

## What Could I Do?

*Written by Kris Gravender*

Chicago Shimpo

October 21, 2011

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What could I do? What could I really do? I was fighting the urge to return to Aizu simply because I knew the possibility for contracting some kind of cancer, but I felt I just **had** to do something. When the earthquake hit we knew it was bad, but the tsunami made everything worse. Then, to top it all off, Fukushima was becoming a “nuclear wasteland,” according to the news reports we were getting, and there was nothing we could do for the place we love.

どうすればいい？本当にどうすればいい？会津に戻ったら、ガンになるかもしれないとの気持ちを抑え、何かをやらなくては、という気持ちがありました。地震の時は怖かったけど、それより津波の方がすべてをだめにしてしまいました。。そしてニュースでよく聞いたのは福島県が「核で荒廃した地域」になって、私たちの好きな福島のために何も出来ないのではないか、ということでした。

My wife, being from Aizu, was distraught for weeks. She called her family, friends she hadn't talked to in years, and even the local International Association, to get as much news as possible. Her aunt and uncle live in Sendai, and there was no communication from them, not to mention that her brother is a police officer and was being sent into the radiation zone to assist with evacuations. Eventually we were told everyone was safe and healthy, and yet this didn't do much to make us feel better. We donated money, clothes, and food to the Red Cross, but it just didn't seem to be enough to make us feel like we were helping.

うちの妻は会津出身なので、何週間も困惑していました。私の日本の家族や何年間も話してない友達など、そして会津若松市の国際交流協会にも国際電話をしました。妻の仙台に住んでいるおじさんとおばさんからの連絡が無くて、弟も警察の仕事で避難指定区域に行かせられた事もありました。結局、皆さんから「元気だよ」の連絡がありましたが、私たちは安心できませんでした。お金や服、食べ物など赤十字に寄付しましたが、助けたという気持ちは全然ありませんでした。

Then I heard from a friend about a program the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was sponsoring for former JETs to return to their hometowns and tour; as long as they communicated with the outside world about what they saw, felt, and experienced. It was almost as if God was trying to tell me, “Here's your chance.” My wife and I talked about it for days. If I go, what kinds of problems would I face; what would I do while I was there; could I go into the zone for just a couple of hours to see for myself what was happening; and a whole list of questions and ideas. No matter what the answers became, I knew I had to go.

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その後、友達から外務省がスポンサーのプログラムで、東北で勤めていた元 JET たちを探していることを知りました。その JET たちには東北に戻って歩き回り、ソーシャルメディアで見た事を放送して欲しかったようでした。神様から「今がチャンスだよ」との声が聞こえたようでした。何日間も妻と話しました。もし行ったらどんな問題があるのか、何をやる予定なのか、自分の目で見られるように少しだけでも被災地や避難区域の中に行けるか、などの質問がいっぱいありました。しかしながら、その質問の答えがあっても行くべきだと思いました。

The good news was that the Ministry was very open to whatever needed to be accomplished. Their objective for this program was to allow former JETs (who were there for longer than a year) to return to the areas they lived, tour around their “hometowns,” talk to friends and/or family to make sure everyone was alright, and generally see for themselves how the country was handling the devastation. Their only request, other than to stay in a hotel and keep track of what money we spent, was to document our time by social media, You Tube, Twitter, or any other internet-based form. I believe their hope was to show the international community that what we had been seeing on the news is not exactly the whole story.

外務省は東北のために元 JET の青年たちに使命を与えてくれました。目的は元の JET たちが日本のふるさとに戻って友達や一緒に勤めた人、家族などを無事かを確認し、被災の規模や状態を自分の目で見て欲しかったそうです。ただ一つのお願ひされたのは、ソーシャルメディア（ユーチューブ、ツイッター、フェイスブック）で、実際に見た事を放送してみなさんに伝えてほしいということでした。欲しかったようでした。外務省の目的は世界の人々が自分の母国で見たニュースほど、日本はそんなに悪くないと伝えてほしかったようです。

I was selected as one of only 18 participants from the thousands of JETs who have participated over the years and was sent back to my second hometown of Aizu, in the western third of Fukushima Prefecture. After spending a night in Tokyo, and meeting with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative the next day, I boarded the Tohoku Shinkansen and headed for Koriyama, which is in the central section of Fukushima; only 40 miles, or so, from the nuclear reactor. Along the way, I noticed how much greenery there was in the area on the way into Fukushima. It was the first week of August, so the rice fields were a healthy dark green, and as the buildings started to become less prevalent, and the nature started to take over, I knew I was heading home.

何千人の中からの 18 人に選ばれて、福島県の西側の会津に戻る事になりました。東京で一晩泊まって外務省の方と打ち合わせして福島県の中心の郡山行きの東北新幹線に乗って出発しました。乗りながら緑のきれいな自然がよく見えました。8 月でしたので、田んぼの青々した緑を目にし、家や建物がどんどん無くなっていくと、会津に帰ってきたということがよくわかりました。

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Upon arrival in Koriyama I quickly changed trains and headed for Aizu. The symbol of Aizu, the red bull called Akabeko, stared at me from the walls of Koriyama Station, and followed me in the train all the way to the city of Aizu-Wakamatsu. The first thing I noticed when I arrived in Aizu was the general lack of change. For an area that was supposedly in decline due to the lack of economy, Aizu seemed to have been unaffected by it all. Leaving Wakamatsu Station was still difficult thanks to the number of cars and buses trying to exit at the same place; and the traffic from the Station to my hotel, which was about a 10 minute drive, was full of cars, bicycles, and people walking. In other words, it was a typical Monday in Aizu: showing no ill effects of the troubles on the coast.

郡山に着いたらすぐに電車に乗り換えて会津をめざしました。郡山駅の壁にある会津のシンボル「あかべこ」が僕を見ているようで、そこから会津まで一緒について来てくれました。会津若松駅に着くと、若松は全然変わってない事がすぐわかりました。アメリカのニュースでよく聞いたの福島は死にそうな状態だということでしたが、会津はまだまだ元気そうでした。自転車やバス、車などがたくさん走っていて、若松駅を出る時は大変でした。ホテルまでも車や歩く人などがいっぱいいました。と言うことは会津の普通の月曜日でした。

And yet, there was something wrong. It took me a little bit, but I finally noticed there were no tourists during the busiest tourism season of the year. No groups of school kids on their field trips to study the past; no bus loads of the elderly coming to use the spacious onsens; and no families spending their children's summer vacation time checking out the gorgeous Aizu nature. In that manner, for the first time I had ever seen, Aizu was empty.

しかしながら、まだおかしい事がありました。少し考えてようやく分かりました。旅行しに来ている人がぜんぜんいなかったことでした。修学旅行の生徒たちはおらず、広い温泉に入りたいお年寄りの方々がいっぱい乗っているバスもなく、会津の素晴らしい自然を見たいという家族もいなかった。その意味で人気のない会津を初めて見ました。

I had found my calling: I understood why I was chosen. Aizu's main industry is Tourism: over forty percent of the area's income stems from the travelers that visit throughout the year. However, due to the media's characterization of Fukushima as a slow death by nuclear radiation, even though the mayor himself had used a meter and taken negative readings at multiple places in the city, no one was coming.

その理由で私が選ばれたと思いました。会津の主な産業は観光業です。この地域の収入の40パーセント以上は、年間を通して訪れる旅行者のおかげです。しかし、国際メディアのせいでお客さんたちは県内の場所は原発で少しずつ死んでいると思わさせられました。会津若松市の市長が市内で自分で放射線数値をテストしましたが、まだまだだれも来ませんでした。

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In order to do what I could for my second hometown, I spent the next few days walking around an area of Japan where I lived for six years, seeing places I had not seen before, and revisiting those I had. My goal was to document my trip by flip video camera; a simple way to upload video to websites like YouTube and Facebook. As of this moment, my group on Facebook called "The Aizu Experience" has over one hundred and seventy members, who have all seen most of the videos I created.

第二のふるさとのために一週間で、昔住んでいた所や行ったことが無い場所、よく行った場所も歩き回りました。私の目標は歩いて行ったところをビデオでユーチューブとフェイスブックに載せたかった。今でも作った THE AIZU EXPERIENCE のフェイスブックのグループが 170 人以上に達し、私がアップロードして作ったビデオをよく見てくれました。

My earnest wish, at this moment, is for more people to see the videos and know that I was there, saw one of the most beautiful areas of the world, and lived through it. I ate the food, drank the water, had some sake, and have had no health problems since. No matter what we hear from government, media, or other opinionated "experts," Aizu is alive and thriving, and still one of the best places to visit in the world. If you don't believe me, look at my Facebook group, my videos on YouTube, or, better yet, go to Aizu and see for yourself. You will be welcomed in my hometown.

いまでも願いは私が作ったビデオを見て欲しいです。私は会津に行って世界で一番きれいな自然を見て、それはまだまだ生きています。会津の食べ物を食べて、水を飲んで、酒も飲んで、まだまだ元気です。政府・メディア・またはその他の独断で話をするどんな専門家がなんと言おうとも、会津は生きていますし、栄えています。世界で訪れるのに最高の場所のひとつです。もし信じてくれないのなら、フェイスブックグループやユーチューブのビデオなどを見てください。できれば、それより会津に行って自分の目で見てください。私のふるさとであなたは歓迎されることでしょう。