Volume 13, Number 2

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

Photo courtesy of Michael Goodman

BOOK EXCERPT
Humble Inquiry
Edgar H. Schein

On Communication: Process Consultation, Helping, and Humble Inquiry
Edgar H. Schein

BOOK EXCERPT
Leading the Relational Inversion: From Ego to Eco
C. Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer

Disaster as a Springboard for Thriving, Resilient Communities
Bob Stilger

Healthcare at Its Best: Southcentral Foundation's Core Concepts Training
Katherine Gottlieb and Michelle Tierney

Commentary
Robert Hanig

Published by The Society for Organizational Learning
www.solonline.org

ISSN 1524-1734

society for SoL organizational learning

FEATURE 13.2

Disaster as a Springboard for Thriving, Resilient Communities

BOB STILGER

What happens when catastrophe fundamentally shifts the world we know? In March 11, 2011, the triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami, and radiation leak devastated northeastern Japan. In the aftermath of the tragedy, people from throughout the country began to gather not just to share their grief but to consider how they might create a new future together. Numerous initiatives have been launched to experiment with the structures, processes, and practices that create conditions for creativity and collective action. As we enter a time when the world as a whole may experience even more collapsing systems and disasters, the people of Japan – and especially of the Tohoku region – are showing us the way to build healthy and resilient communities.

Bob Stilger

It was pitch black outside in the early-morning hours of March 11, 2011, when the phone rang. Startled, I answered and heard my daughter Annie's frantic voice asking, "Are they okay? Have you heard from *obaachan* and *ojiichan?* Are they okay?" I asked her what she was talking about, and she told me that Japan had been struck by an earthquake and tsunami. The next day, the disaster triology would be complete when the nuclear power plants started to explode. News was sketchy. Annie was worried about our adopted Japanese family, who lives 500 miles away from the Tohoku region where the disasters struck.

My Japan story begins in 1970. When the US invaded Cambodia and the National Guard murdered students demonstrating against the Vietnam War at Kent State University. That year, as a young peace activist, I just wanted to be away from the US. A door opened to Japan. Shortly after arriving, I began to develop a deep relationship with the "grandfather of my heart," Nakatsugawa Naokazu. We met when he was 71 and I was 21, and he helped me discover my own spirit and opened the door into the rest of my life. I also met my spouse, Susan Virnig, that year in Japan. Our daughter, too, has grown up embraced by the Nakatsugawa family and Japanese culture.

I arrived in Japan about three weeks after my daughter's frantic phone call. For the last two and a half years, I have spent about half my time in Japan. I stay there for five or six weeks, return to the US for five or six weeks, and then travel once again to Japan. It's been a rich, challenging, exhilarating, and grief-filled time.

Shortly after arriving in Japan in early April of 2011, I facilitated a workshop of business leaders in downtown Tokyo. All of Japan was in a state of shock in those early days. People arrived quietly, inwardly focused, unsure that they would be able to speak with others. The air was thick, and people's hearts were heavy. Three hours later, the air in the room was filled with excitement. The change from the beginning

was so extreme that I went to a quiet corner and tried to sense what was happening. I heard these words in my mind: *We have been released from a future we did not want.* Disasters had cracked open the old normal. A new normal was waiting to be born.

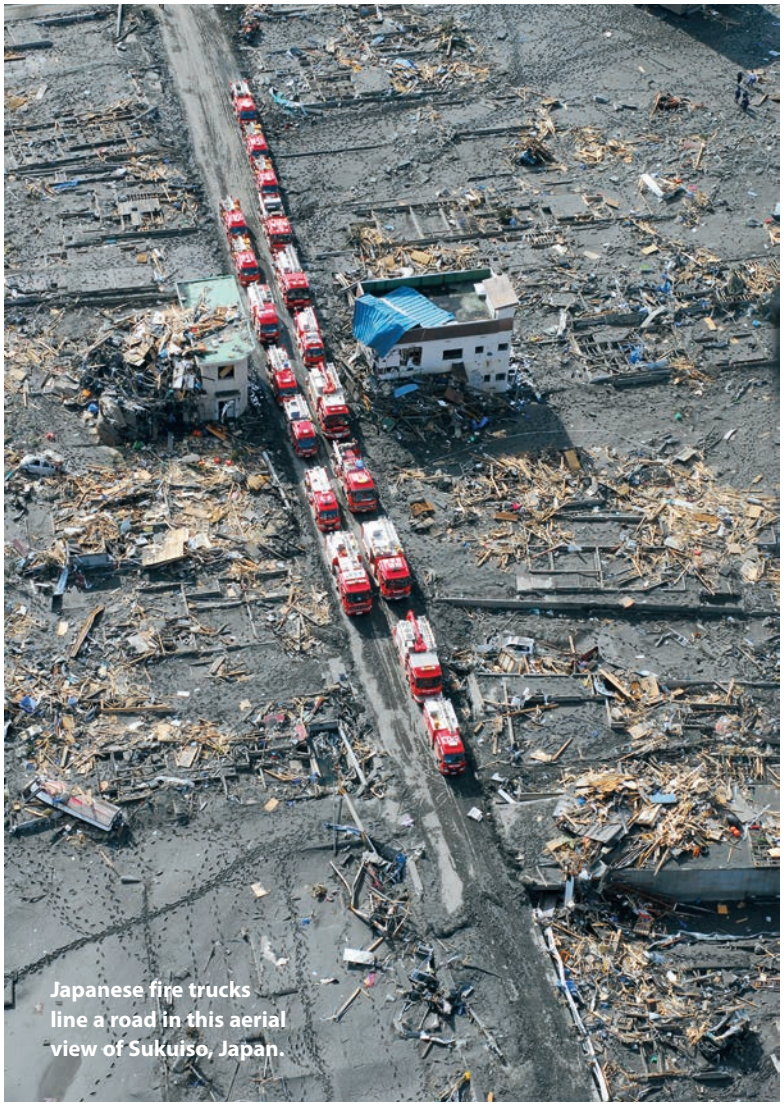
Very Different Disasters: Kobe (1995) and Tohoku (2011)

On March 11, 2011, the earthquake hit first, with the epicenter 70 kilometers off of Japan's north-eastern coast. Buildings as far away as Tokyo swayed. Others collapsed. In some places, the land literally dropped away, creating huge holes more than a meter deep. Then the two tsunamis hit. The larger one had waves 20 meters high that moved at almost 100 kilometers/hour. In the aftermath of earthquake and tsunami, the nuclear reactors at Fukushima exploded and began to release significant radiation. In total, nearly 20,000 people died. Another half million were left without homes or jobs or both. Many hundreds of fishing boats were destroyed, fish processing plants swept away, and forests and fields made unusable because of salt water, radiation exposure, or both. The world was forever changed.

People comment on the difference between the mood after the 1995 Great Hanshin earthquake in Kobe and the 2011 disasters in Tohoku. Yes, of course, the scope was different, but there was something else as well. In the mid-1990s, most people in Japan felt that the country was on the right course: build a strong economy, create access to economic prosperity, achieve upward mobility. The job after the Great Hanshin earthquake was to get back to the old normal: Japan was on the right track.

By the end of the first decade of this new century, the mood was different. The political party that ruled Japan since World War II was tossed out of power. More and more people complained about their lives. The older generation had retired and gone hiking in the mountains. The younger generation, having coming of age after Japan's economic bubble broke, was not stepping forward to hand their lives over to the economic machine. People in the middle – in their 40s and 50s – were left with little support from those older or younger. The 3/11 disasters created a psychic shift of huge proportions. Something else was possible. But what might it be?

I heard these words in my mind: *We have been released from a future we did not want.* Disasters had cracked open the old normal. A new normal was waiting to be born.



Japanese fire trucks line a road in this aerial view of Sukuiso, Japan.

© Stocktrek Images

Seasons of Grief

For most of 2011, my work was still outside of the Tohoku region. Others were doing the emergency work; my focus was thinking with individuals and small groups about how to support people in creating a new Tohoku. I traveled to many parts of the country to host community dialogues in which people talked about their hopes and fears. Among other things, my partners in Japan and I convened a series of five Community Youth Leader Dialogues. These events brought together young people from across Japan to talk about their lives and the future they wanted. Many dialogues were about how to support people in Tohoku. There was a shared sense that the government could re-create the past, but only people could create a new future together.

There was a shared sense that the government could re-create the past, but only people could create a new future together.

Because of my travel back and forth between the US and Japan, I was able to experience the changing seasons of disaster:

- **In April and May of 2011,** the sense of grief was almost overwhelming. Whenever people came together, there were tears. I remember an older television executive looking at me with moist eyes saying, "I thought Japan had ended." Everywhere there was confusion, grief, uncertainty.
- **By autumn,** a sense of determination was emerging. Miraculously, temporary housing had been constructed for everyone who had lost their homes. People were lifting their heads and beginning to find the next step. Grief was still present everywhere, but things were starting to move.
- **In the cold of winter,** people began to stand up for what they wanted. In January 2012, we invited people to a gathering in Tokyo to launch the Future Center approach as a vehicle for forming new collaborative partnerships. Having expected 30 or so people to come, we were amazed when more than 100 filled the room. Young and old. Men and women. Activists and businesspeople. Academics and priests. A new energy was present.
- **By the spring of 2012,** there was a sense of urgency, an energy of *get on with it,* although people were still unclear about what *it* was. People wanted to talk with each other. They wanted action. They wanted to work with the energy they felt.
- **By the fall,** there was a sense that the time is *now.* We need to move. I remember a gathering of about 300 called Fukushima Kaigi, where people from all walks of life came together to talk about everything: protecting themselves from radiation hazards, making safe play spaces for children, supporting young women in Fukushima, creating new industry, dealing with nuclear waste, finding opportunities for youth. People with many different points of view gathered, but they didn't waste their time arguing about their differences. They simply supported each other in finding their next step forward.
- **By the winter of 2013,** there was a new stuckness. People were exhausted. Some who had been giving everything they had for two years were hospitalized with sickness and stress. The emergency was over, but now the real work of building a future had to begin. The clarity of purpose of responding to the disaster was gone, and the funds that supported the response were spent. But 20 or 30 years of work remained to build a new Tohoku.

What a confusing time! Through it all, my colleagues and I are learning many lessons as we work with and host dialogue among many people in many communities inside the disaster area and all over Japan.

It Is About Community – Always

After the earthquake and tsunamis, the distribution of temporary housing was complicated. The government's highest priorities were speed and

Photo courtesy of Bob Stilger

fairness. A lottery system was used to ensure fairness. Unfortunately, that process meant that people already isolated from their former neighbors in emergency housing were separated further, as they were assigned randomly to different temporary housing groups. I encountered some notable exceptions:

Building Community in Temporary Housing

The entire village of Oosawa in Minami-sanriku was destroyed. When the temporary housing allocations came, a man named Chiba-san noticed that he and several other residents from the village were assigned to the same temporary housing site. An idea formed. They went to the local officials and asked, "Can we exchange certificates with others?" A miracle happened: The local officials agreed, and the work began. Chiba-san and his friends were able to gather almost all of the villagers together in the same temporary housing site. They had community. Even if some didn't particularly like each other before, they had community.

The emergency was over, but now the real work of building a future had to begin.

One of their first projects was to build awnings above the doors of their temporary housing units. These awnings provided a place for people to sit, to take off their shoes out of the rain, to see each other. Then the villagers organized nighttime patrols for their own safety. Next, they started gardens so they could grow part of their own food. They were still alive, so they organized a fall festival to celebrate life. By the time winter came, they thanked the nonprofit organization that had been helping them and invited it to go help someone else. They could take care of themselves.

Rebuilding in Jusanhama

In the small fishing village of Jusanhama near

Ogatsu, 10 fishermen had been able to take their boats out to sea between the time of the earthquake and the time the tsunamis came. Their fathers and grandfathers had told them, "When the big one comes, take your boat and go as fast as you can. Get to a depth of 60 meters or you will die." They traveled together, keeping sight of each other. They got out far enough and felt the tsunami pass beneath their boats. When they left, they did not know if they would live or if their families would survive. As darkness came, the fishermen had no contact with their loved ones. They stayed together and turned on all their lights so that people on shore, if they were alive, would know the fishermen were alive, too. They returned to the stark devastation of the tsunami the next morning, but they had their boats, and they had each other. The fishermen and their families began to rebuild. One of the first things they did was to clear a piece of land. They went to the local officials and said, "Please build our temporary housing here so we can stay together." The officials agreed.

Businesses across the region were decimated. The questions became, what are the businesses we believe in now?

Photo courtesy of Bob Stilger

Forming communities of interest

Most temporary housing was built in small clusters of 50 to 200 dwellings. There were so many evacuees from areas of Fukushima radiated by the nuclear power plants that an exception was made, and a site for nearly 1,000 people was created in Koriyama. This larger project had an unexpected benefit: there was enough diversity for communities of interest to form around weaving, baseball, aikido, cooking, children, and more. Some feared this temporary housing community might become a "ghetto," but the arrangement actually helped people find others they wanted to be in community with.

Business – It Is About Community, Too

Businesses across the region were decimated. Products, facilities, and workers were destroyed, damaged, and displaced. The questions became, what are the businesses we believe in now? How should we rebuild them?

Restoration through new forms of energy

In Kesennuma, a large fishing town in Miyagi, a local energy company decided to abandon its pre-3/11 plans to develop solar as a new energy alternative. It decided to do biomass-based energy generation instead. Why? Biomass is less profitable and takes longer. It's more complicated. The reason the company made this decision is that biomass creates the opportunity to restore the forests in the hills around Kesennuma. During the Tokugawa period more than 150 years ago, Japan had one of the best-managed forest

systems in the world. People worked with nature to insure forest health. Modern times brought overuse to the forests, something that severely compromised the watershed. A focus on biomass production could restore the forest, restore the watershed, and help restore the ecosystem of the nearby bay.

The past as inspiration

Further north, in the Iwate town of Otsuchi, others also thought the forest and the surrounding mountains might provide the key for new opportunities. Of 250 boats in the port, 249 were destroyed in the tsunami. Both fishing areas and agricultural fields were destroyed. In response, people turned around, looked at the forest and surrounding hills, and asked, "How can we rebuild community with what we have?" Some have begun to create a new wood products industry. Others are looking to the past for inspiration. They noticed, for example, that 100 years ago, Otsuchi was famous for its tofu and wasabi, made delicious by the underground springs present in the surrounding hills.

Futures Fair. Minamisoma, a community of 70,000 people about 25 kilometers from the nuclear reactors, evacuated 50,000 residents after 3/11. By early 2012, nearly 30,000 had returned. Radiation was present on the ground and in the buildings, but this area was people's home, and they would find a way to live again. Organizers created a Futures Fair, expecting a few hundred people to participate. More than 1,000 came. They came because they needed each other and because they wanted to discover what businesses they could create to support themselves and the country as a whole. Participants shared plans for everything from solar-powered communities to development of hydroponic and aquaponic systems for food production free from radiation. They recognized that new businesses need to work with and for the community.

These are small examples, but they give a flavor of the spirit that is present in the Tohoku region. The future is not built with master plans. It is built when people come together, look at what they have, and begin to create.

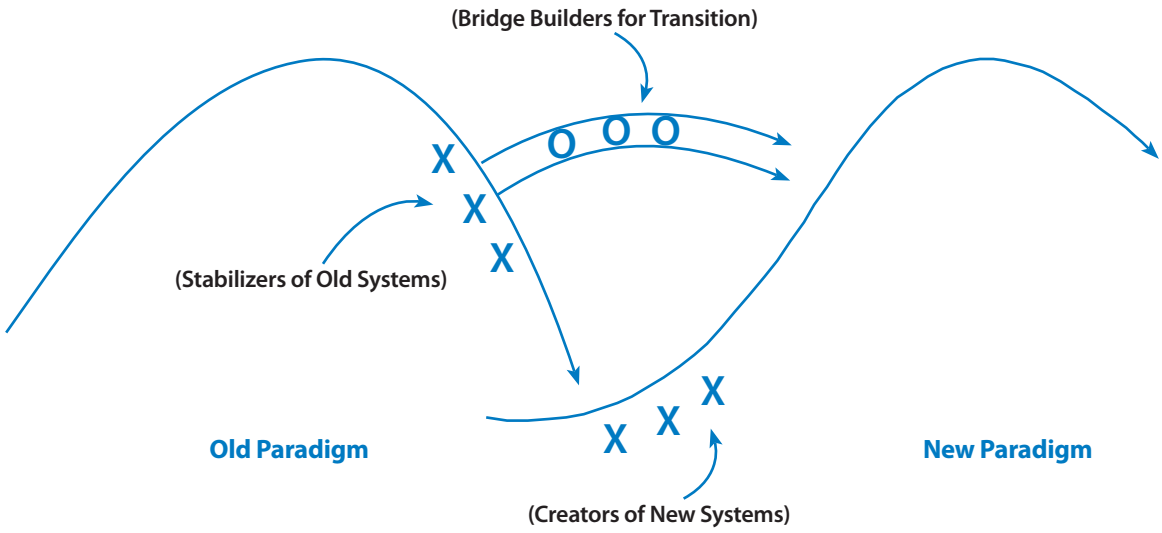
Two aspects of Japanese culture, the ancient and the new, are now coming together. If we go back a couple thousand years, Japan was made up of isolated villages separated by steep mountains. The main food was rice, cultivated in paddies. It takes a village to cultivate a wet rice crop. The alternatives were simple: People either worked together or starved. Business, life, and community were inextricably bound together. Business was not primarily about making a profit. It was about serving community needs. This spirit, somewhat tattered under the onslaught of consumerism, is still alive and is being rekindled in Japan.

If we come forward to the present day, Japan is still a collective culture. Numerous strengths exist in the collective. One weakness is that the collective deters individual initiative. The expression in Japan is, *The nail that sticks up gets pounded down.* People regularly push down their own ideas and aspirations out of fear of disrupting the collective. 3/11 has created a new attitude. Government is not going to fix the problems created by the disasters. Individual initiative is required. But here's what's happening – people are standing up and taking initiative AND they are staying with and in the collective.

The future is not built with master plans. It is built when people come together, look at what they have, and begin to create.

This energy of individuation in a collective field is the energy needed in Japan today, as well as in the rest of the world. Those who live in Tohoku have key character traits many of us would do well to emulate. Although some describe the people in this region as being shy and conservative, my experience is that they are thoughtful and deliberate. Deeply grounded in nature, they are more likely than most to find their way forward in this uncertain time.

FIGURE 1 **Stabilizing the Old System, Creating New Systems, and Building Bridges**



An Opening

Disasters create a crack in our habitual ways of thinking. Alongside the tragedy, an opportunity arises for new possibilities. As we enter a time when we may experience even more collapsing systems and disasters, perhaps we can learn to use these experiences to create a new future. The people of Japan – and especially of the Tohoku region – are showing us the way.

The triple disasters created a moment of "punctuated equilibrium" – a break with the continuity of the past in which the possibility of new future action is born.

The triple disasters created what systems scientists call a moment of "punctuated equilibrium." Put simply, this means a break with the continuity of the past in which the possibility of new future action is born. How does one work with the energy of a time of punctuated equilibrium? What are the structures, processes, and practices that create conditions for creativity and collective action?

During my time at The Berkana Institute, we saw three different kinds of work needed in times such as these:

- **Stabilizing the old system.** We need to keep alive those things that will continue to be important in a new age and let die those things that no longer serve us well. Sometimes we speak of this work as "hospicing the old," because things do need to die – and they need to die well. There are many examples in Japan, ranging from nuclear reactors to the increasingly problematic medical and education systems.
- **Creating new systems.** As people turn away from trying to make old systems work, they start to construct alternatives. Most often, their early prototypes do not work. If they have the vision, courage, and support to continue working, they learn, and new systems emerge. In Japan, examples of this work include the closed hydroponics and aquaponics systems that are being conceived of for production of food in Fukushima.
- **Building bridges.** This work of making it possible for more and more people to embrace new alternatives is essential if systems transformation is going to take root.

Future Centers in Japan

Future Centers were initially developed in Europe at the end of the last century as a creative space where diverse people could engage with each other to define new collaborative actions. In 2009, Japan's Knowledge Dynamics Initiative at Fuji/Xerox began looking closely at how to develop Future Centers in Japanese businesses. Two months after the 3/11 triple disasters, Future Center Week was launched, becoming an annual event in 2012 and 2013.

In its most basic form, a Future Center is simply a place where people gather with the intent to discover and prototype new collaborative projects. Using dialogue methodologies like circle, World Café, Open Space technology, and Appreciative Inquiry, participants build trusting relationships and find new possibilities for collaboration.

We are working with five types of Future Centers in Tohoku:

- **Grief and Possibility.** People, especially in Fukushima, gather to share their collective grief and explore new possibilities. There is so much to be said, and it requires quiet spaces that cultivate a deep listening presence.
- **Local Action.** Grief and possibility give way to development of collaborations and projects to make things better, including new businesses, new ways of helping children learn, and better ways to help people be healthy.
- **Translocal Systems.** While change is always local – it occurs in a particular place – transformative change arises when people engaged in similar actions are connected with each other across distance and difference to explore deeper systemic shifts.
- **Stories of the Future.** Actions begin to take on a deeper focus when people share a collective sense of the future. Stories of the future are a way of introducing the transformative scenario planning that is necessary to ground and connect action in separate domains into a rich ecosystem of emergent possibilities.
- **Deepen Learning.** Finally, Future Centers engage people in learning from their own experience, from the experience of others in the room, and from knowledge and experience from the larger world.

Work in these five domains is accelerated through a series of related activities:

- **Imagine**, always. It begins with imagination and with people who come together to begin to imagine what might be.
- **Invite** the right people, either by scoping the situation and determining who needs to be present, or by developing crystal clarity about a purpose that attracts the right people.
- **Engage** in deep dialogue using a variety of methodologies to uncover the wisdom and experience present in the room.
- **Harvest** the dialogue well, as one would harvest a productive yield from any planted field. What's happened in the engagement is precious and needs to be preserved.
- **Make visible** the harvest so it can inform and inspire others who are engaging in similar efforts.
- **Connect** with others engaged in similar work. Reach out. Draw them together. Find points of common interest and see what else is possible.
- **Imagine**, again and again. ■

Photo courtesy of Bob Stilger

In Tohoku, some of us are using a form adapted from Europe called Future Centers (see "Future Centers in Japan," on p. 33). Future Centers use dialogue as a core methodology for creating new partnerships for collaborative action. We are using the Future Centers concept to weave people and places together into an ecosystem of practice that we call the Tohoku Futures Network.

What's important is that we discover how to connect the system to itself, developing a rich new ecosystem of possibilities as people work together to build healthy and resilient communities.

The work of building a future in Tohoku is just beginning. It will take several decades. The nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in 1986 is just now giving way to new, grounded community. It takes time to learn how to thrive after a disaster. What's important is that we discover how to connect the system to itself, developing a rich new ecosystem of possibilities as people work together to build healthy and resilient communities. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Stilger is the co-president of New Stories. He previously co-founded and served as executive director of a community development corporation in the Northwest. Bob followed Margaret Wheatley as co-president of The Berkana Institute. *bob@newstories.org*

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

Volume 13, Number 2

EDITORIAL TEAM

Managing Editor
Janice Molloy

Contributing Editor
Deborah Wallace

Publisher
Frank Schneider

Photo courtesy of Michael Goodman

ISSN 1524-1734
EISSN 1536-0148

© 2013 by the Society for Organizational Learning.
SoL is a registered trademark of the Society for Organizational Learning.

Design & Production: NonprofitDesign.com

SUBSCRIPTION OPTIONS

To order online and for a full description of subscription options, please visit our website.

Receive *Reflections* as a SoL Connections member:
- USD$125 U.S. (electronic edition only)

One year individual subscription:
- USD$75 U.S. (electronic edition only)

University/Non-profit Institution
- USD$175 United States
- USD$195 International

For-profit Institution
- USD$275 United States
- USD$295 International

Reflections: The SoL Journal is published by the Society for Organizational Learning. Inquiries regarding subscriptions, address changes, back issues, reprints, and permission requests should be directed to:

reflections@solonline.org
Reflections: The SoL Journal
PO Box 425005
Cambridge, MA 02142-0001

+1.617.300.9530 (phone)
+1.617.812.1257 (fax)
E-mail: reflections@solonline.org
www.solonline.org/?Reflections