



All Shook Up

Earthquakes have been very much in the news recently, the large one in China earlier this summer that caused massive devastation, and more recently, one in northern Japan that also killed a number of people. When our family decided to move to Japan back in 1986, the thought that we were moving 'into danger' was one that gave me quite some concern.

We all know that Japan is synonymous with earthquakes, and when friends of ours in Vancouver heard that we were moving here, some of them asked, "Is that such a good idea? What if there is another big earthquake? Do you really want your children to be living in such a place?"

I certainly wasn't able to reassure them that we would be OK, but I could reply to them that there was another point of view - I was actually taking my family away from an area of high earthquake danger! What many people who live in Vancouver don't realize is that their city too is located in an area prone to very strong earthquakes, and that - just like the Tokyo area - the next 'big one' is long overdue!

So was I moving towards danger, or away from danger? There was no way I could analyze this with any degree of confidence, so I just mentally 'shrugged my shoulders' - nothing I could do about it either way.

But when we arrived in Tokyo and I had to find a place for us to live, I *did* indeed think about earthquake hazards. Even though it would have been quite a bit cheaper for us to live in an older wooden apartment, I refused to consider such places, and rented an apartment in a brand new concrete building; we were the first tenants in the place. What could be safer than that?

Or so I thought.

Skip ahead a couple of months; our family settled down into the new place, and while I worked on my woodblock printmaking skills, I opened an English 'school' in one room of the apartment to provide a living for us. One of the first students was a gentleman who worked for city hall. He was currently on assignment at the local library, and he needed to brush up his English before going on an overseas study trip.

When he arrived for his first lesson, and I showed him into the six-mat room that served as classroom, he refused to sit in the location I had prepared for him, but moved his cushion over against the sliding doors that led out onto the balcony. "I would like to sit here," he said. I had no idea what was going on, but he explained that he wanted to sit near the door so that if there was an earthquake, he would be able to escape as quickly as possible.

I just laughed at him, "But this is a brand new concrete building, built to modern standards. You're completely safe here."

He replied with words to the effect, "Look, I work at city hall. I know something about construction, and inspections, and what actually goes on, as opposed to what *should* go on. I'll sit here by the window, and if you're smart, so will you."

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I was flabbergasted. Here I was, thinking that I had brought my family into a very safe building, and this 'insider' was telling me that he felt nervous being in the place for even a few minutes. Well, there really wasn't anything I could do about it, as we certainly couldn't afford to think about moving. I put the episode out of my mind, and we got on with our lives ...

I lived there for fifteen years, and - as you know - there was no 'big one' in Tokyo during that time. On the day when I moved out to live in my current home in Ome, I turned back as I left, to look at the building for one last time, thinking as I did so, "Well, we made it through safely! If there is an earthquake there tomorrow, we'll see what happens, but it won't be *my* problem!"

But of course, I still live in Tokyo. Before I purchased this new place, I took a good long look at it from the point of view of potential danger from earthquake, fire, and flood, and came to the conclusion that it seemed to be as safe as 'possible' against those hazards. But you'll excuse me if I decide not to 'chat' with any city hall people about it, OK?

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