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Theory and Other Dangerous Things

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The Earthquake Diaries

John P. Racine

Dokkyo University

At 2:46 pm, March 11, 2011 the Great East Japan Earthquake (東日本大震災) struck 70 kms off the coast of Tōhoku. The fourth largest earthquake in recorded history, along with its accompanying tsunami, left lasting impressions on all who survived. John Racine, a 15-year resident of Hitachinaka City, recounts his personal experiences in the days (Part 1) and weeks (Part 2) after the quake, and reflects on his life in Japan almost two years later (Part 3).

Part 1

Initial Shocks

Earthquakes are extremely common in Japan. Small earthquakes, that is.

I was in my 9th-floor office just outside of Tōkyō the Friday afternoon when the big one hit. The building is about 20 years old and was built – as most Japanese high-rises are – with earthquakes in mind. The earthquake-proofing here – or so I'm told – consists of a series of supports that extend as deeply into the ground as the building itself rises into the sky. That day they would be put to the test.

This quake began like all the others, as small shakes. Slight tremors typically recede in a few seconds and are followed by mild swaying as the anti-quake mechanism allows the building to wobble back and forth, rather than bend and – heaven forbid – break. But this time was different.

The shaking began – noticeably stronger than usual. This prompted many of us to walk to our doorways and peep out into the hall. No one was running down the stairs so we guessed we were ok. Without warning the shaking turned violent. Enormously heavy filing cabinets rocked back and forth like half-empty matchboxes. Bookshelves emptied in seconds. My clock smashed against the floor. I and others braced ourselves in our doorframes to avoid falling down. Now we couldn't leave even if we wanted to.

As quickly as it had begun, the worst of the swaying subsided and my now ashen-faced colleagues and I agreed that we should get outside immediately. We were weak-in-the-knees and a bit stunned. We barely noticed the broken water pipes dripping on us as we hurried downstairs.

We reached the ground floor and congregated in groups far enough from the building to feel safe from any debris that might fall. We were met by the sounds of sirens in all directions – later, the smell of fire and wafts of black smoke in the distance.

Someone was already watching TV on his cell phone. "That was a 7!" He exclaimed, referring to the value of the quake on the Japanese Scale.

The Japan Scale measures the actual amount of shaking in a given region rather than the overall strength of the quake. The overall strength in this case was a magnitude 9.0 on the Richter Scale, ranking it in the top 5 worst earthquakes in the history of the world right behind the Great Sumatra earthquake of 2004 that had unleashed its infamous tsunami.

I was thinking to myself, "So that's what a 7 feels like", when someone repeated, "That was a 7 in Miyagi."

Miyagi rang in my ears and I went white. Miyagi Prefecture is 300 km north. My wife

Racine, J. (2012). The earthquake diaries. *OTB Forum, 5*(1), 78-84.

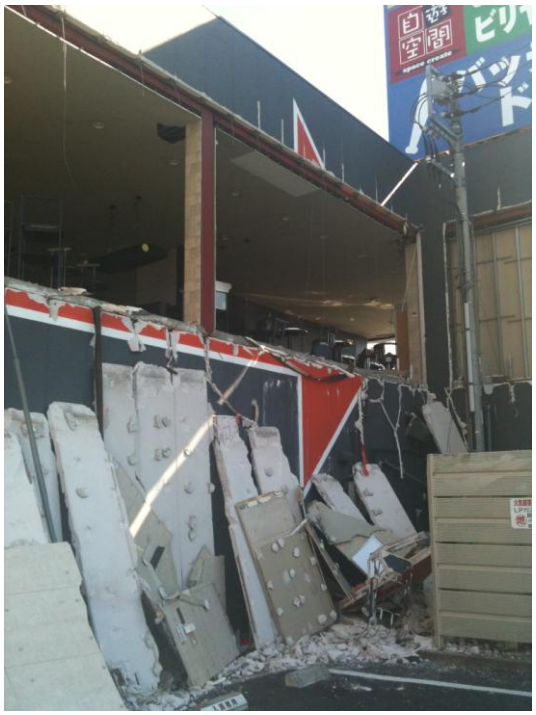
works near our home 150 km north of where I was. I frantically began dialing from my cell. No connection. I tried texting and email. No response. I couldn't tell if my messages had gone through or not. That was to be my darkest hour.

Meanwhile we were told that we were still too close to the building and were asked to move quickly to the playing field. Repeated tries on the phone. Still nothing.

One of the larger aftershocks hit and I watched as the entire campus did a simultaneous two-step to avoid falling. The aftershocks continued constantly, as did my attempts on the phone. Everyone looked deeply concerned, but we were glad we were no longer nine stories up. We were alive and unharmed.

A Ray of Hope

I couldn't wait around any longer. It had been an hour-and-a-half since the quake hit and I still had not heard anything from my wife. I should get my things from the office and get moving. A security guard blocked my way. Just as he was telling me that the building had not been declared safe, a ray of hope appeared in the form of my vibrating pocket – my wife's message had made it through the network congestion.



In fact, two messages had piggy-backed their way through the system. The first was checking on my safety. The second one was a response to my "are you ok". It said, "Not really, but I am still alive." I know my wife well enough to assume she has been shaken up, but not injured. To be on the safe side, I sent a confirmation message. I knew the response would be slow to arrive, so I started heading for home. I left work at around 6:00 pm.

The Heart of Darkness

The tracks were torn up in many spots and all train lines had been halted. I was fortunate to have my car at the office that day. I knew the highway would be jammed but I didn't know that my hour-and-a-half drive home was about to become an 8-hour ordeal.

The highways were all closed. People were fleeing the Metropolis to check on their loved ones further north. The side roads remained bumper-to-bumper as we crawled along at a snail's pace through the night.

I was hungry and had planned to stop at a convenience store for a light dinner, but now there were no stores. Beyond the endless row of red and white lights, all was black. I hadn't anticipated blackouts. After all, even with the pipes leaking overhead, I had left the office with the lights on and the computer running.

So there were no shops open and no traffic lights to facilitate the northward exodus. It was becoming dark in the figurative sense too. I began to understand how Capt. Willard must have felt on his way up the Mekong.

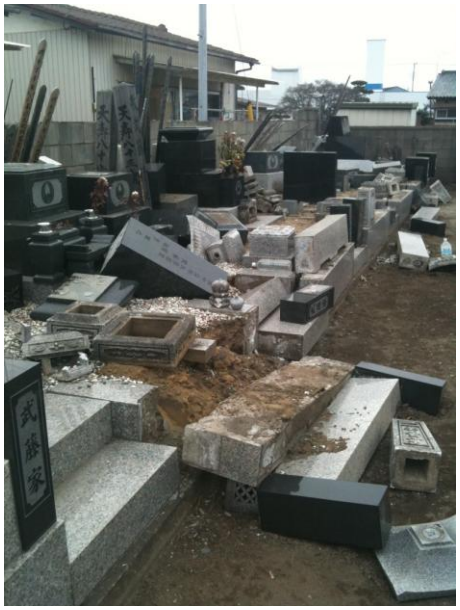
Besides the blackouts, I began to see the first signs of the devastation that lay further ahead. First there were cracks in the road. They were stained with white powder where the asphalt had ground against itself, turning to fine white sand. Later the cracks were bigger where the paving had been pulled apart and there were ridges where the ground had been forced upwards. The bridges no longer met solid ground as they had before. Each began with a shocking bump. Of course not all of them were still standing.

I came to Ishioka, a small city in Ibaraki Prefecture surrounded by rice fields. The bridge was out and we were forced to detour through the town. In places crushed brick and rock lined the roads. Wide fissures in the asphalt here, sinkholes there.

Then there were the people. Salarymen who had ridden trains their whole lives were tiredly walking through the night to get home. Couples and coworkers were still wearing safety helmets issued at their offices as they forged onwards in the dark.

Home Again

I got home at 2:00 am. My house was standing, but not all in my city were as lucky. The Korean restaurant on the corner was now thrown onto the sidewalk. Tombstones littered their graveyards.



I pulled into the driveway. I thought all was silent except for my car cooling off from its 8-hour trek. Then I heard the neighbours' car engine. I could see the family in the car. I asked Mrs. Saitō if everyone was ok. She said they were all safe but the inside of their house was too ruined to find a place to sleep. At least the car had heat.

I fumbled for my key in the dark and unlocked my front door. In the complete black of the entrance way I felt around inside a cupboard for a flashlight. I got my hands on it and begin to explore the house.

I could see that the medicine cabinets had been opened. Their contents were thrown into the sinks. At first, I didn't know what I was looking at on the kitchen floor. I realized after a while that the crushed silver box was the microwave oven, upside down and broken.

For the most part, the anti-quake cupboards had done their job. Their magic latches had held themselves closed so only a few of our dishes were broken.

I headed upstairs, but I couldn't enter the office. There was no place to stand; every inch of floor space was littered with books, CDs, and paper. I see the smashed picture frames on the floor and realize I am standing in broken class. This is a Japanese house so I had removed my shoes. The rest of the exploration would have to wait till daylight.

I should go find my wife now.

To City Hall

I was back on side roads heading north again. The sporty wheels of my Cooper S hit the cracks and ridges hard but I continued through the darkness.

My wife is a city employee and had to work through the night at the local town hall. I arrived and pulled open the "automatic" doors by hand. I pulled them closed behind me to keep the night air off the newly homeless who had wrapped themselves in blankets and were lying on the floor the entire length of the front counter.

I found Yuko huddled under a blanket. She was still on duty, but resting and trying to nap. She had been serving water, tea, crackers, and cold rice to the stranded and homeless all night long. She was tired, but safe. Our eyes widened and we made a beeline for each other. She told me how she had thought she was going to die during the quake. Tears welled up and we embraced.

She had done the wise thing by getting under her desk when everything in her office was being tossed about. She thinks if she hadn't, she would have died or been injured. Some of her colleagues hadn't been as wise and now had the head injuries to prove it.

All the prime floor space was already occupied, so I went back to the car to sleep. Yuko went back to her corner. It was 3 am.

The Next Day

The next morning, I awoke to find myself behind the wheel of my car. Yuko got permission to leave work for a

while and I took her back to look at the house.

As expected, nothing was where it once was. Stone lanterns in the garden had been toppled, as had all the appliances and bookshelves inside. As we were looking about, there was a knock at the door. Actually, we weren't sure at first that it was a knock at all. It was the first time a caller hadn't used the doorbell. We still had no power.

We were happy to discover Mrs. Saitō at the door. She had brought us hot noodles, courtesy of her generosity and her propane stove. She told us that water was available at the local junior high school. After we ate, we took some bottled water and snacks to Mrs. Saitō, but she refused to accept.

Water

We gathered some empty pop bottles we had planned to recycle and headed towards the school.

We arrived to see the single longest line I've ever seen. It surrounded the entire school grounds and then snaked back and forth through the middle, covering the entire area of the field. There must have been 10,000 people there. It was as if they were going to a concert, but there was only one entrance to the arena.

We waited for two hours until a man with a bullhorn informed us that a water truck had finally arrived. Everyone was relieved until he added that it was only a 2-tonne truck and that supplies would be limited to 2 litres per person. I did the math and realized that only the first 1000 people would be served. Others too, realized that there would not be enough to go around. We, and many others, decided to return home empty-handed. No one rioted. No one panicked. No one was discourteous.

Yuko went back to work serving the needy late into the night. I caught up on my sleep.

Day 3

My birthday. And there was reason to celebrate: The electricity was restored at noon. The Internet was up and running and I was able to let everyone know that I was alive and well. The phone worked now too, and I soon received a call from External Affairs in Ottawa. My government was able to confirm my safety.

More birthday cheer: Mrs. Yoshimoto from across the street told us that she had a well-water spout at her house and that we and our neighbours could help ourselves. No more trips to the junior high. No more long lineups.

In the days that followed, aftershocks were continual and the sirens never ceased. We still had no water and rotating blackouts were to recur throughout the day. But we were grateful.

We know we had been lucky. Further north complete devastation reigned: Entire cities had been leveled by the quake, razed by the subsequent fires, and crushed under the tsunami. Sixty percent of entire town populations were unaccounted for. Death tolls rose hourly.

Closer to home, we wait and watch the ongoing struggle to contain the crippled nuclear reactors in Fukushima. We are prepared to evacuate if necessary.

But, for now at least, we are grateful to have our house. We are grateful for the kindness and generosity of our neighbours. We are grateful to be in a society where courtesy trumps selfishness and where patience triumphs over chaos. We are grateful to be alive and grateful to have each other.

Part 2

The Truth about Inconvenience

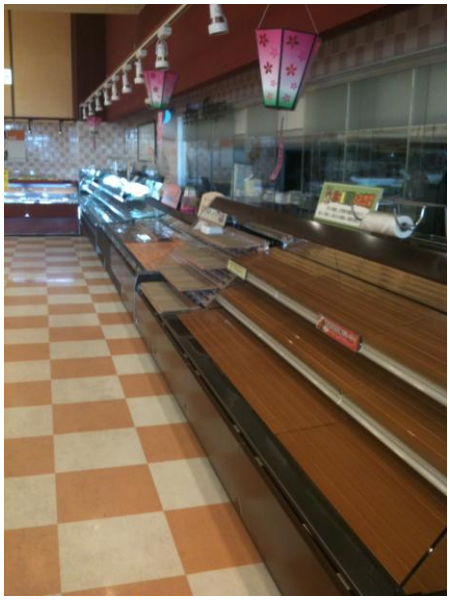
Nothing is easily done now. Even walking is difficult.

In this part of Japan private properties are typically surrounded by walls of concrete blocks. Those that haven't collapsed, now have handwritten signs hung on them saying

KIKEN – Danger. They're weak and an aftershock could bring them down. You can't get too close to the houses either. The characteristic Japanese roof tiles rain down after each aftershock. And while you're looking up, watch your step. The sidewalks are no longer flat.

You could drive, but there is no gas. Many stations have already sold out. Others are rationing. Then why are all these people sitting in their cars with the engines idling? They're lining up for gas. You couldn't have guessed that since you can't even see the nearest gas station from this part of the line.

In fact, it is at the front of the line that the absurdity of our situation is truly witnessed. This station isn't even open. There are people sitting for hours simply hoping that the tank truck will arrive that day. Others who are running on empty park in front of the gas stations the night before and wait for them (hopefully) to open in the morning. Since tracks are twisted and station platforms have crumbled, Japan's preferred mode of transport is also out of the question.



But even if we could travel, there is really no place to go. Most stores and restaurants haven't reopened yet. Without water it's difficult to stay in business.

The tiny mom-and-pop western restaurant out on the corner has somehow managed to reopen. They've carried water from who-knows-where in heavy jugs. With all the supermarkets closed they only have enough supplies to make curry. On a regular day, I would be complaining about the small portion and the taste. Today though this is one of the greatest meals I've ever had.

Generally speaking, it is safer to stay home. But cooking is almost impossible without supermarkets, convenience stores, and most importantly, water. Having the electricity restored opens up a lot of possibilities. Unfortunately, our oven was destroyed in the quake and the appliance stores haven't reopened yet. Even if you had the ingredients and the facilities to cook, you wouldn't be able to wash your dishes. Ten days after the quake that means a lot of dishes piled up. Given the continual aftershocks, anything involving tall piles is not ideal.

When it comes to water, the kitchen is far from the most drastically affected room in the house. I had a shower last week. I drove 120 km to have it. No way to do laundry. No way to wash your hands. No way to flush the toilet. You would not believe how much water is involved in a single flush until you've carried it from down the street.

People are very tired and stressed from this lifestyle. They want a hot bath. They are tired of the smell of human waste in their homes. They are tired of their own smell.

Of course none of these inconveniences compares to the struggles further north. We are not happy about the closed roads, the lack of water, the nonexistent train service. But our house is standing. Our city is mostly standing. The mayor, the city council, and all the people who work hard to fix these things are all still alive. Our friends and family are all safe. We have much to be grateful for here. Things will get better eventually. So many others are not as fortunate.

Dream of Water

During the night of Day 10 I dreamt we had water. In the dream I turned on the tap just as I had dozens of times in the previous week and a half. This time though water came out. It was tropical green in the dream, and so inviting.

Mizu ga deru yo! "We have water!" My wife said, waking me from my wishful sleep. Yuko had got up before me and had discovered the good news. Like a kid on Christmas morning I jumped out of the futon and ran to the washroom. We did have water, just not very much of it. Even if all the mains had finally been repaired, I imagined this trickle was the result of an entire city simultaneously running hot baths.

Actually, I had had a bath the night before. Water had been restored in the town next to ours that day, so we had driven to Yuko's sister's house for a hot shower. "If you want the bus to come," my grandmother used to say, "light a cigarette."

On Day 12, we are still hoping that the flow will increase to the point where a shower would become possible. I wait at the faucet like Hachikō awaiting his master.

Things Are Not Normal

The situation is still surreal to me. When I see the damaged homes and streets, the scenes are familiar. I have seen them on television after natural disasters have occurred elsewhere in the world. I'm continually shocked when I come to realize these scenes are actually around my own home. I've walked down these streets a hundred times before and they've never looked like this.

Twelve days after the quake and we are still longing for running water to be restored. It is not merely a matter of comfort or convenience, or even of hygiene. Water represents a potentially giant leap towards normalcy. More so than the presence of ample gasoline, running trains, repaired homes, and repaved roads combined, running water would go so far in allowing us to feel normal again. Or would it?

The aftershocks serve as constant reminders that Eastern Japan is still suffering. It has experienced a horror the magnitude of which arises only once in a millennium. Exhausted, 100 million say to themselves "Not again", after each tremor. We wait for the slowly subducting Pacific plate to normalize relations with the Japanese archipelago.

Other things will certainly not be normal again. The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, for example, will never be operational again. After the absence of running water, Daiichi's ailing reactors remain the single largest obstacle on our road to normalcy. Teams of specialists continue to work around the clock, fighting to stabilize conditions at four of the six reactors.

Life and Death

Of course the battle to contain the reactors in Fukushima is a continued source of worry. The idea that evacuation may still be necessary raises life and death issues. I find myself making decisions that I have never been forced to consider before.

I have a bag with bottled water, snacks, a flashlight, batteries, and our passports ready to go. I've given serious consideration to such issues as which car to take if things go really bad. In the event of a Hollywood-scale science fiction exodus, blocked roads, and apocalyptic panic – Should I go with the SUV or the compact? I hope I am not forced to reach a decision any time soon.

And where would we go? Towards my office where we'd have a place to stay far (enough?) away from the calamity? Or would it be better to go straight to Narita? Should I close all the vents before abandoning the house? What would I do if I'm separated from my wife? I hope I never need a firm answer to these questions.

So a potential nuclear catastrophe looms over us like a specter from the Cold War. It's as if Khrushchev is standing between us and the resumption of our regular lives.

Meanwhile, the sensationalist tendencies of the 24-hour news cycle merely exacerbate tension. It's clear that ratings are more important to Western media sources than the dissemination of correct information. Given the extreme conditions, however, even words of caution ring of danger.

The government has now warned us away from locally grown greens and milk. The

mind boggles at how dangerous this food must be. Given our crippled supply lines, they would never choose to ban these products unless they posed a serious threat, would they? Indeed, amounts of radioactive iodine had registered above the legal limit in these products.

The good news is that legal limits are set with human safety in mind. One would have to eat irradiated Ibaraki spinach every day for a year to accumulate the amount of radioactivity of a single CAT scan. And you'd have to drink 58,000 glasses of Fukushima-produced milk to increase your lifetime risk of cancer by even 4%. If you want to live dangerously, you will have to drink a glass of that stuff every morning for the next 160 years.

But we continue to abide by the safety warnings from our government. We continue to follow the news for the facts and continue to ignore the chaff. We continue to wince as wave after wave of aftershock rattles our houses and our nerves. And we continue to closely monitor the reactors in Fukushima. We continue.

Part 3

Aftershocks: Looking Back

While piecing this story together almost two years later, I am reminded of how frail life can be.

Within the first month after the quake, our region was rocked by almost 400 aftershocks, including more than 70 with a magnitude of 6.0 or greater. Each one was a rattling reminder of how deeply and drastically our lives had been affected and could be affected again at a moment's notice. But now the aftershocks are weaker and less frequent.

Other things, however, got worse before they got better. Not the least of which was the nuclear situation in Fukushima. The classification of the Daiichi plant accident was raised to a Level 7, marking it as the worst nuclear incident in Japanese history and placing it alongside Chernobyl in terms of its possible impact on the environment. Increased radiation levels led to a series of bans on local produce, gutting the fishing industry and drying up agriculture.

Local roads will never be quite the same again either. What municipal budget allows for the repaving of an entire city? Every bump and burrow is a reminder of what our city endured. Most local residents have repaired their homes. But those of lesser means still have blue plastic tarps making due where their roof tiles once were.

I'm happy to say that the media, even the western media – which could fairly be accused of fear-mongering during the darkest days after the quake – have also reported much good during the months that followed. News sources publicly acknowledged the brave efforts of Dr. Takeshi Kanno who was able to save dozens of his patients before the tsunami ravaged the Shizugawa Public Hospital in Minami Sanriku. Another kind of bravery was reported in stories about Minami Soma Mayor Katsunobu Sakurai who used YouTube to alert the world to the plight of his town when federal authorities failed to act decisively. There have also been countless stories of generosity extended from local communities all across Japan to those displaced from their hometowns. And there has been deeply moving coverage of those returning to Tohoku to survey the damage. And to mourn the dead.

Closer to home things have slowly but surely returned to normal. Nine months after the quake we were informed that Fukushima had been "brought under control". In time, food bans were lifted. Industry has resumed. Worries have receded. My wife and I are now parents to a healthy and happy baby girl born 16 months after the quake. Life does go on.

Memories fade, but never completely. Everyone in eastern Japan on 3/11 will surely carry their own earthquake diary within them for the rest of their days.

About the author: John Racine is a Lecturer in the Interdepartmental English Language Program at Dokkyo University. For more of his thoughts on life after the earthquake see: http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/all-about-alumni/john-p-racine-a-year-in-the-quake-zone-japan/