

Risk and Refuge: The Role of the Commonplace in Navigating Crisis

Lynn M. Ishikawa

March 25, 2020. I sit at the heavy oak table in the dining room, stacks of books, binders, and papers on three corners, my son's trumpet music and the US census form to my left, a bright bowl of oranges behind my laptop. Electric guitar notes echo from upstairs; water runs in the kitchen. Life goes on despite the fact that much of what we think of as "life" has stopped: going to work, seeing family and friends, traveling. It is both scary and surreal: already someone I know personally is suffering from COVID-19 (although, on March 25, he had not yet received his test results due to a backlog of unprocessed samples), and the Tokyo Olympics have been cancelled. A headline on the front page of *The New York Times* reads, "India Locks Down 1.3 Billion People for 3 Weeks." It seems hard to get more surreal than that, yet recently I often recall another strange day in March 2011—almost exactly nine years ago—when I took the train to the New Sanno Hotel in downtown Tokyo to get the potassium iodide pills that were being provided to American citizens living in the area, a precautionary response to the nuclear disaster that was unfolding in Fukushima. Then, too, reality seemed at odds with everyday expectations; it was surreal to be on such an errand on that lovely day. I stopped at an outdoor café on the way home, trying to enjoy the spring warmth despite the reality of Japan at that moment. Looking back, I don't know the point at which I became so acutely aware of life's tendency to veer. It may have been September 11; it may have been before. Most of my life I have been preoccupied with risk, and now here we are—the whole world—trying to assess the risk of stepping outside.

Looking back at my writing from that third week of March, when I should have been at the conference but was instead observing life through the window of my dining room, what stands out to me is my ability to proceed with the commonplace business of the everyday:

filling bird feeders, cleaning the house, planning lessons. My concentration lagged and my work felt less efficient at home, but I could get on with the typical tasks of life. I could move from room to room without feeling paralyzed, I could focus long enough to accomplish small things despite the chaos. Dread and anxiety are not unfamiliar to me; they wake me now and then in the middle of the night or seize my thoughts occasionally during the day, but they haven't incapacitated me in this current crisis the way they did in 2011. Then, even the most mundane household chore required thought and time; now, I got on with it, purposefully if awkwardly. The first time I went to the grocery store after the lockdown began, I wore a mask and a pair of magenta polyester fleece gloves. I was nervous and uncomfortable, my glasses fogging up with each breath, standing in the produce section trying in vain to find the opening of the slippery plastic vegetable bag. The trip itself was the result of risk calculation, timed to reduce the number of encounters with other people, and executed with the new accoutrements of daily life: wipes and hand sanitizer. But I managed. This was the new normal of engaging with the outside world, the new reality necessary to minimize risk. Of course, people made choices: some didn't wear masks or take the threat seriously; for whatever reason, the precautions were more than they were willing to change. I could judge them, but a part of me also understood. In Japan, in 2011, one of my friends carried a trowel in his backpack at all times in case he needed to dig himself or others out of debris. For me, it was too much. The idea that that was now the sane and recommended thing to do, that everywhere I went I should be prepared to find myself in a pile of rubble, felt like more than I could handle.

If you're looking for a film that captures our current moment, it's *Night of the Living Dead*, George A. Romero's classic horror film from 1968. The threat—"ghouls" that devour the living—seems to come from outside the house; yet in many ways, it is what happens inside the house—the bickering and the petty power struggles—that doom the residents. Because they are unable to work together and to see each other as connected—strangers, yes, but united by the same goal—the real threat ends up being the living people rather than the undead. The house is a refuge yet also a risk, and they can't stay inside forever. The characters in the film listen to radio and television reports describing a "national emergency" and a country in crisis from an "epidemic" (Romero). And then Ben, the main character and the only person of

color in the film, survives the attack of the undead only to be shot by a militia-like figure acting on behalf of the sheriff. In the midst of the pandemic, we stay in to protect ourselves and others from the virus circulating outside, but increasingly it seems that our inability as a unified nation to agree on a productive way to manage our problems and our past is a bigger threat in many ways than the risks posed by the virus. Our home, itself, is the risk. For me, home has been a refuge, but it is clearly not so for everyone; indeed for many, inside is more dangerous than outside. In this and other ways, the pandemic has exposed the inequities in society and the ways in which the systems meant to protect are either broken or unjust. What is commonplace for some is fraught with risk for others.

How can one assess risk in daily life? This question has preoccupied me for decades, but it consumed me in the days after the 2011 disaster in Japan. I felt that if only I could determine a rational, objective sense of the risk we faced from the threat of another earthquake, I could make a clear-headed decision about what we should do. I looked at the reactions of both friends and strangers to see how they were coping and rationalized that if they could move on, then I should be able to as well.

Eventually, society started to return to normal. Shops opened; people went out to eat and drink. But by this time, I could see that something was different about how I was reacting to the aftermath of the disaster. On the occasions when we did go out, I scrutinized spaces for a place to take cover if necessary and mentally assessed the safety of every building we entered. I had to have the television on all the time at home in order to hear the early warning alerts. I was so distracted and on edge that it was difficult to accomplish even the smallest task. I was constantly worried about the radiation that my son, then four, was being exposed to. I read conflicting reports about air and soil safety and wondered whether it was okay for him to play in the park near our house. I watched as government officials explained efforts to contain the still unfolding disaster at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima. In those days and weeks following the disaster, everything seemed uncertain. I kept shoes at the foot of our bed in case we needed to flee in the middle of the night.

Quotidian routines require both calm and trust—the ability to escape the outside and a sense that the inside is safe. In the third week of March 2020, my dining room table became the center of this new

inside world: office, conference room, break room, and cafeteria. In this case, “outside” did not necessarily mean outside my door—I left the house to take walks and go to the store—but rather closer to the Japanese sense of *soto*, or society outside the self (Bachnik 6). In my house, I felt an almost Zen-like sense of peace: my chief anxiety the knowledge that in a few days I would need to meet my students in an online space rather than around the large oval table in our campus classroom. I could stay in because I was being told to stay in, and theoretically I could manage the risk that my family and I faced by making choices about when, how, and how often I went out. In this sense, the danger seemed farther away and the risk less palpable than the March 11 earthquake-tsunami-nuclear disaster in Japan. I thought often of the similarities: the sense of loss and grief for those who had died as well as for everyday life—the way that both lent a sort of nostalgia to common daily routines, making the quotidian seem almost miraculous.

Spring is a turbulent time, March in particular. My father died on an unseasonably warm Michigan day in March; almost 10 years later, I met the man who would become my husband on the first day of spring. The fact that March is also my birth month makes it a time of commemorations and connections between past and present. Seen within the context of this dynamic significance, it’s not surprising that at least two of the biggest unexpected disruptions in my life have occurred in March. On the day of the earthquake, my son had stayed home from daycare because we’d been invited to a friend’s house. I was preparing for the beginning of the new academic year in April. It was a cloudy day, a little cool. As I was walking across the living room, I heard the tinkling of glasses in the kitchen cabinet; immediately after, the house began to shake and then to sway. When it finally slowed, I picked up the television remote with trembling hands, my son under the table, and turned on the public station. It was immediately clear that something major had happened. The emergency broadcast system played a continuous tsunami warning; on the map, almost the entire Japanese coast was blinking.

On March 11, 2020, I said goodbye to my students halfway through the semester without knowing when I would see them again in person. Like the disruption resulting from the triple disaster in Japan, the disruption caused by the pandemic has been enormous and difficult to fathom. For weeks now, life in parts of the world has stopped. I was

told to leave my office and not return without first obtaining permission. Because I was not an essential worker, I took seriously the order to stay home, and when I did go out, I wore a mask and kept as much distance from others as possible. The sense of crisis, the questions of safety and whether the government was being transparent about what they knew reminded me daily of 2011. Both raised questions about preparation and what should have been done—but was not—in order to be ready for such a scenario. Both prompted discussions of life returning to “normal” and, like the other major crisis of my life, September 11, a thought in my own mind that things were forever changed in some way. And both, at least for me, involved almost obsessive checking of the news as a way of gauging behavior and decisions. Just as in *Night of the Living Dead*, the news was a source of both information and fear, deepening my understanding of the crisis but also my sense of panic. What is different about these experiences, however, is the role that the commonplace tasks of everyday life—the routines of making beds and meals and lists, the limited but purposeful movement from one room to another—played in each. Now the commonplace grounds me; then, it fractured my sense of self. Paradoxically, my obsession with risk nine years ago and my inability to fall back into the ordinary routines of daily life eventually made it impossible to go back outside and interact with society. Now, commonplace routines make it possible to endure a fractured society.

A week or two after the earthquake, in a conversation with my husband’s grandmother, I commented, in halting, imperfect Japanese, on the fear I felt about both the current situation and what might happen in the future. At the time, I was obsessed with the concept of risk and trying to assess the chance of another large earthquake which might then trigger further unimaginable disasters. We sat at the dining room table together in the deep quiet of my mother-in-law’s house near Nagoya, where my son and I had gone in an attempt to regain some stability. In a photo dated March 15, 2011, the day we arrived, she sits at the low kotatsu table with my son, their faces close, both smooth, her white hair against his brown. I didn’t have the language skill to articulate my feelings well, but my deep preoccupation—the constant back-and-forth in my mind between the possibility of luck and the acknowledgement of risk—compelled me to attempt the conversation anyway, encouraged by her warmth and willingness to listen. I’m sure she could see and feel my anxiety. Earthquakes were frightening, I said.

Yes, she agreed, all of nature was frightening, capable of huge destruction. But, she added, humans were more dangerous. Then in her 90s, born just after World War I, she had seen the devastation humankind was capable of. She knew the pain of dislocation and loss. A natural storyteller, she was charming and popular with everyone who knew her, yet she had no illusions about human nature; she knew people well. Having lived her whole life in Japan, she also knew well the unsettling yet commonplace reality of the shifting earth in this land of typhoons, volcanos, tsunamis, and earthquakes. But ultimately, despite the overwhelming power of nature and the surreal disruption of our lives at that moment, she knew that the real risk was us.

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