

From the disaster area

Welcoming March on the 12th anniversary
Normal times can turn into an emergency at any time

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This year's winter in Kesennuma was a long and harsh one. There were more frequent and greater quantities of snowfall compared with last year, and unbearably cold days seemed to last every day. Since the beginning of March, we have begun to feel the slightest amount of warmth. It feels that the end of winter is approaching.

Incidentally, this year marks 11 years since the Great East Japan Earthquake. At the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center, with which I am affiliated, we publish an article about mental health in a local newspaper in Kesennuma every month, prepared together with the Kesennuma Public Health Center, but for the March issue every year, we write about the earthquake disaster and mental health. This year, we received new inquiries from residents who read the article. This year, as in 2011, the date of the disaster fell on a Friday, so there may have been many people who were reminded of the earthquake. I realized once again that there are people for whom, after 11 years, the event feels like a distant memory, as well as people for whom the memory comes back to life—where the memory never goes away. Already 11 years, still 11 years, finally 11 years. No doubt, each person has their own March 11.

It is going to be nine years since I started working in Kesennuma. When I spend time in Kesennuma, I have the impression that after March 11, the town and people both begin to prepare to welcome spring. At 11:36 pm on Wednesday, March 16, a large earthquake occurred with its epicenter off the coast of Fukushima Prefecture. I was in Kesennuma on this day, woken from sleep by an earthquake early warning on my smartphone and a huge tremor. This was my first earthquake experience, and I felt it subside very quickly as a physical experience. I started reading related articles on my smartphone while feeling a bit drowsy, and then one or two minutes later, a second

earthquake occurred. It was during the second earthquake that I felt fear. I heard a tremendous rumbling, and at the same time, there was a small but strong shaking, after which the entire building began to shake, with the shaking becoming gradually more intense. I recall vividly how I thought to myself, "everything will end," how this shaking was a disaster-class earthquake, and how my life will end here. As a physical sensation, it lasted about two to three minutes. As the shaking gradually settled, sirens began to sound in the town. My residence in Kesennuma is located in a lowland about 300 meters away from the sea; the possibility of a tsunami was very much on my mind. Although it was only at a warning level according to the TV, cars continued to drive toward higher ground on the typically quiet road out front. I was unable to return to sleep and stayed awake until the morning.

I felt like I was caught off guard by this earthquake. This earthquake, which occurred just after March 11 and just another year after the previous earthquake in the region, dragged me back to March 11. Since that day, I have often heard residents say, "I wonder why the timing was like this" and "that shaking was similar to the earthquake disaster." Approximately one week later, weak aftershocks continued. Fortunately, there was not much damage around my house, but the town was severely damaged. Many restaurants and retail stores were still closed. We never know when and in what form a disaster will occur. Normal times can turn into an emergency at any time. It is easy to forget, but the fact remains. It would not be strange if such an emergency happened now, at this exact moment.

When talking of disasters that can happen at any time, we cannot ignore Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Of course, it is unreasonable to talk about natural disasters and man-made disasters in the same terms, but there are no differences in

terms of the deaths of people and the devastation wrought, as well as the loss and damage resulting from disasters. The lifestyles of the Ukrainian people were suddenly disrupted on February 24. Many important things that do not need to be taken away are taken away from us. The videos and images shown on the news are unbearable to watch. The circumstances in which we find ourselves today are similar to those I faced when I was working in Yokohama at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake, and how I was not in Tohoku, where there was severe damage. What can I do, now, as a person who was not directly affected by the disaster? Does it end at just saying, “that’s so hard for them,” or something more?

What we can do as the involved party and what we can do because we are not the involved party, in response to the various disasters occurring today—surely there must be something that we can think of precisely because we have experienced the great disaster that was the Great East Japan Earthquake.