



An Evening Stroll

Last week saw the anniversary of the massive earthquake and tsunami disaster that hit this country three years ago. In the months following the quake, I wrote a few items for A Story A Week, touching on how the rationing of electricity was affecting us here, but I have never told you the story of what happened to me on the day itself.

(I have to mention right up front that I was not injured in any way at all, nor was any of my own property damaged, so I do not mean for my own tale of slight inconvenience to be compared in any way to the truly horrifying stories that many of the people in the Tohoku region experienced.)

I was in Tokyo the day of the quake, visiting one of the men who is working for us as a hired printer, Shinkichi Numabe. I was there for the purpose of shooting video footage for our YouTube channel, and actually, I was shooting video at the very moment that our floor began to shake. I'm not able to show you any exciting footage of the event because, along with everybody else in the building at the time, I did the sensible thing - I immediately stopped what I was doing and headed outside. (It simply didn't occur to me to try and keep the camera rolling ...)

I have been in any number of 'routine' earthquakes here in Japan, but this was my first experience of what was clearly a major quake. The earth movement for us was almost in slow-motion, with the ground undulating in visible waves, just as though we were out on the sea, standing on the deck of a large ship. Utility poles rocked back and forth, and the hanging wires jangled and clattered together roughly. It went on for about three or four minutes, gradually settling down.

But that was the extent of it for us; there was no apparent damage to either our own building nor any of the others nearby. When we came back inside we turned on the radio to get a bit of information on what had happened and when we heard that the epicenter had been such a long way north of us, we understood that this must have been an historic event. To have felt *that* strong, even such a long way from the center, meant that it must have been massive indeed.

I began to pack up, ready to head home. It was clear that there could be no resumption of train service for at least the rest of that day, as all the tracks and cabling would have to be inspected before any train could move. I was going to have to walk home - something around 40 kilometers. As my normal walking pace is on the order of 4 kilometers per hour, it should be doable, I thought.

I stopped at a convenience store, stocked up on drinks and rice balls, and then headed west. For the first couple of hours things seemed fairly normal, but as evening drew on the sidewalks became quite crowded with walkers, all of us headed towards the suburbs.

Luckily, I had my Tokyo map book in my rucksack, so I could work out an efficient route, but my plan of getting all the way home in one trek didn't pan out. "Forty kilometers in a day; no problem!" might have been true some years back, when I was a regular hiker, but it clearly wasn't going to happen this time around. Around nine in the evening or so, after about six hours of steady walking, I started to consider what Plan B might be.

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I was near Mitaka City, where one of my print collectors lives. I had visited his home some years ago, and although I had no idea what the actual address was, I thought I might be able to find the place from memory of the surrounding streets once I got close.

It took a bit of circling around, but I finally did manage to locate his apartment building. When I rang the bell down at the entrance his wife answered, and although I had met her on that previous visit, she was clearly somewhat reluctant to open the door. After a couple of awkward minutes though, she decided to let me in, and up I went. It turned out that her husband was also stuck downtown, and had not been able to call her.

After a bit of time, she relaxed a bit, and fed me her husband's waiting dinner, assuming (correctly) that he wouldn't be making it home that evening. She also asked me to have a look at his 'print room' as many of his books and print storage cases had been tumbled onto the floor by the shaking, and she wasn't sure what to do with them. I spent an hour or so getting everything all safely stowed away properly, and we then spent the rest of the evening watching the scenes of devastation that had begun to fill all the TV channels, learning for the first time the real magnitude of the disaster.

She prepared a sleeping mat for me in one corner of the room, and after breakfast in the morning, I thanked her very much for the assistance, and headed off again. It turned out not to be necessary to trek all the way home, as once I got near Tachikawa, found that some trains had begun to operate, and made it safely home by mid-afternoon.

I do have to admit though, that I am a bit disappointed in my inability to simply walk all the way straight home. 40 kilometers is 'only' marathon distance, and although nobody would expect to be able to run that far without any advance training, surely it should be walkable?

A bit of a wake-up call for me, I think!

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