



# *Dispatches From* **Kyoto**

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**No.02**

**Seven years later, half a world away,  
closer than ever.**

Sept. 13th

It is a weird time to be an American citizen abroad right now. The election is big news here. There is coverage of it on the news shows and in the newspapers. I have been reading the coverage of both conventions and the aftermath on the web. [<http://www.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld>] (The Japanese version of the BBC is NHK. They are completely publicly funded. An NHK representative comes around once a year and if you have a TV in your home you pay a fee. No questions. There are no advertisers.)

The world is watching America. I caution anyone who thinks otherwise. The September 11th memorial was covered. There was even a documentary of the events from September 11th to the Iraq war. I was a bit surprised because it was on TV in Japanese with English subtitles. The sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway in 1995 came right to mind. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarin\\_gas\\_attack\\_on\\_the\\_Tokyo\\_subway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarin_gas_attack_on_the_Tokyo_subway)] The trains and subways are the lifelines of every city here. Spurred on by the anniversary of September 11th, I found myself talking to the people around me, and their terror and fear sounded the same as mine had been. I remember every moment of that day, in clear detail. What does it mean that I am comforted by talking and sharing with a person here, just as much as those that lived through it with me?

Sept 16th

I began to think about what I wrote the other day, about the September 11th anniversary, so I want to elaborate. It has been seven years since that morning. I am sure that those of us that lived through it each have a "where were you" story. I was going to work when I heard the first reports of an airplane hitting a building in New York. I remember, after an hour or so, telling my boss that I needed to go to the Student Union to see what was happening on television. I remember him coming over thirty minutes later to retrieve me and standing another half hour beside me and silently watching the television. I am sure there are millions of stories like mine in America. Yet for all those stories I have only really talked about that day in detail with the handful of people that were there with me. How is it that something like that can be seen by everyone but not really talked about at all? After a while it became difficult to talk to others about it. Isn't that what a memorial is for?

There is one thing that keeps coming back to me. Just moments after the first tower fell, a woman came up to me. She was Japanese. She noticed all of us and asked us what was happening. "The tower just fell not a minute ago." I replied. I remember being annoyed at her next question. "What tower fell?" How the hell could she not know what I was talking about?

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It was not until later that I began to realize that it was entirely possible that she really didn't know what was happening. I thought about all the reports that had come over the radio at work. A small plane struck a building in New York. It was a prop plane, a single engine, a military plane, passenger . . . and so on it went. There was so much confusion that even I did not know what to believe.

I looked at her again but after only a few words I was looking back at the TV. I recall using phrases like "World Trade Center," "plane crashed," "huge fires," and "completely destroyed." It was not until she grabbed my hand, like a mother to a child, that I looked back at her. Her face was one that I will never forget. In very slow and deliberated words she repeated my words back to me. I confirmed that she had it correct. Her hand tightened.

"My brother works there."

I stood there with nothing to say. I was in East Lansing, safe, but not in a bubble. She let go of my hand. As she hits the door to the stairs I see the cell phone in her hand and she is gone. I didn't talk to the people around me what had happened. They were still transfixed to the TV. To this day have no idea what happened to this woman or her brother. She has not left my memory, even seven years later.

I was invited to dinner at a friend's house her in Japan. She works for the school board where I teach and takes care of any questions I have. If I have to pay a bill, sign a tax form, she is there. I will call her Rei.

We began to talk about the September 11th special I had seen on TV. It was a recap of the day and the days that followed. It included interviews, news reports, and solemn music. I tried to explain to her what it was like during that day. I still really don't understand why I was able to tell her so much. It may have been the fact that it wasn't a shared experience for the two of us that allowed me to put things into words. After about an hour the towers fell I was having a smoke outside of my work with a friend.

He looked around at the buildings near us and told me that it gave him a chill to see anything taller than two stories. When I looked around the same chill hit me. I still feel that most people had this same feeling but nobody really talks about it. Only after I concluded did she say that my feeling about the buildings was how she remembers feeling about the subway. I had forgotten about the 1995 Tokyo gas attacks, but Japan has not. The faces of the members of that cult who are still at large are plastered up in every city. The posters are updated all the time. Rei began to tell me about her September 11th only this one was six years earlier. I learned that the reasons behind the attacks may have been different but the pain and fear for the survivors are the same.

Rei was not in Tokyo at the time, but the holidays were near and her family was going to Tokyo. Rei loves to plan things. It's like her hobby. She makes an itinerary for every family trip, with times for all the trains and buses. It was around 8:30am/9:00am that the reports started coming in. She was checking the railway schedules to find where to make her connection. If her travel had been on the day of the attacks, she and her family would have been right in the middle. She told me that her daughter was three at the time. I don't think I could know what she felt, holding her young daughter in her arms and imagining what might have been. For Rei the subways and trains are unavoidable. Sometimes cars just can't cut it here. She, like millions of others, relies on the subways four or more times a day. I know it was a long time before I got back into an airplane. I can't imagine getting on a train the next day. Rei went on to tell me about others she knew that had people they knew in Tokyo at the time; the frantic search for loved ones; the fear of anything bags or boxes being left on the trains or buses.

Rei knew exactly what I had been trying to tell her. My story and hers seemed to blend together. I shared one of my darkest days and discovered that I was not alone. It is strange to be comforted by the similarities of our horror stories. Is it right to use acts of violence to form a bond between cultures? Should I really feel better for that?