

Ashtaba: The “Courage and Hope” to Recover Community in Miyakejima and New Orleans

Reflections from the disaster recover learning exchange between New Orleans and Miyakejima sponsored by the Japan Society and supported by the Ford Foundation

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When I first read Professor Yasushi Aoyama’s account of managing disaster response to the residents of the small, volcanic island Miyake a six-hour boat ride away from Tokyo harbor but part of the prefecture of Tokyo, I was immediately transported back to the first few days of life after Hurricane Katrina flooded our lives in New Orleans. We were living in temporary accommodations in Houston unaware that the adopted city would become home to my family for the next four months. It and other American cities have become home to New Orleanians still trapped in the financial crevice of Katrina – unable to return home.

Miyakejima was blanketed by volcanic ash in 2000, thus forcing the evacuation of its 3,800 citizens for approximately four years. Volcanic activity has marked life on the island approximately every twenty years for as long as anyone remembers. Then, Professor Aoyama served as Vice Governor of Tokyo Metropolitan Government and director-general of the disaster response headquarters. In Aoyama’s account, it is easy to picture the adrenalin running through his body during his attempt to make quick, wise decisions affecting the lives of citizens (and without compromising their dignity), the sleeplessness, and the unexpected excitement that accompanies the suspension of everyday life when disaster hits.

I too remember the sleeplessness, the anger while watching elected officials congratulate one another at press conferences, and the utterly surreal recognition that these may become defining moments of our lives. Will we learn anything? Will the adrenalin foster wise decisions and clarity? In my personal instance, I was not part of the official response of government, rather just a nongovernmental executive director in exile. Less than a fortnight after my family’s evacuation from New Orleans, I was invited to attend a philanthropic gathering in Memphis, TN where I recall two things: One, I wanted to slug several of the philanthropic program officers in attendance who seemed to marvel at the opportunity to make themselves important in our sad, devastated world. Two, I kept my comments limited to my experience as a citizen rather than as an advocate for my nongovernmental work: “Major investments should be made to address mental health and financial literacy.” I knew that if I was not certain how to navigate these waters, the same was true for others with less to work with in our troubled region.

During our brief Japan Society-sponsored learning exchange, we traveled great distances, crossed barriers of language and culture, and discovered that indeed the disasters that found us are defining moments of our lives. As a result, we treasure the opportunities to share that which most do not understand and will hopefully never have to experience. This shared experience also provides us the rarely available opportunity to

learn from peers in our own town with whom we traveled, build trust, and develop networks of support. Risking overtly obvious statements, the exchange sheds light upon vast differences between Miyakejima and New Orleans, Japan and the USA, as well as extraordinary similarities that transcend distance and culture.

SOCIAL CONTRACT

Japan: It is always easy to romanticize the distant places we visit. The food tastes better, the people more interesting, and customs appear to make more sense. Fully aware that Japanese society is haunted by major clashes between past and present, commerce and community, an aging population, and an historically uncomfortable relationship with a heterogeneous world, here's what I also observed. The communitarian value of public good, care for neighbors, for the infirm and elderly stake out a larger share of civil discourse than is the case in the USA (where private interests and consumer values alone define that which is good). It is also painfully obvious to us visitors from New Orleans (itself among the poorest cities in the USA) that Japan has by contrast managed to create a stable, middle class society. Granted, this may in part be due to the fact that it is a small, island nation with almost no diversity. However, this is no small feat. If, as the hypothesis goes, natural disasters peel away the veneer that glosses over preconditions of inequity and/or harmony, then Japan may in general fare well. Several important factors may assist Japan's ability to manage disaster well. The stable, corporatist political and economic model of the post-World War II era enriched Japan's citizens. After all, little to no Gross Domestic Product could be devoted to military investments.

Additionally, the small geographic footprint of the nation requires constant negotiation over physical space and its engineering. These negotiations are both technical and political. By contrast, the USA's "Manifest Destiny" has created a "slash and burn" world-view that allows planners to simply move on if a place does not work any more. Are there planners in the USA? Do they exist? Or are decisions left to the wisdom of the market to determine how and where resources are to be invested? The orderly command structure that appears to be in place everywhere in Japan – traffic laws, citizens' registration with local government – may have something to do with a perception that natural disaster is an ongoing threat. If everyone is vulnerable, then constant mobilization and vigilance are required. It may also refer back to the social contract that accompanies corporatism: If you follow the rules (and they are rigid rules), then you will be protected and served with dignity and honor.

USA: By contrast, what remains of the social contract in the American experience may have likely washed away with Katrina's storm surge. How often were citizens mocked for choosing to live in harm's way? How often did elected officials question whether the city should be rebuilt on grounds of economic investment? It appears as though the social contract in America is broken. Our pursuit for individual liberty and private pursuit of happiness has flooded the once vibrant town square. Long gone are the promises of life long careers, financial stability, and civic engagement. While circa 2009 all is not well in the house that neo-liberalism built, neither is there evidence that coherent alternatives are on the table. And yet, citizens hunger for belonging, meaning, and authentic places that nurture community. This hunger speaks to the work of my particular nongovernmental organization – marketumbrella.org – to reinvent public markets as mechanisms for community building.

How ironic that at the start of the twenty-first century, political leaders grew government in order to protect its citizens from the threat of outsiders, only to reveal just how vulnerable these same citizens are from the threats of nature (i.e., hurricanes), poorly executed and maintained civil engineering (i.e., levees), and woefully inefficient disaster response systems (i.e., FEMA). If Japan is small, dense and governed by robust command structures, the USA is big, sprawling, and forever renegotiating who's in charge and why.

TRUST

Whether due to a respectable track record of past success thus inspiring confidence among citizens or from a darker belief in societal obligation, the residents of Miyakejima with whom we spoke never questioned whether central government would come to their aid. This contrasts sharply with the general impression in New Orleans that while the rest of the nation looked on in horror they also engaged in civil debate about the wisdom of rebuilding disaster prone areas like New Orleans. Needless to say, it does not take a Marxist-Leninist to question whether the true nature of the national discussion about disaster prone areas like New Orleans actually masks darker realities of race and class in America. After all at the time of the Katrina crisis and since, the chorus singing the Crescent City's demise drowned out the faint voices calling for critical analysis of other wealthy but disaster prone areas' survival – desirable addresses in California's earthquake and wild fire regions come to mind.

Set in context of technical complexities like risk management and insurance industry *mumbo jumbo*, respected decision makers felt emboldened to think aloud about New Orleans' future. One cannot help but question whether the buried truth in the minds of elected officials and the like is this: New Orleans is jam packed with poor, black people. The failure of the system to prevent and/or attenuate the outcomes from the 2005 hurricane season provides the system with some attractive but unexpected alternatives, including not rebuilding the city and/or not enabling many of its poor citizens to return.

This thinking, of course, veers on crack-potted conspiracy theory. Indeed, paranoia has fared well after Katrina. However, it is more likely that incompetence and callousness is more to blame for circumstances than carefully orchestrated conspiracies.

This leads us to the issue of trust. If Miyakejima's 2002 volcanic eruptions may have stretched a community's ability to trust central government's promise to return them home (after a long, four years), New Orleans' 2005 hurricane season exposed the lack of trust between citizens, between citizens and government at all levels, and between local agencies and federal ones.

Miyake: While I am certain that the thousands of daily decisions by government agencies, NGOs and citizens to effectively transport the population to safety, house them for years, and attend to their needs without causing undue disruption to wherever they landed did not come easily, there is little indication that throughout the painful process few questioned the government's promise to protect and care for its citizens. This speaks to a level of trust in place in Japanese society. It speaks to a trust in government as the major player in times of emergency, a trust that everyone will do what they are committed to do, as well as a recognition that everyone is vulnerable to disaster. As a result, there is no room for "thinking aloud" about who can be left behind by society's decisions. This undisputed trust in the emergency rescue and relief apparatus speaks to a social stability in Japanese society. Is this replicable in a larger, social context like the

USA where the ethic of “buyer beware” and personal opportunity outweighs community obligation and social protection? Perhaps it is not. However, the scale of disaster inflicted upon modern Japanese cities (i.e., Kobe in 1995; Tokyo’s Miyakejima in 2002) has also forced some soul searching in Japan: Is government enough?

During our team’s April 2009 visit to the island of Miyake itself, we participated in at least two conversations that speak to this ascending role for personal initiative beyond the expected obligation of pulling together during the time of crisis itself. One, the establishment of the NGO House of Wind as a community center for elders and others to enjoy the traditions of the architecturally significant center, share and remember community life speaks to a civic wisdom that has emerged from the embers of the volcanic disaster and forced exile. While our hosts spoke of life before and after the exile and sang traditional village songs, I began to appreciate the subtext of their comments: “Without this place and other citizen-led expressions of community, we might get lost in the shuffle of rational planning by government.”

Two, a shopkeeper showed us a book of postcards he had printed and distributed via the postal service to all of his fellow islanders during the four-year exile. A lifelong photographer, he had a backlog of images of their beloved island. During the early months in exile, he printed up a postcard with a general note to his friends and neighbors wishing them well and encouraging them to hold onto the faith that one day all will return. This private initiative went on for four years, grew to thousands of residents, and ended up costing him approximately \$30,000 (from the life insurance policy he cashed in). He quickly acknowledged that this act of generosity was driven by a need to attend to his personal loneliness. Regardless, this action resembles the “silver lining” we all observed in New Orleans that encircled the otherwise dark, storm clouds of Katrina: a new found propensity for civic engagement.

New Orleans: It is difficult to separate the successes of civil society to act quickly, creatively, and with clear, heartfelt mission for public good from the great failure of government to protect and attend to its citizens’ needs after Katrina. Moreover, the deeper the hole dug by official decision-makers, the grander the impact of civil society to model best practices. As such, it is only government failure that gave way to civic innovation. Maybe this is how it happens; however, by no means are we to suggest that the American experience is one to be replicated. And yet, might the New Orleans disaster provide us with prophetic insight into a new global future? Might the comfort level negotiating instability, perpetual negotiations between unequal and diverse players, and creativity serve as hallmarks of the future? The Katrina story is still too young to tell. The complexities of reassembling a large North American city and its surrounding region takes far longer than the twenty-first century expectations for quickly paced actions. Regardless, the tragedy reveals how American society in general and New Orleans in particular suffers from low levels of social trust. The peculiar logic of government at all levels to roll out the plan “that there is no plan” has created a several crisis of trust between citizens and government. While the internal lack of trust between citizens in New Orleans (black versus white, rich versus poor, urban versus rural) to attain resources also makes progress difficult, there are enough examples of citizens and nongovernmental organizations bridging new relationships of trust with new allies. This give us all some hope that something good will indeed come out of all of this bad.

ASHTABA: A belief in tomorrow

Do isolated, vulnerable communities have futures in this increasingly uncertain world? While their specific scale and geographic location and risks may vary, both Miyakejima and New Orleans share an unfortunate set of circumstances. The calm and detached bureaucrat may have much to say about both places. Both face aging populations with crippling brain drain, geographic isolation from mainstream economic activities, populations with heavy dependency upon public assistance, questionable consensus about the future, and a history of natural disasters. From this standpoint, neither place shows much promise. And yet, the world is dotted with places that should not be. Central to the philanthropic portfolio of the Ford Foundation program officer who originally approved this shared learning experience – Miguel Garcia – is the idea of “shifting sands.” Garcia has argued that it is these prophetic places of compressed social, demographic, and/or ecological changes that provide the rest of us with insight.

How might we negotiate a new social contract between parties of unequal wealth and power to yield public good? When the well-financed hospital in, say, Chicago expands its new research wing in the poor urban neighborhood, must the residents always lose it all? Or, in Brazil must the global demand for soy beans require that every riverside community in the Amazon fall before the altar of progress and industrial agriculture? In the wake of disaster, the detached bureaucrat may possess the power to not only question the future of a community but also number its days. Indeed, the aging population of commercial fishers in Miyakejima mirrors that of coastal Louisiana and Mississippi. And yet, fishermen continue to fix their boats, plan for the future, and tend to nets. Similarly, principals of high schools serving dwindling populations plan future curricula whilst also tending to shrinking budgets. Are these actions foolhardy? Or are they examples of resilience, of leadership, of courage and hope in the face of “shifting sands.”

If these shifting sands wreak havoc upon settled lives, they also spark creativity upon those whose lives have been disrupted. For instance, when our team met with the village leaders in government and commerce, Miyakejima Village chief Sukeyasu Hirano described the “hope and courage” it takes to return and rebuild lives after disaster and separation. Another of his team described how unexpectedly during the time of exile (the first time he had been away from the island for such a length of time), for the first time he began to appreciate the island from the vantage point of an outsider. Trapped in the concrete jungle of Tokyo, the quiet, green beauty of Miyake grew greener in his mind. He missed the bird life, the flora and the fauna. This insight informed his and the village government’s refocused energies to re-brand the island as an eco-tourism destination. And while this may have played a major part in the economy before 2002, it was the extended period of exile that has led to innovations like the use of the island’s emblematic and renewable wild vegetable, the *ashtaba* (translated as tomorrow’s greens so named for the fact that if you snip its green shoots today, by tomorrow the plant will re-grow in time for another cutting) in promotion campaigns. We returned from the island with personified *ashtaba* cartoon characters adorning face towels, mugs and bags. And while this cute, harmless marketing ploy may be just that, it may also be no accident that the power of “tomorrow” (i.e., tomorrow’s greens) is itself a means to communicate that this isolated island community has not given up on itself and its future.

Similarly, most New Orleanians craved the tastes of home while they muddled through life in exile. Gone were the predictable rituals of oyster, crab, crawfish and

shrimp seasons. Not only were ingredients for seafood gumbo and crawfish étouffée difficult to find, so too were the people with whom locals shared these meals. As the saying goes, “you don’t miss your loved ones until they’re gone.” For isolated communities rich in cultural and natural assets, it is difficult for citizens (or their representative leaders) to recognize how these might also serve as economic assets. The experiences of exile have informed both civic and political leaders in New Orleans. Two related examples help to support this point. One, prior to Katrina Louisiana’s Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu had discovered the writings of Richard Florida and the loosely curated conversations pertaining to the “creative economy.” While he got some traction elevating cultural and natural assets to legitimate subjects of debate within political circles, movement was slow. Two, after officials reopened New Orleans for citizens to return, public debate was wide and chaotic. Much of it mean-spirited (e.g., questioning who should return and which neighborhoods should be rebuilt), other discussions led to unexpected places that forged new allies. Neighbors rallied around restaurants that reopened; farmers markets sprung up where none had before operated; and citizens rediscovered a love of Mardi Gras and the rituals that define life in the Crescent City and differentiate life there from that elsewhere in the USA. This ascent of cultural traditions – food, music, and culture – as the building blocks for a future seem to fuel a new-found sense of empowerment, pride in place, and in almost foolhardy belief in *ashtaba* – tomorrow’s greens. Indeed, Landrieu’s creative economy efforts appear to find fuel in these authentic expressions of cultural pride that now stands in opposition to the monolithic belief in one-size-fits-all market values. By no means is one necessarily connected to the other, or is there anything that looks like a coherent plan of action in the land of improvisational jazz; however, the expression of belief in tomorrow is authentic and worth a look.

The New Orleans story is still unfinished. Its future unfolds on a daily basis, especially as residents count down the dates to the next hurricane season. Regardless, it is the drama of Katrina, the failure of government, and the rediscovery of community and caring that captured a nation’s imagination in 2005. This came at a time when the nation was preoccupied with threats from foreign terrorism and asymmetrical warfare. Since, a constant trail of volunteers has traveled to the Deep South to “do good” at a scale of civic engagement unfamiliar to the neo-liberal American landscape. It has continued to ignite a discussion in America about trust in government, individual liberty versus community responsibility, empathy, and the future of communities who face crisis. While the financial crisis circa 2008- may not provide startling images of impoverished Americans being rescued by “good ole boys in pirogues (indigenous flat bottom boats),” it seems to draw from the same wealth of knowledge accrued during the early days following Katrina. While no one’s future is certain – even in the stable social contract of Japanese corporatism, the shared learning exchange points to symbolic value of *ashtaba* around which we can all rally.