

Section III

Contributions

From Kobe to Miyagi

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Since November of the year of the disaster, I have traveled to Kesenuma every single month. The hotel at which I always stay is built on top of a hill overlooking the harbor—whether I like it or not, I find myself overseeing the changes occurring in disaster-affected areas. Only the roads have been raised; the land around them remains untouched, and when I look at the countless buildings that remain in ruins across the countryside, I am overcome by a deep despair despite not being a disaster survivor myself. After all, every disaster I have ever seen has been different from the rest. In disaster-affected areas two years after the Great Hanshin Earthquake, I saw clear signs of reconstruction, such as the rebuilding of the collapsed Hanshin Expressway and other public infrastructure projects proceeding at breakneck speed and the moving of people into public reconstruction housing. In areas affected by the Great Shichuan Earthquake, I saw stubborn residents (apparently forbidden by authorities) using rubble and bricks from previous buildings to reconstruct their homes.

Aiding supporters when the progress of reconstruction is unknowable and imperceptible is a job filled with frustration and helplessness. After all, the regaining of the foundation of one's life is the first stepping stone to true psychological recovery. Further, when we think of the fact that many supporters themselves were affected by the disaster, and that they lost family and friends, I think almost anyone can see how difficult survivor support for this disaster has been.

To the staff of the MDMHCC, who have come from both disaster-affected and unaffected areas, the unknowability of reconstruction and the ambiguity of their places and roles in the community have no doubt caused a whole host of emotions, including confusion, frustration, and helplessness. Looking back, the staff that gathered in Kobe 18 years ago were all placed in a similar situation. Despite having very high expectations placed on them by society, these supporters were treated like demons by affiliated organizations. Our struggle to understand what to start work on first amidst our daily practices was so great that the subtitle of our first activity report was “A Year of Exploration,” which I believe symbolically speaks of what we went through.

The year-long processes by which a motley crew of helpers started with a variety of written forms, documents, and communiques, continued to update their activity plans alongside the situations in disaster-affected areas, and above all, deepen its relationships with affiliated organizations was full of stops, starts, and bewilderment. However, as I saw them slowly begin to make their way into communities, all the while completing these mundane tasks, I was quite impressed by the ability and motivation of these staff members. I still believe it is miraculous that not a single one of us quit because of burnout.

Every disaster affects people and places differently, and rebuilding processes also vary. Some information from past disasters may be of use to individuals later on, but much of it is surely not. Further, the Great East Japan Earthquake affected each of the three prefectures of Tohoku differently, and even within Miyagi, the situation in a particular area is often quite different from that in the next. We must flexibly respond to the needs of survivors as they change over time, and change our own policies accordingly, and we must also fastidiously document that process. Those tasks alone will create a great treasure for the future of our society. I would now like to raise a rousing cheer for the current and future efforts of all the staff of the MDMHCC.