

The Power of Reminiscence Groups to Overcome the Disaster of Tsunami

Toyoko Nomura
Toyo University

The paper presents two studies of a volunteer reminiscence group as a support to overcome the Great East Japan Earthquake. The studies were conducted in the city of Miyako, Iwate prefecture of Japan. The first study is on a volunteers' reminiscence group with the elderly, the younger generation and the professionals. The second study describes an activity conducted by the volunteers' reminiscence group on a railway that has deep roots in the communities of the area. It offered a social opportunity to elders who have become homebound since the community center was washed away by the tsunami. The voices of elders and younger volunteers in the activity are introduced in considering the implications of the study. The discussion covers the roles of the speaker and the listener, and the complexity of their meanings, as well as the power of reminiscing to go beyond time.

Key Terms: Reminiscence Group; Community; Volunteer Training; Great East Japan Earthquake; Cultural Resources

Background of the Study

Applications of reminiscence and life review in Japan include care for elderly persons with dementia, prevention programs addressing needs for nursing care, community programs for healthy elderly persons, and cross generational approaches. Prevention programs for nursing care, through a focus on community-living, in particular, have been developed under a new long-term care insurance system.

The two studies presented are on a volunteer reminiscence group in the city of Miyako, Iwate prefecture of Japan. Miyako is the easternmost city of the main island of Japan, with the Pacific Ocean in the east and the Kitakami Mountains in the west. It is a city known for its rich fishing ground and has a population of approximately 63,000.

The initial footsteps of the Reminiscence Program in Miyako can be traced back to the author's reminiscence group (total of 3 sessions) in 2004, which was conducted as part of the Prevention Program of Homebound under the Preventive Care Project of Miyako. A three-year plan starting in 2005 was laid out for the program development of the Preventive Care Project and the Preventive

Dementia Project. In each district of Miyako, reminiscence groups were held with the local members. Training for the volunteers also took place. The volunteer group was named after the word "moor" in fishing (i.e. *Moyai* in Japanese) to symbolize the ties of community members of Miyako. The reminiscence group by volunteer members continued as part of the activity of the local program for preventive care in the community. In 2010, the reminiscence handbook of Miyako, "The Handbook of Reminiscence in Community" was published. The reminiscence group, enriched with the history and customs of Miyako along with community's cultural resources, was on its way to becoming realized.

Purpose of the Study

On March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck Japan. Miyako, lying along the Sanriku Coast, experienced a devastating impact from the Tsunami. Two years have passed since then, and yet there are about 4100 people who are still living in temporary housing.

Among the members of the volunteer group, there were those who have lost their loved ones and relatives, and those who had their homes and stores washed away by the tsunami without a trace of their existence. Even under such difficult circumstances, the members got together and thought over ways to provide support to people suffering from the earthquake. Two potential plans were adopted: 1) training of a reminiscence group, with an invitation to participate extended to elders in the community; and 2) a reminiscence group on the Sanriku Railway, a railway that has its roots in the history of Sanriku.

Toyoko Nomura, Professor, Toyo University, Faculty of Life Design, Japan

Correspondance concerning this article should be addressed to Toyoko Nomura. E-mail: tnomura@toyo.jp

Study 1: Volunteers' Training for a Reminiscence Group with the Elderly

The purpose of the training was to develop the human resources needed to conduct a reminiscence group, drawing on people from a wide range of backgrounds, including not only professionals but also those organizing preventive care programs. The training consisted of lectures on reminiscence, as well as a reminiscence group in which both elders of Miyako and younger students were invited. A total of 52 people attended the training and 36 elders participated in the reminiscence group. They were divided into five groups, in which members of Moyai became the leader and co-leader. Themes were chosen among the following three: "Reminiscence of food that is unforgettable," "Reminiscence of helping out in childhood," and "What autumn reminds you of."

The first training session, started half a year after the earthquake, had a positive effect on the participants of various areas. In particular, they valued the significance of the social interaction across generations through which reminiscing was mediated. Members of Moyai and elders together constructed a culture that cherished the one-time-only event. While not many words were said about their experiences of the earthquake itself, it may be that the participants shared a moment of peace in which they thought of loved ones and lost ones, and moments that are never to return again. The participants carefully chose their words as they supported one another and passed on their reminiscences to the younger members of the group. The dynamics of their social interaction showed a sense of togetherness among the members.

Study 2: The Sanriku Reminiscence Railway Project

The railway project offered a social opportunity to the elder people who have become homebound since the community center was swept away by the tsunami. The project took place on December 26, 2011, a round-trip of approximately 90 minutes. A total of 62 participants joined in this little trip on the railway. Thirty-six of them were elders (1 male, 35 females, average age of 74.0). The others were supporters of the project, including researchers, practitioners, an instructor and students of nursing, and volunteers from Tokyo. The participants were divided into six groups and talked about "Reminiscence of the New Year's in childhood."

The Voice of the Participating Elder

Some comments of the participants were "It reminded me of my old days and it was fun," "It touched my heart," and "I feel younger." One of the participants said "Until last year, I would spend the end of year cleaning here and

there around my home getting ready for the New Year's. This year I have nothing to tidy up. I suppose I can at least have a little New Year's ornament." Another member nodded and responded, "Well, we've been too busy every year, so we might as well take a little break." There was also a member that shared her feelings as "I feel at home and I'm so glad to talk with people who have grown up in the same area as I have and to be able to talk about the usual things given the circumstance." She referred to a friend of hers who she hadn't seen for 30 years, "It feels kind of strange to be able to see each other alive now after all these years. I can't find the right words to describe my feelings."

The Voice of the Volunteers

The members of the group who took part in the local activities always found a place that is quiet and that ensured the group members' privacy. To make the reminiscence group possible on the railway that runs from one place to another, there were many things that needed to be considered. The members took an active role in organizing things such as arranging seats in such a way that participants of the groups could hear each other well. They also thought over the emotional effect on the part of the participants, "Wouldn't it be too much for them to look out at the various views of the reality of Miyako from the railway?" Moreover, they paid special care to sanitary aspect of how to guide the participants efficiently to the restrooms at the station in a limited time without causing them fear or anxiety.

As their feedback to the group, some showed warm thoughts to other members, while others expressed their interest in learning further about the role of the leader. At the same time, the members exchanged their ideas about public relations and steps to call for new members.

Discussion

The Roles of the Speaker and the Listener, and the Complexity of their Meanings

The role of Moyai volunteers in the two studies presented here was not a single, nor fixed one. There were multiple roles and their roles were flexible in that they varied depending on the context and the relationships among the group members, including the relationships between elders, those between younger participants, and those between the volunteers from outside Miyako. Both the speaker and the listener engaged in reminiscence with very deep empathetic understanding. On the part of elders who experienced the March 11th tsunami, it was their first time to have such an opportunity.

The Power of Reminiscing to Go Beyond Time

In the present study, the March 11th tsunami, on the one hand, was viewed as a traumatic experience of today. On the other hand, it was an experience that has been woven into the elders' experience of the tsunami that occurred more than half a century ago on May 24, 1960 from the earthquake in Chili, Gran Terremoto de Valdivia. In another research study of the author conducted prior to the Great East Earthquake, their experience of the 1960 tsunami was one of the themes that were reminisced about their young adulthood. The elders' reminiscence in the present studies shows that their experiences up to now go

beyond the limits of time and acquire the power to live on. As Gibson (2004) delineates, reminiscence bridges the past, present, and future. One of the volunteer members looked back on her involvement in Moyai as follows: "My visit to various communities and listening to others' reminiscence meant a lot to me as it encouraged me very much. I will keep faith that we can overcome this situation. Everyone's cheerful smile says that it is possible."

References

Gibson, F. (2004). *The past in the present: Using reminiscence in health and social care*. Baltimore, MD: Health Professions Press.