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To Japan with Love

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Location

Country:

Japan

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Two years after the earthquake and tsunami, a traveler discovers beauty and connection rising from the debris.

I remember the day I fell in love with Japan. I had been living in Tokyo for three months on a two-year teaching fellowship, and I had finally made my first foray outside the city, to the ancient capital of Kyoto. On my first morning there, the manager at the inn worried whether the breakfast of salmon, seaweed, and rice would be all right for me, itemized the elaborate rituals of the bath, and painstakingly traced routes on a city map before bowing me out to the street.

There, a serendipitous succession of smiling locals took over, going out of their way to walk me to the right subway train, station exit, bus, and side street to reach the temple and gardens of Ryoanji, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. At Ryoanji's famed 15th-century rock garden, I stared and stared at the meticulously arranged moss-dappled stones, the ancient design, and freshly raked lines of sand that wove an intricate web of tranquil tension. Something about the garden's beauty, combined with the kindness I had experienced all day, enraptured me.

A year later I fell in love with a Japanese woman, and two years after that we were married in two ceremonies, one in California and one in Japan. Though we live in California, we have bridged our hearts and homelands with regular visits ever since.

Two years ago on March 11, the whole world felt connected to Japan, watching in horror while towering waves killed more than 15,000 people, obliterated coastal communities, triggered a nuclear disaster, and swept 5 million tons of debris out to sea. On the West Coast, our link is being brought home literally now, as waterworn rubble borne by the clockwise currents in the North Pacific Ocean washes up on local shores. The flotsam has ranged from a 165-ton dock to sandals, fishing buoys, and toothbrushes. In one poignant instance, a soccer ball inscribed with its owner's name was returned to 16-year-old Misaki Murakami, whose family home was lost in the disaster; this was the only possession of his to be found.

After being pummeled for months following the tragedy, Japan's tourism industry began to bounce back in 2012. This spring, the country's hard-hit northeast is encouraging travelers to discover such sites as majestic Tsuruga Castle, the restorative outdoor hot springs at Naruko Onsen, and Hanitsu Shrine, the repository of numerous national treasures. It's also an ideal season to visit Tokyo's vibrant Sensoji temple, gold-gleaming Kinkakuji temple in Kyoto, and Osaka Castle, where the cherry blossoms burst into pink clouds.

And Ryoanji rock garden. Today I look back at Ryoanji's artful embrace of rock and sand and empty space, and I see a profound symbol of our interconnected world. The Pacific Ocean, strewn with floating pieces of people's lives, teaches a vast version of Ryoanji's lesson: No land is truly an island.

Photography courtesy of Cquest/Wikipedia

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