

Helpless or Helpful

James Hershman

(former Higashiosaka City Nisshin HS AET, current Osaka Prefecture Ikuno HS NET)

When tragic events occur in the world they often make us feel helpless and hopeless about our fate on this planet. On March 11, 2011 just such an event devastated the Tohoku area on the East coast of the Japanese mainland. A large earthquake was followed by a terrifyingly destructive tidal wave which took nearly 20,000 lives, displaced roughly 340,000 people from their homes and caused a nuclear disaster that has yet to be completely resolved almost 3 years later.

It has been difficult for many of us to wrap our minds around this event and whether there is anything that we can do that would make the slightest difference for those affected. On that day in March, as I watched buildings, homes and cars being swept around like so much flotsam and jetsam, I felt much like I did on a day in September nearly 10 years prior as I watched two planes slam into the World Trade Center in New York; helpless. The two events occurred for vastly different reasons but my helplessness felt the same. Events like that often tend to make us feel helpless for a while after they occur. If we try, though, we can be helpful. It is not always easy to know what we should do or how we should do it. Through this disaster I learned that putting into action your desire to help is what matters, whatever form that action may take. It was my two young sons that taught me this lesson not long after the tidal waters had receded back into the vast Pacific Ocean.

As a way of motivating my boys to be on their best behavior, I use an application on my iPod that awards stars for good behavior. At the end of each day I sit down together with my boys and go over what rules they followed and those they didn't. On a day when their behavior has been excellent, they can earn up to ten stars. Their "total star count" is saved in the application and they can use the stars like money to buy snacks, toys, books or games. They look forward to using their stars in this manner as it gives them a sense of

accomplishment. The reward they get helps to motivate them to continue their good behavior. They had already saved up several hundred stars at the time of the Tohoku disaster. My older son was intent on purchasing a new game for his Nintendo DS while my younger son had his sights set on new Pokémon cards.

A few weeks after the Tohoku disaster, we had planned to go shopping and my sons were going to use their stars to buy the game and cards. To my complete surprise, my older son said that he no longer wanted to buy the game and said instead that he wanted to donate his stars to help the people who were suffering in the Tohoku region. My younger son quickly agreed that he too wanted to give up his precious stars for the same purpose. My wife and I had recently cancelled a trip to a nearby hot spring resort and had decided to donate that money to the relief effort in Eastern Japan. This was not really a significant sacrifice for us as we could reschedule the trip at any time. However, for my two young sons, who had worked hard for months to be on their best behavior to earn the stars they had saved, this was a real sacrifice.

This coming spring will mark the third anniversary of that terrible day in Eastern Japan. There have been a great many acts of generosity and kindness from people in many parts of the world since then. It is easy to miss the beauty and generosity in each act. If the sacrifice you make is small or large is of no consequence as every contribution will eventually add up for those in need. Looking into the eyes of my children as they wished to make a difference in their own small but personally significant way, I was moved, and learned that we are not helpless if we have a true desire to be helpful.