

Klassen: We can learn from the Japanese

BY KARIN KLASSEN, CALGARY HERALD MARCH 27, 2011

Like some sort of bizarrely cruel story out of Grimm, one day, the Earth snapped its fingers and about 25,000 gentle, hard-working people and \$300 billion in Japanese infrastructure disappeared. As opposed to all the times writers use big, bad words we hope will bring goosebumps, the earthquake, and then the tsunami, created what could without overstatement be called "tragic," "catastrophic" and "shocking."

It even had shimmers of "apocalyptic," "cataclysmic" and "biblical."

Yet, while western journalists were tripping over themselves to show and tell just how bad it was, like I did again just now, the Japanese have displayed the most remarkable, fascinating, almost unimaginable poise. If ever there was a demonstration of character in life's defining moments, these stoic people win the bee. They have behaved in an elegant, measured way under the most obscene circumstances. It gives me culture envy.

I watched, listened, read for a week, and here is my synopsis. Foreign reporters grill the everyday folk, assume the worst, dig for scandal and division, and get none from the Japanese people.

Question: How angry are you that you got such short notice from officials?

Answer: They did the best they could. Who can say when nature will decide to do something like this?

Question: Just how bad are the conditions in the shelters?

Answer: We are happy to be alive.

Question: How has the international community let you down?

Answer: We appreciate the offers to help and will call upon it as needed.

Question: You're Hiroshima survivors who know the devastation of nuclear energy; how angry are you to be facing this threat once again?

Answer: Our people have sacrificed and we have better lives because of it.

Question: Do you want nuclear energy out of your country?

Answer: No, it gives us electricity so we can live.

Question: How unsafe do you feel?

Answer: Accidents happen.

And my favourite question: Do you trust your government?

Answer: Of course. If we can't trust the government, who can we trust?

This makes me want to go literally to the edges of the Earth to help these unassuming people. In keeping with the fairy tale metaphor, they're the Little Red Hen of the international community.

They get the job done, live lean, put family first and are rewarded as the third largest economy in the world. Even with the hit (to use an understatement) their economy will take, they will still have a bigger loaf of dough than most of the rest of the industrialized world. Why? They're not greedy. They take responsibility. They don't feel entitled. They're not whiners.

One doesn't want to compare the level of human suffering among cultures, because, of course, everyone should be happy and healthy and live without oppression. But as someone who pays high taxes in a country that gives aid (not to mention the lives of soldiers), as opposed to receiving aid, I can't help but take umbrage with some of the rhetoric coming from other needy hot spots: Canada isn't there fast enough. We're not giving enough. We're not doing enough. It's better than nothing. Too little, too late.

You couldn't do enough to satisfy the demands of agitated special interests that are sometimes, let's face it, worse than unreasonable in their expectations — they're hysterical in the "crazy" sense of the word. I would put these in the "Chicken Little-The Sky is Falling" category, whereby eventually, you just want to shrug, put in earplugs and carry on eating your soup.

There's a website called ediplomat.com that acts as the Letitia Baldrige of the diplomatic world. It tells you the values and practices of how cultures are likely to behave, and it says of the Japanese: "Great importance is placed . . . on people working together for the good of the larger group." What a concept.

After watching the mindless, petty bickering that kick-started yet another federal election, I wonder what [ediplomat](http://ediplomat.com) would say about Canadian culture. I wonder what character in a morality fairy tale would define our values, our behaviour.

I wonder how big we would crack if we actually experienced something really bad.

Canada (and we're not alone) could learn a thing or two from the Japanese. Even after suffering such a punishing, merciless act, they demonstrate amazing grace.

Karin Klassen's column appears every second Monday.

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