

Voices of women

From the City of Ishinomaki, Miyagi prefecture where affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011

September 2015

Prologue

On March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake caused massive damage where the earthquake and Tsunami destroyed many valuable homes, buildings, assets and took many precious lives. Reconstruction and restoration are progressing a little by little in the City of Ishinomaki in Miyagi prefecture as in the other cities that were also damaged, changing the view of the city with road work, new construction and restoration of factories, companies, stores and building new homes. However, there are piles of unresolved issues even after five years such as construction of public housing for the victims, land development of residential areas, preparation of higher ground to relocate homes, etc. Despite all these, people must continue their living everyday and the time continues to pass without mercy.

How about things that are not visible to our eyes? Since immediately after the disaster, what “disaster victims” are thinking, what are they experiencing? Especially what women are feeling, those women who are forced to live with restrictions without any restoration in their lives? I decided to record voices of these women on their experience with the disaster.

My conversations with these women ranged from 10-minute talks on the street to 30-minute conversations over tea to over two hour interviews by formerly sitting. I started this project in March 2014, three years after the disaster. 20 women first, whose age, living condition, level of suffering were all different. Not a single person was living the same life as someone else’s, had the same experience nor same thoughts or feelings.

Every one of these 20 women is a special existence, living a pre and post disaster life. I hope to convey something to the future from the words of these women by feeling something from their stories. May be we can relate to or see ourselves overlapped with some of these 20 lives.

1) Ms. AB (a woman in her 60's)

March 2, 2014

After three years passed since the disaster, I just began to be able to have hope. When I learned my son (40's) had a desire to take over our oyster farming business and open a coffee shop during the summer time, I could have a positive feeling. I had been in the state of mind where I couldn't feel, see or think about any future. But my son's words made me change.

Before the disaster, we were running a bed and breakfast in our stone warehouse what had been renovated. This was our dream of long years. We were practicing green and blue tourism. Conservation issues and protection of nature were our biggest interest and we had many dreams. We've offered various workshops and tours by utilizing mountains, rivers and ocean such as fishing and oyster farming experience, crafting with sea shells and fishing nets, walking through the mountain, etc. We also cooked and served to customers what my husband brought back from the sea and ate and talked with them. My husband's trade was a fisherman and oyster farming. Tsunami destroyed our bed and breakfast, and my husband lost equipment and machinery for the farming, a fishing boat, everything.

We moved to temporary housing. After the disaster, my husband was hospitalized for brain infarction and mother passed away. My husband is working very hard now believing in himself "not to be defeated". He goes out to the ocean from early morning, fishes with a new boat and started farming oysters again. My son's desire is making us move forward.



Daffodils bloomed right after the disaster in 2011

2) Ms. CD (a woman in her 60's)

March 29, 2014

I bring back the memory of the disaster from time to time. After the disaster, I used an old style heater to warm ourselves and cooked food. I also used an electric heater. I walked a lot, rode a bicycle and drove a car, and felt you needed physical strength. I felt it was important to live healthy on a daily basis. I cooked miso soup for volunteers and acquaintances who rushed to come to help us. I'd like to pay attention to the environment of the earth. I have been opening my house that had been repaired after the disaster, to the community to organizing a gathering of elderly from the neighborhood. Through these gatherings, I hear about when the disaster hit and find myself learning something new for the first time. For example, how our cat was doing. I realized the importance of interaction with neighbors including checking on each other by saying something. If you let your neighbor know when you are leaving the house, you don't even need to lock the door.

I feel "I'm forced to live. To live is being forced to live." I didn't become a victim of Tsunami but something in me changed due to the disaster. I feel much stronger now that "I must do something." Not just by my own will but for those who lost their lives. Among people who lost lives, some lived on a higher ground but were happened to be at the ocean front on that day or escaped to a higher ground but returned home to a lower ground. Some People I know evacuated and survived by being beckoned by strangers. I think about the difference between those who survived and those who lost lives. Why did I survive? I feel like I've been told to "do something" for others. I ask myself what separates life and death when we were in the same place at the same time under the same condition. Maybe a true nature of a person will show up at the time of the disaster. I think about human nature, a way of life, and want to think about "moving forward".

I no longer attached to physical goods. My values on what's important have changed. Connection with people, relationship with neighbors, words and actions in consideration of others are important, and quietly extending your hand for those needed and expanding your imagination seem to be of importance. Having various experiences will make your life rich and kind. What you need will come when it's needed. Take care of the nature. The ocean returned black stinky slime back to us. I felt happy and our hearts were one when three of us, my husband, son and I (plus three cats) lived in a small room on the second floor of the house, which was saved from water. We lived with candles and battery operated light. Getting up with the sunrise and going bed after sunset. We humans should change the way we live. Do not think what we don't have but think what we have. Nature will heal itself. We are taking over our friend's coffee shop which had been closed since the disaster and starting our new business by August 2014.

3) Ms. EF (a woman in her 70's)

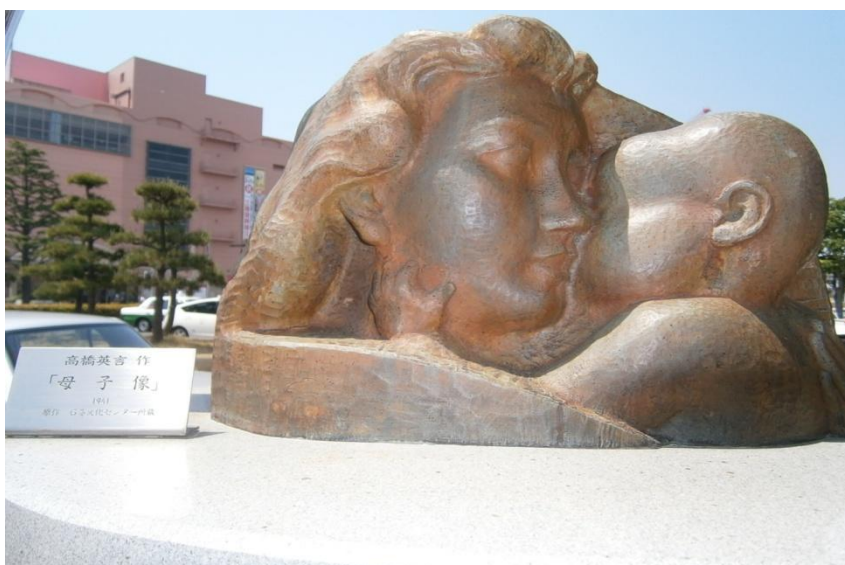
April 13, 2014

The Tsunami came to the floor of my shop where I was selling pizzas cooked in a wood oven. That pizza oven was intact, so I cooked meals and provided to people who came to evacuate even when there were no gas or electricity. I was 10 years old at the time of Great Tokyo Air Raids during World War II. I remember a big red burning fire, falling incendiary bombs and the school evacuation accompanied by the 6th graders. At the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake, I quickly remembered that Great Tokyo Air Raids. Given the condition of that war, I feel this can be managed. I think I'm fortunate, living alone feeling easy with my own pace. I feel it can be managed because I'm just by myself.

One time, I stayed at a shelter and my landlord's but returned to my shop after 4 days and continued to live there. The road to my house was cut off and I couldn't go home. But I didn't feel sad or bitter. Customers stopped by and that encouraged me to feel "I want to reopen my shop quickly." However, I wondered if it were ok for me to reopen my shop when other shops around were still closed.

I'm very thankful for my parents, thank you for giving me a healthy life, thank you for raising me. When my husband passed away five years ago, I still wanted to continue our shop. The shop was primarily run by my husband then, and now I'm running it by myself. Since God saved this shop in this disaster, I'd like to continue the shop and live independently. It may be my fate. Relatives and children were all very kind to me, having made me realize I couldn't live alone. It's important to interact with people on a regular basis. I'm encouraged by meeting with positive people as a good example.

When the disaster happened, I was in my shop and started to head home. However, something stopped me and I turned around to return to the shop. People who continued on the same road became victims of the Tsunami. There may be a fork in the road in someone's life. The great earthquake, I wonder what that was. When it's rough or sad, I try to think of it as a fate. I want to live tomorrow just like I did for today. Different types of customers come to my shop. I once witnessed that two ladies who were fighting before the disaster unexpectedly encountered each other in my shop and made peace.



"Mother and Child" statue by Eikichi Takahashi

4) Ms. GH (a woman in her 70's)

April 17, 2014

I feel "Thank you" for having a chance to encounter with a disaster that happens only once in a thousand years. I could experience something that occurs once in a thousand years! I was six years old when World War II ended. The war was much harder. It's no use feeling sad. Why people are throwing away things that became dirty by the Tsunami when those things can be used again once washed? Throwing away because you can buy them again is so wasteful. The apartment building I owned was totally destroyed. I want to quickly provide a new housing that meets the expectations of my tenants. If people stay and continue to live, it will also accelerate reconstruction of the city.

I'm volunteering to teach tea ceremony for the tea ceremony club at a school. After the disaster, young students quickly came to help me. I felt generous hearts that money couldn't buy and repayment for my volunteer work. You can recover fast by changing the way you think and handle matters, valuing meeting with people and holding yourself firm. During these three years, I felt there was a difference in speed of recovery in people based on the difference in the way they lived their lives. I returned home from a shelter on the fourth day, determined to rebuild my apartment building and applied for a loan. There are things you can do only because you experienced the Tsunami such as contributing to the community. My husband passed away when I was 53. It's important to change yourself. It's a pleasure to serve others and others will return a favor to serve you, too. I hope to build my house disaster proof for which there is a subsidy by the city.

The tea chest was floating on the water among waves that attacked the first floor of my house. Inside the chest was an expensive tea cup for the tea ceremony. Kimonos were safe for being on the second floor. As a matter of fact, during the week before the disaster, I was preparing for a large tea ceremony (the first one for the New Year), put the only expensive tea cup in the tea chest and placed the chest in the alcove. When I saw this tea cup that survived the disaster, I had an instinct of having "a tea ceremony that can only be offered by me". I felt something was protecting me. You can manage goods and money. I know life will end eventually. I've learned many things from practicing the tea ceremony. I wanted to live for myself during my 50's but for my 60's, I want to live for others by passing the teaching of the tea ceremony to the next generations. The disaster allowed me to experience many things.

Three years later, there are many people with an empty heart. It varies person to person but I believe it's the individuals who need to overcome the disaster. I think how to utilize my life, how to recover and be needed by others, and I want to live my life in my own way. After 2014, I think mental health care is going to be needed. It's important to always have a sense of "self" and not expect a reward. If you raise a child or animal, you will grow with them, too. Having established "self" will enable you to accept others and excuse them. If you are emotionally independent, you have a chance to catch luck. Polish yourself, don't envy or hate others. Also as important is to have financial independence, dignity and grace, know what's adequate for you. Have a purpose in life and think how to live. I think about my mental attitude, how to live every day, relationship, etc.

5) Ms. IJ (a woman in her 30's)

April 27 2014

I thought women were tough to take action immediately and were able to quickly change emotional gears. When living was still difficult with lack of food due to debris and slime, women wanted a haircut, to be clean, to be pretty, and came to my beauty salon. Women after the disaster grew more gray hair and lost more hair, and some of them cut their long hair very short. Women wanted a short hair in anticipation of days when they might not be able to wash hair.

Customers were very happy to receive hair lotion or skin care products. In the midst of emergency, women were concerned about their hair and skin care to overcome rough skin and dry hair. White lilac flowers in front of my salon bloomed for the first time in three years despite the Tsunami. I adore these flowers that once were washed by the sea water. I adore customers who come to enjoy chatting, bringing some sweets, probably to have some healing time. I, too, was encouraged and supported by talking with and working on these customers.

At the shelter, I built new relationship with my new neighbors and felt very thankful for being Japanese. On the fourth day after the disaster, a flood of support goods started to come in. I felt very thankful for volunteers. I got married in 2012.



Spring 2014

6) Ms. KL (a women in her 70's)

April 29, 2014

On the day of the disaster, I invited a family into my house, who came to refuge to a park near my house. Four days later, my son's family and relatives came, a start of a community life of five families. We cooked rice porridge with a desk top portable stove, saw the burning sky reflecting a burning elementary school building, and took turn in getting water. After the disaster, I received a letter to my surprise. I met people I had never imagined for meeting and feel "connection" is very interesting. I've talked about serious topics such as "life and death" or "view of life" with many different people. What is richness as a human being?

As I've been teaching picture letters (drawing pictures on postcards, letters, etc. that you send to people), I started receiving them from my group members all over Japan. And, I distributed picture letters of Japanese round fans that I received to the shelters. When I took some picture fans to a community center, I was asked to teach "picture letters" by the victims. Brushes, paint, postcards, palettes were all donated and I started to teach including children. The relationship, connected with a heart not with goods, may last longer. I want to continue passing on what happened with the disaster so that it won't fade with time. Some people who came to my picture letter class wanted to talk more than drawing. Some people saw flowers after three years and started to talk about hope and tomorrow.

At the age of 70, I want to draw pictures that are full of dreams at least for ten more years. I feel life and death close to me and adore every day. Sometimes, I think of the origin of myself. A big power of nature could be God. I think everything has a meaning. As a matter of fact, we bought a house three months before the disaster. My husband had a hunch and decided to buy it on the day we went to see it. If we were still living in our old house, we would've been victimized. With this new house, we could invite many victims in. The house many people come to visit and it's safe for being on a higher ground.

I think I am a quick decision maker, taking action right away. After I became ill with women's disease at the age of 48, I became lighten up and realized that there was another myself. I was a housewife but started picture letters at the age of 50. With a single phone call, I started my picture letter class at the age of 54. I want to live for tomorrow with dreams and hope, getting more energetic.

7) Ms. MN (a woman in her 60's)

May 17, 2014

On March 11, slime and debris buried my jewelry shop. I thought I lost it forever. However, new ideas came to my mind one after another when I climbed up a small hill next day and thought about "what I should do", "how I should live my life", etc. I continued climbing that small hill every day. After one week, when I returned to my shop, it dawned on me that I was not the only person who was affected by the disaster.

Volunteers came with water and washed many things that became dirty with slime for us. Then, it dawned on me that my customers' jewelries must have gotten dirty too. I wanted to clean them to make them pretty again. I sent postcards to 300 customers asking them to bring dirty jewelries and sent them to a cleaning vendor by couriers. Once they came back cleaned, I put them in a pretty bag or case and returned to customers. Jewelries were sparkling again! I just wanted to clean them not to sell anything. After the disaster, I checked a list of deceased in the newspaper everyday to confirm there were no names of my customers.

I entered in to a drawing to win a retail space in the temporary shopping area and won the space. I wanted to do something useful for others, something that can only be done now to my best. I believe it will come back to you if you care others with what you'd feel happy to receive. I'm a type of a person who takes immediate action if something comes up to my mind. I thought about how to run this shop, how this town should recover, etc. and went to a bank asking for a loan. My enthusiasm and drive convinced a banker who told me felt radiance out of me. I can run my business largely owing to my customers, employees and people around me. I'm so thankful for them and want to do something for them. I should not be wondering and go straight to the goal. I trust my hunch to be successful. I opened the door by myself, it's a notable step I take. I had a tough life in my 30's and 40's, tried to be financially independent since my younger years, had an unforgettable event at the age of 57. That's when my neighbors in the community helped me by taking my mother in law under their care. I'm forever thankful to them.

It doesn't worth to compare with others. I think image is important, so I want to create a great shop even though it's a temporary shop. The result will follow. People cannot live alone, so I value people and make a small connection grow into a strong pipe. People somehow gather around me and have a talk. I think human is wonderful and feel grateful for being one of them. After the disaster, I took classes for computer and making announcements to be useful for others. It's important to help others and deal with what's in front of you. I became very ill at the age of 39 but am living with full power every day after the age of 60. My life is full of curiosity, just like being a little girl forever.

8) Ms. OP (a woman in her 70's)

May 22, 2014

Women are tough having a family and community to protect and always thinking about how to protect themselves and those around. I'm currently thinking about my own life and soul. I want to save myself first and others and strongly feel that I want to take care of others. Returning something for the life I was given, the life that was saved, that's my mission to live for those who lost their lives. Three years passed very quickly, and I have not been satisfied if I were not doing something all the time. It's nice to have something you can devote yourself, something you can put your heart and soul. Relating with people on a regular basis is also important.

A bed and breakfast run by someone I knew was washed away. But, the owner lady started a meal delivery service for senior citizens and became successful. That lady, when suffering from the disaster, remembered my Ikebana (flower arrangement) classes and started to come to take lessons. My ancestors said "evacuate to the shrine", this turned out to be very true. At the shelter, I was also worried about cleaning up myself (hair, clothes). Having just hard biscuits was enough to fill my empty stomach and it was satisfying to share food with others. I was with my neighbors I've known, and we helped each other.

No one tried to eat by oneself.

It doesn't worth worrying about small stuff. I thought the way you had lived your life was being reflected here and felt it would work out somehow as I didn't have a critical feeling. My husband asked, "Are you going to continue Ikebana?" I immediately responded "I won't give up". There were Ikebana tools dirty but not broken, and I felt I could do it. I re-started my class in June 2011. Our everyday life seemed to have come back when students started to see each other in my class. This will make us forget about many things. You can lose physical goods, but you can't lose your skills.

I realized the importance of a community. Having room to breathe in life is also important and this will make you gradually realize what's important. The first is the health of my family and me. I'm concerned about solitary death at temporary housing. Do not think you're alone, value your neighbors and reach out to them. I want to open my house to others like a salon. It doesn't have to be as large as a community center but a small tea party with just neighbors. It's not where you are but who you're with. There are different things you can do at a different age bracket. The elderly and the young are both needed to support each other. You don't have to try to go straight but it's ok to bend a little bit. Don't be too serious with fears. I was adopted when I was in grade school and came to Ishinomaki City from Yamagata, being dressed in a red kimono. I grew up alone as a single child, so now I want many people to come to my house.



Candle dinner at home

9) Ms. QR (a woman in her 60's)

June 2, 2014

I no longer need too many physical goods. Before the disaster, my house was filled with goods. I think people can go on living as long as being wanted by others. If I can help others, I feel happy. I felt that way when I helped distribute meals at the shelter. I never thought I would end up in living at temporary housing myself. I started lessons on how to play ocarina after the disaster and met with one lady. Her daughter and a grandchild were missing. She wanted someone to hear her story and as I listened, she gradually started to open her heart to me.

I grew relationship with volunteers and am gathering with a group. I've learned how to listen to other people and trust them. You never know what will happen. I finally became able to shed tears after three years. I try to change the way I think and be creative. I can make myself feel at ease for a compromised level of satisfaction and not to feel that I must have something. Don't worry about small stuff. I won't try to go out of my way by saying "no" for what I won't be able to do. I care for myself and think there are plenty of people who can substitute for my absence. Do not regret, do not fret. I appreciate blue sky, fields and gardens and even weeds, they are so beautiful. Don't carry over your anger. I am living with my brother and trying to say "I'm sorry" in reflecting that I had been ignoring him to date. After taking a bath, I smile at his back feeling happy for being with him.

I started lace crochet since winter of 2013, picked up again what I used to do in my 20's, hoping to gift them to those who helped me. Small things make me feel happy now. I worked very hard as an office worker in my 30's, took care of my mother in my 40's, who had dementia. My mother wanted to go home when she was at home. I couldn't sleep at night as she wandered around in the middle of the night. I was the only help she had and was always tense and nervous. For 10 years, she was in and out of the hospital. Since I had that kind of experience, I felt very happy when volunteers cared for me this and that at the shelter after the disaster. Losing the house couldn't have been helped, so I will let that go without feeling regret. It's not just me but same for other people too. It's wonderful to have a family and I feel happy if someone opens up to me. I think the time will heal us.



By the river

10) Ms. ST (a woman in her 60's)

June 15, 2014

My brother's wife and son's wife graciously took me in for three months. I realized how important it was to relate with siblings and relatives on a regular basis, as they would help you when the worst happens. You will see a true picture of a person at the time of emergency. I feel privileged, thankful and happy for having such family and relatives. Please value your family. I am a person who won't get so depressed and weave my way through hardships. I spoil and excuse myself as I adore myself. I looked back my past life and started to think about what that life meant to me and other things that I didn't really have to think. What are friends? It was all because of me that I didn't have anyone to talk to open heartedly. Ashamed matters, difficult matters, may be I chose to invite them by myself. I am useless, what am I?

As I watched my house being washed out to open sea, I found part of me feeling a kind of relief from conservative family traditions and community that I had never thought twice in the past. No worth crying for things you lost. My dishes, clothes and my house, where did they go? Not in the bay but may be somewhere in the ocean. I was happy and adored the house that was inherited from my ancestors, just 10 years after being renovated was washed away. My life after the disaster being stripped bare of everything I had. I feel positive, negative going forward and downward, feeling anxious thinking about moving to a new place or land development. That place was where our home was to my children, where their heart belonged to. When your heart aches, you remember that place.

I think how I want to live my life, a life of two with my husband. I want to value my temporary housing. If your family is comfortable, you have nothing to be afraid of. I don't envy others. I'm trying to accept and approve myself. I was happy before but how about my husband and son? After the disaster, I was saved by books. Was it an escape from the reality? I once worked at a library and a book store when I was young. People cannot live alone and eventually need a care of others. I wonder what type of person I was before and if I did anything wrong? It comes back to you if you take care of others. I try not to deal with matters head-on. As I don't know the feeling of those who lost immediate family, I try to speak while keeping in mind those who are going through much difficult situation than I am.

My past was suddenly cut off in 2011, and I wonder if ordinary life will ever come back. There is no more "ordinary", so you need to value what is "ordinary". I'm happy for an ordinary life, the past that was cut off will come back to continue. There are things of value that you realize after losing them for the first time. I remember I was saved by well water. Stars were beautiful that day and I think the nature is amazing. Ocean is calm and beautiful.

I am a type of person who tries to accept any circumstances with a positive and calm attitude. When the Tsunami struck, I took refuge in the upstairs of my house and waved to every helicopter flown by hoping that my son would learn that I was safe in case the image was to be broadcasted on TV and he would happen to watch it. I lived alone which made it easier for me that I only had to worry about myself. It was a reminder how important it was to have good health. I was grateful to have great friends. I don't cling to my life, though. Later, I took refuge to my daughter-in-law's parents' house which was equipped with wood burning stoves and a well. A communal life shared by 24 people had started in that house. Having coffee in a stylish beautiful coffee cup enriched my heart. Having to experience the disaster gave me the ability to see the true color in people. For example, some friends just sent me cheap goods (dollar store quality) or kept making empty promises.

For me, the experience of having to go through a divorce was much more painful than the experience of the Earthquake disaster. I was 37 years old when my husband left and never returned home. I was mortified and cried. It was a painful, shameful, and miserable experience. Compared to the divorce, dealing with the natural disaster was easier for me. I had children who were first and sixth grade at the time of my divorce and I really felt bad for them. When I moved back to my parents' home with my two children, my parents told me that they were happy that I was back. The neighbors were nice to us, too. I started to work on a few part-time jobs. When I worked at a fish cake factory, I became in charge of 13 trainees from China. Although I was nervous and anxious with this big role, I was proud to say I tried my best. You cannot see your own face but you can see your reflection in others' eyes. I spent that year working hard in earnest. I took Chinese, bookkeeping, and singing lessons. My younger son still remembers how I struggled back then and treats me very well. It's my policy not to envy others.

I live in a temporary housing for the Tsunami victims, but I often invite newspaper delivery volunteers in for a cup of tea. Keeping in touch with my friends and volunteers from different area is important to me. When I was younger, only some of us advanced to high school and many went to get jobs in the city where companies took group of workers. I keep in touch with my classmates and meet for a reunion in every four years, in the year of Olympics. There is nobody who are dishonest or jealous among my friends.

I've always been cheerful since I was born. In my mind, I feel like I'm still an 18 year old. I almost feel like I can still wear my high school uniform to this day. I'm positive and enjoy fun conversations. It's fun to live in the temporary housing. It is small, and neighbors' conversation bothers me some time, but at a same time, it's easy to clean! It's all about perspective and how we perceive things in life. No life is perfect. Appreciate it. Be happy. Nothing exists forever. Enjoying my single life and there is no use complaining. I'm taking voice training lessons. After turning 70, I started to work as an assistant to a professor at a college. I enjoy people's company and I don't like to be alone. I had never imagined my life to turn out so wonderfully as this. I am the happiest right now. I would like to take on another challenge to learn Chinese language. I am also looking forward to welcoming Chinese exchange students again, soon.

There were people who ignored the rule that had been etched in the stone monument in Ishinomaki that said, "Do not build beyond this point towards the ocean." There also were people who bought the land despite the warning of the realtors addressing the potential risk of Tsunami 40 to 50 years ago. It has been three years since the disaster, but we are still struggling to rebuild. The day of the earthquake, when I realized that I survived the disaster, I told myself that I need to live strongly on behalf of the many fallen victims. All my neighbors are gone along with their homes. It's the fact and cannot be helped. I saw number of corps. I received a great deal of support from so many and don't know how to return the favor. They all told me that the fact I am living is the best favor that I can give back to them. The thoughts supported me strongly. The relief goods did help me, as well. I felt that the people with faith are generally strong, kind, and gentle.

I am against the movement to preserve the damaged elementary school building as a memorial site. The building brings back the painful memory of so many lost lives. I was lucky to survive with my husband. I cannot be dispirited forever. The home will be rebuilt but it is not the end of my journey. I would like to travel to Cambodia to see the Ankor Temple. The past three years... I cannot make any sense out of the last three years. I would like to start an architectural business someday. My sister's death in 2013 has been the most painful event to me much more so than the disaster. I would like to return the favor to the people who helped me in Japan and from the world. I am lucky to have many friends. I can talk to my friends about my issues. We cannot live alone. Having relationship that you can trust is important. We can do away with material things. I have many friends who invite me to stay over.

I drive myself to places as well as I drive for the people who lost their vehicle. I first got my driver's license at the age of 45. I lost my entire house, however, I am fine because I have my family. I became more insightful of other's personality and their true colors after experiencing the disaster. I was so shocked when a person told me "you deserve it." I don't interact or associate with people that I don't care for. Others brought me some rice and miso paste from far distance. I would like to live my life as I wish. I worked hard for twenty years so I don't cling to my life. I have no regrets. I took care of people too, as much as I was able. I don't want to die before my husband and leave him behind. It is harder for men to live alone. I cannot worry about these things too much. I just take things as they come. I used to love luxury goods like rings and leather goods before the disaster and I indulged myself with Kimonos, purses, and shoes. I totally lost interests on those things now. I don't even want to wear a ring. It is strange, but I don't want anything. I don't care about materialistic things any longer. When I was younger, my husband was away on fishing trips as a fisherman. I worked and raised my children alone by leaving them in someone's care.



Handmade cards received from children in the United States

My house in Izushima, Onagawa, was swept away by the Tsunami. On the day of the earthquake, my third son was going to take a train from Ishinomaki. We learned that the train was also swept away by the Tsunami. Luckily, my son didn't make the train and survived. During the time his safety was unknown to us, I was too busy to find his whereabouts and had no time to be desperate. My son's name was not found on the list of survivors posted at the Village Hall. I almost lost hope then not knowing he was alive. I sulked at the police station. There was no one at the train station to provide any information. I realized that I would need to give a great deal of support to my husband if we were to lose our son, as my husband adored him more than I did. I stayed at the high school building where I worked for the first two days and moved to the shelter on the third day. On the bulletin board at the high school building, I left a message to my son saying, "I am at the Junior High School Shelter". I was pretty sure my mother-in-law was safe in the island. I spent every day thinking that I need to protect my students.

It took five days for the sea water to retreat. We spent the first 5 days at a shelter and the next 5 days at a friend's house. We bought a used car for 600,000 yen (equivalent of \$6,000) and commuted to work spending an hour and half every day from my brother's house in Furukawa for the next four months until July. Lived in a temporary house for a year and half. How to protect my family was only thing on my mind back then. I didn't want to see anyone and didn't want to go anywhere even being invited for a period of time. Not having a house to go home to also meant that I didn't have to cook dinner. It was a strange sense of relief, as well.

At the age of forty, I became a librarian at the high school and commuted from my home on the island for seven years until I was transferred to the high school in Ishinomaki. I used to commute by taking the boat that leaves at six o'clock in the morning and came home on the 5:50 pm boat from there. During the three-month scallop fishing season from October through December, I help my husband with his ten fishing trips. My dream has been to build our own house, and the disaster realized our dream. If our old house on the island didn't get swept away, the new house had not been possible. We built our house in 2013. We had bought a land a while ago to build an old-style house that I always dreamed about. Living in the city is much more convenient than the island life. I would love to invite people over to our new home, but at the same time it makes me feel guilty building our house in a big, clean space while others could not. I was afraid that the people who are still living in the temporary housing or small apartments inconveniently may feel envious towards us. I still feel I earned it by working hard. I have been bound by the rules and restrictions of the small island community of only about 500 people but now I have moved out and been liberated.

My house on the island was stuffed with goods such as books, CD, children's clothes. I realized we do not need all those goods to live. It's meaningless after all, all those goods were swept away as debris. For the first four days after the disaster, I commuted to the house and kept cleaning up. I was there to watch the house being demolished. There are not too many things that are necessary to live. It is senseless to spend money on goods. My husband reestablished the fishing business by getting new materials and a boat. We ordered the boat from a boat builder who lost two elementary school aged grandchildren. It seemed to give him some hope to live. To receive the aid, you need to go through the complicated documentation preparation and the process at the local municipal office. I am concerned if the aid was missed by those who are not capable of reading or using computer.

I had an experience of having a huge debt in the past. I told myself that I can only go forward, there's no time to be discouraged and not acting. Living on the island prepared myself for the possibility of Tsunami disaster someday. I am thankful that my family was safe. I don't wish to go back in time. The disaster happened as an extension of our lives. It feels like we time tripped to a whole different world. I was disappointed about people who sent us unwanted old clothes. I want to be physically strong to serve meals to others. I would like to open my house for volunteers to stay. I was destining to live here at this time. Before the disaster, I used to think I was going to spend my days ordinarily for the rest of my life.

I lost my husband for lung cancer when I was 52 years old. It was 16 years ago. I experienced what it meant to lose a person. It changed my life with the idea that I needed to do things that my husband couldn't achieve. Getting married and losing a husband were two biggest events in my life. My husband was a member of the municipal assembly. I realized it is such a task for a wife of an assembly member to ask for a vote. My husband was a kind person with a big dream. I shared his dream thanks to him. When I was younger, I used to help the liquor store that my family owed. I delivered merchandise and helped with the customers at the store. I've always wanted to do something to help others. I started to dream about going abroad when I was about 20 years old.

I started working when I was 18 years old at a company where people around me took care of me, taking out for meals and places. I wanted to do the same to help others when it was my turn. After my husband passed, I started to work in the insurance industry also worked as a receptionist at a law firm. If you work faithfully, jobs would come your way. You never know when you expire so you need to do things in moderation and to be yourself. Since I was younger, I've always felt it is important for women to be independent financially, socially, and emotionally. While I was raising my four sons, I met many people. Women are flexible, adaptable, and are capable of multi-tasking.

After the disaster, I have been doing things that I am capable of as much as I am able. I had my son's and friend's family move in with me and ended up having 9 people in my house. I was thankful for the relief goods I received such as meat, vegetable, and fuel from my friends. I realized how important to have good relationship with neighbors. My son's family stayed till this October and it was enjoyable to prepare meals for them. I love cooking for guests and I didn't mind it, at all. We used to go pump water at people's well or went to the local water source. We take more precaution with our safety and we escape to the higher hills when earthquakes come. I've been visiting hospitals, senior homes, co-ops and halls to put out consolation concerts since the disaster. I started to take Chanson lessons at the age 59 and won a prize at a competition at the age of 60. In June of 2011, my Chanson singer friends got together and did a concert. A famous Chanson singer came to Ishinomaki and joined us and we were all energized. At the day of the disaster, the singer was getting ready for a concert and she was victimized by the disaster. She shares the pain with the victims and she supports us. I also want to support others, following her lead. I hope I can visit more facilities to sing songs to cheer people up. All you need is a dream.



Tea ceremony in yet inconvenient life

My previous house was swept away in the Tsunami. Immediately after the earthquake, I rode my daughter's car with my mother and my aunt heading to the elementary school to take refuge. The gym was locked and while we were trying to get to the school building, the Tsunami caught us. When I realized, I was on top of a shoe cupboard surrounded by water. We all got separated, but my daughter and I found each other the next day. The volunteers placed flower beds only alongside of the major road where buses run but not by the land where I used to live. I brought the flowers that survived the disaster from the land where my house used to be to the temporary housing. I won the lottery to move into the public housing and planning to move next fall, but I am keeping it to myself as I feel bad for others who didn't win. I don't want to give up my land just yet. We can rebuild a new house near where my old house stood, but I am not willing to do so fearing another Tsunami to come.

I was not happy about how the relief goods were distributed after the disaster. Some people took many blankets and others took many clothing items. I am not looking forward to moving in to the public housing as it does not come with a yard. It is an apartment without any soil to plant. I wish I could live in a house. I am not happy with how the local government is rebuilding the area without considering local people's opinions. It is being handled by people who do not live here.

I am against building tide embankment because it won't be strong enough. I like sewing and doing crafts. Volunteers from Tokyo are helping to sell my crafts. I survived the disaster. Once in a while I remember my formal kimono that used to be stored in my drawer of my lost house. I've only worn it once. I have vision impairment and will need help moving to the public housing. I cover my tomatoes with plastic to protect them from birds for my grandchild who comes to pick my tomatoes. I told my neighbors not to feed the cats. The crows that gather around the garbage collection area are bothersome. The soil around the tulip bulbs that were planted by the temporary housing had been washed away by the heavy rain. I dug out the bulbs and planted them by my old house.



Planting tulip bulbs in 2012

I don't want to focus just on rebuilding, rather, I want to build a world where people live together with a common hope of world peace. I would like to advocate world peace from the kitchen for it being the center of our everyday life. The world cannot be changed without our kitchens change. When the disaster struck, we were helped by so many people around the world. I realized then that the world is one. While I think about rebuilding, I want to cherish the relationship that were flourished and expanded through this experience. We all need a place to live. We need to be nuclear free. We need to think about how we can live kindly and gently to the nature as we all are a part of the nature. The nature is not mean to us.

I believe that I will return to dust. I am a human created by God, who lives and made to live with others through the experience, hardship and sharing. We don't know when our life would expire or where the life takes us. Before the disaster, my life was all about my family, friends and relatives. However, the horizon widened after receiving so much unexpected support from all over Japan and the world. I was so thankful for the support and care we received across the border. Having good relationships and network of friends are very important. We need always to be thinking about what we can do to help others. We all live by leaning against each other. We need to live happily and peacefully. The disaster was just one event in your whole life, it was just a part of your life. Sharing the experience with others expands the friendship.

After the disaster, people and friends gathered and talked around my house. The circle of friends expanded. I started to cook meals for the volunteers. The disaster struck a year after I stopped working. My kitchen represented me. I was happy when people enjoy my meal which I prepared using seasonal fresh ingredients. I opened my house for volunteers and showed them around the shore. I was thankful that they traveled to our town. We need to welcome them to our homes openly. My husband changed in a positive way. Before the disaster, he rarely invited people over. However, having many people come around our house, he started to take interest in helping others. He discovered himself by being helpful to others and being needed.

After the disaster, I was amazed to see how the volunteers jumped right in and helped us. I understand the meaning of "neighbors" which Bible describes with the experience receiving help and supports. I want to do the same for the others. I experience the joy of being alive and I enjoy the task I am given to help others. I had thought I've done a lot but realized the circle of support was even bigger than I imagined. Having money is not important. It's in us to come together to help each other. When we get weaken approaching the end of our life, we realize how important to live with others. Through many encounters with people, I think about meaning of life more. As for my future plan, I would like to market great local food from Ishinomaki, help student with school refusal issues, and to develop work places where you can still work even you are not in full health. I would also like to build a community that is diverse and each individual family comes together.

I am more interested in the earth as a whole than humans. On March 11, when the disaster hit, I thought to myself that I was not ready to die, yet. I had to focus on saving myself first then others. It's so important to have family. You need to believe in your senses and be intuitive and reactive. When I experienced Chilean Earthquake at Nakase, Ishinomaki, I realized that whether having training and education or not can determine your life and death in a split second in a situation like that. I witnessed how women can exhibit superhuman power in an emergency. I climbed over a wall that was 1.5 meter high when the Tsunami came after me. At the instant I saw the huge tide, I thought my life was at stake. Knowing intuitively the situation was serious, I told my car that I was driving "Thank you for the service" and left it there and escaped to the upstairs of a stranger's house. A man who was standing on the roof of a condominium building saw me and shouted "stay there". The owner of the house I escaped to, was also trying to find a better place to take refuge. The same man in the condominium invited us into the building and we were saved. It was a perfect timing. Two days later, I crossed the railroad track and headed back to my home. On the way, I exchanged information with the people that I passed by. I thought the entire Ishinomaki had been gone.

I felt like I was saved by an invisible force. I passed my food first to the elderly. The people who lived on a hill opened their homes for refugees. My family members were safe so I thought I need to focus on my workplace first. Women were flexible and prioritized matters need to be attended. Most of my co-workers were women and they improvised and took care of the details using their life skills. They were sanitarily conscious and for an example, came up an idea to use the swimming pool water to flush the toilets. I also cooked meals for the victims at a local school kitchen; using propane gas; asked for vegetable donation from the local farmers and self-defense force crews who were there for relief mission; as well as checking the whereabouts of students (a week after the disaster).

I volunteered to handle the task of accepting and managing a number of victims who escaped from the destroyed area including the patients from Japan Red Cross Hospital. I was disappointed in the local township government office for its inefficiency. Two things were important to me then, I first wanted to protect myself, and secondly, I wanted to share the food with the co-workers who lost homes. My focus was to find what I could do to help making things better. I want to enjoy working in my area of expertise. In 2011, to accommodate the demand in the area, I established an NPO which provides a space for children with mental disabilities and autism to learn art. Each student draws different pictures. I get comforted by looking at them. I live my own life, not just copying others. I love the universe, the sky, and living matters. The universe created humans. We maybe are the dewdrops of the universe. I want to fly freely.

I have been drawing six-year-old girls. I feel your whole persona is determined during the period from the moment you are born before you turn six years old. I think you are going back to the beginning when you die. When I was a child, I was quiet and didn't talk at all. I was watching other children from an adult perspective thinking they were all childish and noisy. I have a strong desire to draw now. It recently came to me that "I was born to draw six-years-olds, that's it!" When I was still not sure about my decision, I took a trip to Hawaii by myself. When I bathed in the abundances of sunshine from the sky, it assured me that I was doing what was right for myself.

Having disability is not an unfortunate thing. I value the importance of family and being happy together. You must love yourself. In 2014, I came to many intuitions. Unhappiness in people doesn't mean to lose things or to die. It is when the negative aspect of human being surfaces, such as betrayal, abandonment, or loneliness without having a warm family. People may feel like giving up in the situation like that. When you try to be a person who are needed by others and live your life truthfully, good things would happen eventually. Under the candle light, the family members came together in one room after being separated with the chaos and felt each other's warmth. It's warm to be together. All we need is to stay together. We quartered an orange and shared. I called it happiness. I want to devote myself in drawing for the rest of my life and draw 1,000 pictures before I die. I have full of themes and insights.

The job I started when I was younger as a part-timer, working just two hours a day to stock the shelves at a company, developed to be three-hours a day job by the time my son entered the elementary school. Subsequently I became the area manager then a board member. On March 11, we had a meeting in Sanuma. After the earthquake, I stayed at my friend's house in Furukawa till the 13th and took a taxi home to Ishinomaki to reunite with my mother-in-law, my husband, and my son. The three of them had escaped to Mt. Hiwada by car. We lived in a high school building until May. The dinner was served at 6 pm every day which gave a trouble for people who were working. Our house in Minamihama was swept away by the Tsunami. We moved into the temporary housing. We were lucky to win the right to the temporary house but that caused the rumor that we had some connection with the people in the government. In case of a large-scale earthquake, it is important to escape as quickly as possible.

We delivered goods to the stores in town. Some people had no respect and took goods many times, sneaking the goods, or stealing the workers' shoes. These people made me upset but made me realized that I was trying too hard, instead, I should be comforted, as well, being a victim myself. I was exhausted from cooking meals for the volunteers, sorting tremendous amount of relief goods, and getting tea time organized (snacks and beverages). I was startled by the support program for the supporters/volunteers. While it was a hard work, it gave me a sense of purpose. It would have been depressing if I were to be stuck in the temporary housing, instead, being on the helping side gave me more satisfaction. I played a listener role as the area leader. Experiencing the disaster made me realized that you cannot have enough preparation as it hits by a total surprise. I am doubtful that you can ever be fully prepared for an event like that. Japan lost a lot, however, we received a lot from people all over the world.

I used to visit abroad every year on business or personal. I used to have over 200 pots of flowers in our yard at our old house. I still grow flowers at the temporary housing. I learned how to use a personal computer at the age of 60. We are rebuilding a new house next year. The disaster gave me something to look forward to. I lost my mother-in-law this year, she was 99 years old. I suffered very little from the disaster compared to other victims. A person I know lost her daughter and a grandchild. Another person I know had to make an ultimate choice of saving her grandchild over her elderly mother in an extreme situation. Survived families have fights among themselves. Sometimes, the volunteers from afar have hard time to choose which temporary housing they should support. There is a difference in how people get along at each temporary housing unit and some are better than the others. Cliques are formed at a community room of the temporary housing and some are being isolated.

I lost photos of my children, souvenirs from the places I traveled overseas, and my clothes. Each change of season, I look for a certain outfit and be reminded that that was all gone. I share tears with the people who lost their family members. When we were watching the news of typhoon damage in Okinawa and wondered how they were doing out loud, my son said that "Never mind the other people, look at us, it has already been three and half years at this temporary housing". On March 11, 2011, my daughter who lives in Sendai had gone to the Akiu hot spring and was safe. When I have stress, I talk to people in my circle about them to relieve myself.

On March 11, after the earthquake, the café “Mominoki” opened the doors to the victims under candle lights for relief. I was served some bread. The lady who owned the café passed away on Nov. 10, 2014. I feel that I am kept alive by others, rather than I am living on my own. After the disaster, my husband developed a cancer and needed to be hospitalized and undergo a surgery, so I commuted to the hospital everyday driving on the highway. The doctor had told us he may not last three years, however, he is still alive and is healthy to my great relief. My son suffers from depression, domestic violence, and experienced a car accident as well as a small fire. We bought the house that we had been rented in 2013. When the earthquake hit on March 11, my husband and I drove to a nearby elementary school to escape. Tofu, apples, and fried tofu were supplied. We spent 10 days in the car parked in the school yard holding our cat in our arms. My friend in Hachinohe came with some gasoline for the car and we drove to my in-laws and to my brother's. The cat had died since then. It was rescued when it was a kitten in Tashiro Island. We had brought it back to Ishinomaki to take care of it. I believe the cat gave its life to my husband. The cat we have now loves to take a walk with my husband.

Since the disaster, I had never really felt it had been difficult. I think I was too busy making it than feeling sorry about what happened. I never felt I was tired. Coming home from the hospital to visit my husband one day, in the rest area of the highway, a strong urge of wanting to eat fresh vegetables came to me, but I thought to myself that many others were victimized as well and are in the same situation as myself. My friend visited me from far and was taking pictures from top of the Hiwa Mountain. I didn't feel like being in the picture and it was when I felt the difference in the state of mind between the outside world and the world I was in. We need to eat daily, and I feel I must do something to earn it. My friend once sent me a letter asking, “Are you back in normal?” I asked myself, “what is “normal” and what does it mean to be “back”?” It's difficult to put in words but does “normal” mean a life with abundance of stuff? Then what does it mean to be enriched? I've been thinking of what's important in life. I am wondering if the disaster was God's plan to test us, which had been embedded in our lives.

My mother got divorced when I was little, and she raised me on her own since. She got remarried and I had to switch school multiple times. I was bullied at school and had told my mother I didn't want to go to school. My mother had tied me up to a pillar and said “ok, no school, not leaving the house.” Later, I also went through a divorce. When I was younger, and was working as a nurse at a tuberculosis unit of a hospital in Sapporo, I felt like I figured out how life worked.

The pain sheds like a thin film. Another layer tomorrow. At a rock bottom, maybe another bottom tomorrow. Let's worry about it tomorrow. The experience of the 3/11 disaster was not painful or sad. I believe we can move on by forgetting the past.



Basking in the sun

I had left my house to go to the flower arrangement class on the day of March 11, but I realized I had left something and returned home. On the way, the Tsunami came, and I escaped to the hillside where my sister lived and stayed there for a few days. It was like a miracle and I felt I was protected by something unknown. I was able to live without any troubles at my sister's house as it was equipped with a propane tank and an old oil stove for cooking and heating. My parents had always told me to escape to my sister's in case of Tsunami, which prepared me to protect myself at a time of emergency. I feel that my ancestors are protecting me, and I am thankful for that. Every day I tell myself, "I cannot do anything unethical as the Sun God is watching me". I am thankful for my life. I distributed cosmetic soaps to the victims as my contribution.

After the disaster, I moved to Sendai City as I've always wanted to work in the beauty field. It was a great opportunity for me to start a new life and take the first step towards living my dream. I had made up my mind to be independent working in the beauty industry. My life living on my own for the first time working at a beauty salon had started. People in Sendai viewed the disaster differently than the people in Ishinomaki. My beloved hometown, Ishinomaki. I've always worried about people back there and wanted to do something to help them and to be of some use to them. After working at the salon for two and a half years, I finally realized my life dream to own my own salon. I want to support others as much as I am able by offering a healing space and hospitality. The ability to do what I want to now could not have been possible without all the support I received from others. I believe when women become more attractive, that would encourage men as a result, thus contributing to the society as a whole. It gives great flexibility and ease to work in my own salon that helps me balance raising children and house work economically and emotionally.

I believe it is important for us to keep following the dream by always being on the lookout for new information. I learned that meeting with people and human relationships are more important than physical goods. You cannot live alone and there are things that money cannot buy. I lost my friend to an illness which made me think about life in. There are people who were not ready to die. I am thankful for my health and my wellbeing. Four and half year later, I still have anxiety about another Tsunami. I want to take care of myself and be happy and spread the happiness to others. I hope the smile is passed on to others, as well.



Tulips in full bloom in 2012

Epilogue

The twenty women from Ishinomaki expressed their impalpable feelings that you cannot feel or see in their own words. After experiencing the East Japan Great Earthquake Disaster, how are they feeling and what are they thinking?

By meeting the twenty women and listening to them, what I found in common among them was that the memory of what happened on March 11, 2011 has been deeply etched in their memory and their soul and it was connected to their past, present, and the future. Each woman remembered the event as if it happened yesterday with details, talked about what happened next, faced with the present, revisiting the childhood memories, and went on to the future prospect.

Each women's story shared some commonalities, such as "made to live beyond own will", "we lost a lot but gained a lot, as well", "meeting new people or experiencing different things has been an experience I could never have imagined before the earthquake and feeling thankful" "want to be needed by others" "importance of giving and supporting others" "renewed gratitude towards family" "the connection built with people who rushed to help us from Japan and across the world" "sense of guilt towards materialistic world" "refocusing on inner enrichment" "importance of sharing things among neighbors and family members", and "discovering the contentment achieved by sharing space and living with others."

These women are standing up to act to do something for the world even though sometimes they get lost or wonder around about the ideas. Some realized the long-term dream, some took the first step towards realizing the dream prompted by the experience of the disaster. Where does the strength and flexibility come from for these women to stand up for themselves in the after-mass of the disaster? That's one of the things I was looking for throughout the interviews. Stories shared were very personal, such as hospitalization and illness of family members, war experience, death of husband, divorce, huge debt, failure of plan, caring elderly family member, disagreement among family, and family issues. It seemed to me that how they lived before the disaster became the foundation of the decisions made at the time of the disaster and it continued beyond.

I am hoping that the voices of these women will reach other women in Japan and in the world. Last, but not least, I want to thank all twenty women sincerely who shared their stories with me.

September 25, 2015

Interviewer: Naomi Chiba in Ishinomaki city, Miyagi prefecture

I would like to continue my interviews with women who survived the disaster.

Please support publishing these voices as a book and send inquiries to:

swan20110311@gmail.com