



Surviving Sendai, a first person account

Basil Tonks, SPECIAL

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BARRIE - "My name is Basil Tonks. I'm 44 years old. I grew up in Barrie from the age of four to 14. My father was the parish priest at St. Giles Anglican Church on Cook Street. I attended Codrington Street Public School.

After graduating in Asian studies at the University of Toronto and doing some post grad work at UBC, I came to Japan in 1992. Since then, I've built a career here in education and publishing. Currently, I'm the Vice-President of the Educational Venture Corporation in Yokohama, Japan. We research, develop, publish and sell educational materials for children aged five to 15 and provide teacher training in face-to-face seminars and by e-learning.

An earthquake unlike any other

On the morning of March 11, I went to Sendai with a business partner by bullet train for a meeting with a client. We intended to return the same day but during our meeting, the region was hit by a large earthquake, and we found ourselves thrown into a completely chaotic situation.

Our meeting was being held on the second floor of an office building near Sendai Station. Suddenly, during our discussions, our mobile phones began to ring with the distinctive earthquake alarm. This is part of the earthquake early warning system that we have here in Japan. This gave us a window of a few seconds to prepare before the shaking began. My business partner and I took shelter on the floor beneath a steel door frame and waited for the shaking to begin. Although the building we were in was fairly new, the shaking was strong enough that we were not able to stand. Dust and debris from the ceiling began to fall like snow and large cracks appeared in the walls. The lights flickered and died but the siren of the building's automatic emergency system continued to wail. Although we experience small earthquakes regularly here in Japan, this earthquake was stronger and longer than anything any of us had ever experienced.



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Contributed photo

After the first quake ended, we made our way to the first floor. Immediate damage to the building was slight – cracks in the wall, damage to the stairwell, etc. But we could see a lot of broken glass on the streets from other buildings around us.

Of course, we had no electricity and communications were sporadic or non-existent. Fortunately, I was able to speak with my wife for a few seconds before my cell phone died so I was able to let her know that I was alive.

On the first floor, we started to gather information from the radio. Fortunately, I had a laptop with mobile Internet that was, incredibly, still working. Having working radio and Internet access was extremely important and probably saved our lives.

Planning to return to Tokyo later on Friday, we had nowhere to stay. I immediately went to find a hotel but they were all damaged beyond use. My next thought was to go to Sendai Airport but we abandoned the idea after the radio began warning of a tsunami, and I learned that the airport was near the coast by checking the Internet.

At a loss as to what to do next, I went to try and find food and water and was fortunate to find one store where I was able to get some bananas, a loaf of bread, some chocolate and water.

By this time, it was beginning to get dark, and it began to snow quite heavily. It was clear that our most immediate need was to find shelter for the night.

A night among evacuees

Asking locals for directions, we walked through the blacked-out city streets to the local primary school, which had become a makeshift evacuation centre. There were three or four staff from the school who were trying to cope with limited resources.

We were directed to the small school gym and were amazed by what we saw. By the flickering light of one spotlight powered by a portable generator, we saw 400 to 500 people squeezed into the gymnasium. Everyone – the elderly, students, office workers, mothers with small babies – was sitting on the cold wooden floor with no heaters or blankets. Toilet facilities consisted of four portables outside the gym.

There was no panic but many people cried out softly when one of the larger aftershocks rattled the gym or the generator sputtered, and the room darkened. I realize now the importance of that light. To us, that one light was hope. As long as it shone, we could imagine that this horrible night would end. No one knew what the next day would bring but all of us felt that things would get better if we could just make it through the first night.

As the temperature dipped to -1 Celsius, we huddled together for warmth. The news from the radio was all bad, and many of the local people around me had been separated from their families with no information about their whereabouts or safety. In short, the situation was grim.

I was beginning to feel a little hopeless but my partner and I decided to gather as much information as possible and make a plan. From the radio, we learned that there was another airport nearby and that taxis were still operating in the city.

A plan of action

From this information, we put together the skeleton of a plan. We would leave the evacuation center before dawn, walk until we found a taxi, negotiate transport to the airport 140 kilometres away and fly out. Amazingly, I was able to book flights from my computer before my laptop died.

Our plan was full of holes. Would we find a taxi? Would it have enough gas? Would we have enough money to pay him? Would the driver be willing to leave Sendai? Would the roads be open? There were too many unknowns to be confident but we decided to give it a shot. Having a plan, no matter how impossible, was better than having none at all.

The next morning, in the cold pre-dawn light, we walked toward Sendai Station and, incredibly, found a taxi with a full tank of gas. The driver was willing to take us to the airport if he got permission from his supervisor. We drove with him to his dispatch office and negotiated directly with the duty manager. Again, we were amazed. The driver was allowed to take us as far as the roads would allow.

Avoiding the damaged expressways, we began our long drive to the airport. Along the way, we finally realized the scope of the disaster. Thousands of wooden houses were damaged. Some had lost whole walls. Even some large buildings still burned, and smoke from fires in factories and refineries darkened the sky.

Many of the roads we travelled were heavily damaged and some were completely destroyed but our driver was able to use detours until we arrived at Fukushima Airport shortly before noon. It was the biggest cab fare and tip that I've ever paid but worth every yen.

The airport was also damaged and the main control tower was destroyed but the airport was still operating for civilian flights. After a long wait for military and rescue aircraft, we were able to fly north to Sapporo before making our way south to Tokyo.

Apparently, we left Fukushima just 20 to 30 minutes after one of the nuclear reactors there exploded, but we were more than 50 kilometres from the explosion so I don't think we would have been exposed to any radiation.

Home

I arrived back in Yokohama on the night of the 12th, very tired but grateful to be with my family, eat a hot meal and take a long shower.

I felt very guilty to be in such luxurious surroundings while so many are still suffering. In my mind, I try to console myself in that now there are two less people that the emergency services don't have to take care of but I still feel bad in my heart. I guess this is a mild version of what they call survivor's guilt.

Looking back, I realize that there are one or two things that are essential to overcome a natural disaster like we faced in Sendai. First, gathering accurate information before acting is a priority. Having a portable radio is probably one of the best pieces of advice I can give. Secondly, having light, even if it's just a single candle can make a big difference to your spirits. Thirdly, making a plan and working toward a goal are crucial. Hopelessness is the greatest enemy in an emergency situation. Lastly, the thoughts and prayers of others are very powerful. Even in the cold and dark evacuation centre, I would get sporadic messages on my computer, and it made a big difference.

Lastly, let me extend a plea for help. Although Japan is a rich country and the Japanese people are showing great courage and fortitude, the scope of the current disaster will pose a huge challenge for this country. I encourage everyone to help in whatever way they can."

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