

TWO FORTY SIX

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Two forty six p.m.

A normal Friday afternoon at two forty six p.m.

What would you normally be doing?

Would you be at school? Would you be at home? Would you be working? Would you be shopping in a grocery stall? Almost two years ago, at this time of what was supposed to be an ordinary Friday, people's lives were turned upside down. It should have been just another routine day, but it wasn't. That day, the day on which so many lives were taken away or changed forever, was March 11th 2011.

It's almost 2 years since the tsunami ruptured through the north east coast of Japan. The National Police Agency report last September said that 16000 people died, 6000 were injured, and 3000 are still officially missing. Although the disaster is not as frequently broadcast as last year, that does not imply that things are back to normal again.

Last May, I was fortunate to visit Sendai, to get involved with the volunteering there. When I first arrived in the city, I was surprised at the lack of visible destruction. However, the next day when I went to help the volunteering near the coast just 10km away, things were very different. I saw scenery that day I can never forget.

At first, I saw an enormous empty space, so still and lifeless. It was hard to imagine that the place was once a residential area as there were now no houses to be seen. Next, piles of debris caught my eye. Heaps of what once used to be somebody's belongings were entwined with dead trees and unrecognizable scraps of materials. I could not believe that people's daily lives could be washed away so easily. At that moment I felt truly powerless, and knew that nothing can defy the power of nature.

One of the only buildings standing in the area was the local elementary school. Later, a local man told me that his daughter was one of many children who were rescued by the self-defence force, plucked by a helicopter from the rooftop as a 10m tsunami approached them. Imagine being a nine year old on the rooftop with your friends facing a gigantic wave, swallowing up the whole town, slowly coming towards you and it might be you who is next to be consumed by the waters. It was heart breaking to know that a girl so young had to go through such a traumatizing experience.

He also told me that he had never felt such hopelessness in his life. “Tomorrow didn’t matter” he said, “We were just so desperate. We couldn’t afford to worry about the future.” Then, he went on to warn me that we never know what happens in life and that if we ever find ourselves in a natural disaster it is wise to know where you can secure essential supplies. I thanked the man for his words, but I could not find the right ones of my own to express my condolences.

I felt that the emotional scars of these people are too deep to disappear. However, more importantly, even though their lives were turned upside down by the tsunami, they are moving on and making the most out of it. At times I felt useless while volunteering and I felt that a person’s labour does not contribute so much, but I learnt that just being present, beside those affected holds a significant meaning. It shows that we care and that we haven’t abandoned them.

Hundreds of people still live in temporary housings. Many are waiting for their homes to be rebuilt. It is also true that even once these homes are completed, safety is not guaranteed. There were small earthquakes when I visited Sendai last year and that was fourteen months after the disaster. Apparently, the ground still shakes at least once a day.

Inevitably, the number of volunteers has plummeted as the situation fades from the news. I know that we have our own lives to live and many of us have neither the time nor the resources to actually visit Tohoku. But, how hard is it for us to consider about people in Tohoku and pray for them once in a while? Even a little thought means something to those who are still battling every day to rebuild their lives. And by doing this wouldn’t we be giving the idea of “kizuna” its true meaning?