind.” “OK then, see you in a little while.” I put my cell phone in my pocket and purchased a train ticket, wondering what I should make for dinner. Little did I know that the evening ahead would be filled with news of one of the greatest natural catastrophes in Japan's modern history — an event that would change the face of the country. Or, would it?

The next day, I went to the supermarket. Growing up in Florida where, every year, we had to prepare ourselves for hurricanes and tornadoes, I expected to be part of masses of people clearing the store shelves of its nonperishable food items, water and batteries. Back in Florida, it had always been every man for himself. With this memory in mind, I rushed to the local supermarket here in Kyōto's northern district with alert eyes, ready to compete for the merchandise. As I neared the store, I found that there weren't many people and thought that perhaps I was already too late. I quickly grabbed a cart and entered the store. I scanned the shelves — full, orderly and intact — and observed the shoppers around me. They moved about normally, as if this day was no different from the last. I seemed to be the only one even partially roused. I composed myself and began moving like the rest of the crowd.

In private conversations with friends and acquaintances, we express worry and concern about the “people up north,” or “the victims in Tōhōku” in passing. At work, in schools and in the marketplace, it's as if all the images on TV were happening in another country.

About a week later, I purchased chicken at my usual spot in the open market on Omiya Street, one of the few long shopping streets with specialty mom-and-pop “hole in the walls” that date back a few generations of owners.

The elderly woman handed me my change as she smiled. “It should taste really good and fresh. I just got it in this morning.” I crinkled my nose and said, “Do you think it's OK for us to live our daily lives normally like this?” She shook her head and said in her soft Kyōto dialect, “It's really terrible what happened up north. My husband and I watched TV and we couldn't help crying for them. But ‘shikata ga nai’ (it can't be helped). We have to live our lives, don't you think?” I thought I saw a glimmer of moisture in her eyes.

“I wonder if it will be OK here in Kyōto with all the talk about the radiation leak.” She laughed softly, saying with certainty in her melodic tone, “You don't have to worry about that. Here in Kyōto, you are safe. Kyōto is really a special place. There was that terrible earthquake before in Kobe as well, but Kyōto was fine. We are surrounded by so many shrines and temples. The gods protect us here in Kyōto.” Having just read about the upcoming Gion Matsuri in July, an ancient festival that was conceived to appease

the gods after numerous deadly plagues and disasters had engulfed Kyōto, I wasn't so sure what to think.

My trip to Tōkyō last weekend was the first time I had ventured outside of Kyōto since the disaster. I wondered if I was living in a “bubble world” in the Kansai (Kyōto-Ōsaka region) area and got off the Shinkansen bullet train with a curious anticipation of visible changes. Immediately after the earthquake, the government had implemented various energy-saving methods in Tōkyō, such as shutting off electricity and rotating power by regions for a few hours at a time. As Japan enters the heat of summer, there has been great fear that the Kanto (Tōkyō region) area would face an energy shortage. On TV and radio, everyone was asked to do their share to conserve energy.

However, this time in Tōkyō I had to look for the changes with scrutiny. If I had no idea of the recent disaster, I wouldn't be able to tell a difference. There were small measures; for example, a few escalators in the back of the train stations were closed because foot traffic was lighter. In the center of the station, people still lined up long lines to ride the main escalators rather than using the stairs. In the convention hall where I was attending a conference, the restroom light functioned with movement sensor. The state-of-the-art Westernized toilet with its various Japanese “comfort” functions, such as a seat warmer, sanitary bidet water squirts and blow dryer for the delicate end part of our bodies had been turned off as was the electric hand dryer. In the smaller train stations, a few of the ticket machines were closed during the off-peak hours. But on the streets of Shinjuku, bright neon lights with advertisements still lighted the crowded city. Luxury brand stores such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci left their doors wide open with the air conditioner blowing full blast into the street. I moved with the crowd of window shoppers, bombarded with countless hawkers handing out pamphlets and flyers with advertisements for “all-you-can-eat” restaurants, bars, shops and high-interest loan companies. The fast-paced frenzy and noise overwhelmed the mind.

Now back in the quiet of Kyōto, I once again stroll down Omiya Street, shopping for my evening meal. The temperature is reaching almost a hundred degrees. It is hot and humid. As I walk past small shops — a women's boutique, a butcher shop and a rice store — I feel the crisp air blowing onto the street and hear the subtle droning of air conditioning. In front of the green tea shop, where the door stays open from morning until closing, there hangs a small donation box that reads, “Aid for Tōhōku disaster.”

Perhaps at the actual site where the disaster struck there is a different reality. But here and now, four months after the “life-changing” tragedy, I'm wondering, uncertain and perhaps a bit fearful: Is the feeling that the rest of us have to live our normal lives truly “shikata ga nai” or has it, in fact, become a sense of numbness and indifference? **HH**

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of “Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan.” While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of “Hidden Treasures.” If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she explained that “Oideyasu!” means “Welcome!” in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by e-mailing her at jackiejkim@hotmail.com.

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