

Sunday, March 22nd, 2020

Dear Chris,

The feelings of this last week recalled memories from a past life and so I looked back in my old diaries. This is the entry from March 16th, 2011, written in Tokyo.

Panic is the handmaiden of fear...and the odour of dread floats around me as I check into my hotel in the gardens of Chinzan-
so, a mere 5 days after this devastating earthquake. The lobby is eerily empty, with a few lights on, a hollow lifelessness has taken all in its grip. There is a despair that the nuclear reactor at Fukushima will explode, spreading radiation across the nation and its food supply. Is our food safe? Is our water safe? Will we all develop cancer due to the radiation? The foreigners have fled and we have no where to go, but to accept our lot. The people here never publicly express their emotion, but the scar of the quake exposes their worry, their anxiety and their sorrow; they try and hold back their feelings but with every interaction they reveal more and more.

As I walk around a paralysed, desolate city of 20m; the stores are shut, the neon signs off, there is an occasional pedestrian or cyclist, even the police are few. I arrive at a soba shop that I usually frequent, it looks closed and as I walk away a voice emerges and asks if I am looking to eat. There is gratitude in his tone and the cold soba, as usual, is delicious; I begin my long walk back to the hotel and a thought occurs to me: the people here have built a society on broken pieces of earth that can crumble any moment; they suspend this knowledge and just

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focus on the present. It is an other-worldly combination of knowing one's fragile existence yet compartmentalising that information. With this the present becomes the most critical task, focusing the mind, and gently whispering to us that existence is temporary...that we are temporary.

This is a jolting reminder that most, including myself, do not wish to see. It is easier to flee, rather than accept what this disaster exposes...the our existence is short and we, as a species, don't want to recognise this. This calamity only affects the locals so the rest of us can all disregard the lesson it is attempting to provide - that the society we live in is delicate and we must focus our achievements to the current day to create an enduring existence.

If our society is ever tested in this sudden manner, then we may find that, although our institutions and societal interactions may appear robust, allowing us to always be forward looking, our present could be shattered, leaving but a rubble on which to build our future. This earthquake is a message from nature to build robust societies, as nature can, at will, disrupt our present. For this society, I believe that soon fear will transform itself into belief and return this place to the regular rhythms of life.

Let's stay in touch 'virtually' for the foreseeable - Mustafa

