

## Diary from Sendai, Japan (Part II)

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*Some homes and neighborhoods were damaged more than others.*

When the floor and walls had stopped twisting and jolting, there was a woozy, slow swaying of the ground. Neither clearly horizontal, vertical or periodic, it produced an odd sensation something like standing on solid ground after days or weeks at sea.

I called to my wife Chiaki again. Finding that she was unhurt, I trotted out into a light snowfall and headed toward the nearby elementary school, where I imagined I'd find my daughters Tina and Elena enjoying a break from classes out

on the playground. I do not know why my first thought wasn't a desperate need to see and protect them immediately. I didn't run, but strolled down to the school, hands in pockets, jingling keys.

As I moved through the street, I stepped over small compressed ripples and ruptures in the pavement everywhere. I saw fine but serious-looking structural cracks in walls, scrambled roofing tiles and broken windows. Some homes were spared damage, some not. No one was calling out. I saw no one on the street. And the light dusting of snow dampened all noise.

At the playground, the children were filing out of the five-story building in orderly fire-drill style. It was freezing cold and snowing after having been warm in the morning, so no one had dressed warmly enough. I walked around the assembled group of about 200 students and felt a bit frustrated as I couldn't find my daughters, or even identify any of the kids I know. None smiled or waved at me as they usually do.

They were difficult to distinguish, and not just because they were each wearing a standard-issue silver-gray fire retardant head covering. There was something else common in their appearance. Every kid had the same mask-like facial expression – a thousand-yard stare that is astonishing to see on a child.

I finally identified Elena, my seven-year-old and went to hold on to her and maybe clown around a little to cheer her up. She was shivering, so I tried to give her my coat. She said, "I'm not shaking because I'm cold, it's ... that ..." and she couldn't describe it. It dawned on me then that these kids were all in shock, probably for the first time. I made her put on my jacket, and we held on to each other as we squatted on the sandy turf.

The lazy swaying of the ground began again and we looked across the playground, watching long, low, quick swells pass across the surface, and the ground vibrated like gel as aftershocks came through. Sometimes the ground seemed to rotate slightly, as though the playground were a bowl of pudding with us at the center, and it being twisted back and forth by someone gripping the circumference. This is impossible, of course, even in an earthquake. And yet there it was.

When one of these weird contortions would occur, whatever teacher or school official was addressing the assembly would pause briefly and uncertainly before bringing the megaphone back into speaking position. It was only a slight hesitation in what was really a seamlessly professional, well-drilled conduct of the safety procedures. Yet I couldn't help noticing it. I'd seen it somewhere before and decades ago, in a crowd – was it a plane crash? A traffic accident? A fire? I couldn't remember.

We heard a series of explosions, softly in the distance. But while seeing the solid ground turn liquid before our eyes, were beyond concern about what these might be.