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Recession Eats Up Japanese Careers, Lives

By Tsuji Tokiko

Letters in the Heian Period (794-1185) were written on paper made from the bark of the dakekanba birch tree. It's a bit of trivia that few know. One who does is Shinji Iwata.

Iwata, 58, is an aspiring nature guide. Every weekend he drives 150 kilometers to a campsite in Takayama, Gifu Prefecture, where the forest is deep and skunk cabbage blooms in tiny brooks. He has been training here as a guide for the past nine months.

The forest soothes him. He needs the peace the trees offer. Over the years, he has seen the ups and downs life can deliver. Gently he runs his hand over the bark of a dakekanba tree. "I don't have to work myself to death any more," he says.

Three years ago he was a salaryman, working at a dealership affiliated with Mitsubishi Motors Corp. in Gifu Prefecture. Promoted steadily, he eventually reached the rank of department head.

But, in the fall of 2001, the nationwide recession became distinctly personal. Company restructuring squeezed Iwata out of the executive suite and into the street, selling cars door to door.

"Visit 10 homes a day," he had once ordered his subordinates. Now those marching orders were his own.

Map in hand, he trudged from house to house, ringing doorbells. "Are you thinking of trading in your car? What condition is your vehicle in?" He would ask his questions and, rebuffed more or less curtly, return to his car. It was a relief to ring the bell and find no one home.

Three hours of that, and he would call it quits for the day, seeking refuge in his car or in a coffee shop. Obviously, he wasn't cut out for this sort of work.

Iwata joined the auto industry at age 17. It was 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympics. He started off as a technician and eventually transferred to sales. The economy was surging, the market expanding. Iwata did well.

In the course of 17 years, Iwata sold nearly 3,000 vehicles. There were times when he was selling 32 vehicles a month. In the late 1990s he drew his reward -- an appointment as department head.

But the bubble that had inflated Japan's economy through the 1980s and into the '90s was about to burst. Auto sales nationwide were nearing their peak. Times and values were changing. Mitsubishi Motors was still riding high, but the fall was just around the corner.

Disaster beset the carmaker when the company's cover-ups of mechanical defects came to light. Over the next seven years, sales declined by half. Reeling, the company threw itself into streamlining and integrating its various operations.

Just then Iwata fell ill and had to take time off. His timing couldn't have been worse. When he returned to work a month later, his job was gone. "You can sell though, right?" said his boss. He would keep his department head title, the boss explained, but his new job would involve selling door-to-door.

Iwata nodded weakly and said nothing. The question left unasked was, "Why, after all these years?"

Things got off to a dreadful start, and didn't get better. Day after day, filling in his daily reports, under "orders received" he wrote 0.

He was demoted from department head to section head. Several months passed. Iwata and another employee were summoned to the boss's office.

"If you guys don't sell 10 vehicles each within the next two months," he said, "there's going to be trouble."

Iwata did not sell 10 vehicles, and indeed there was trouble. He was openly encouraged to quit.

He still remembers his last day at work. It was early August 2002. 8:50 a.m. morning calisthenics. 9 a.m. morning meeting. And so on. On the surface, it was no different from any other day. Beneath the surface, the difference was total.

His professional demise had been too sudden. Only a year before he had been a department head. Now, his career was over. Though everyone knew this was his last day, no one said a word. Surely, he thought, the manager will mention it. But no, nothing. The few words of farewell Iwata had prepared went unspoken. He went home at the end of the day, as usual; only this time he would not be back.

At home, he took off his suit and tie. From now on, weddings and funerals aside, he would not be needing them.

But there is the forest. All week long he looks forward to Friday night, when he sets out for the camp site. Each week there's a little less snow, a little more greenery. Here, he thinks to himself, is where I belong.

The sharp smell of detergent hangs in the air. In a corner of a 6,500-square-meter dry cleaning plant, Iwata works, bamboo brush in hand. He attacks the stains on shirt collars and blouse sleeves. This is his job now. The garments flow in from 1,600 affiliates.

At first, unemployment brought with it a feeling of liberation, but clearly he could not continue without work indefinitely. At the local Hello Work government employment center, he had a look around to see what jobs were available.

One thing was certain -- he did not want to go back to sales. The first three companies he approached turned him down. At the fourth, a dry-cleaning establishment, he was hired. About a year had passed since he left his old company.

Now, he spends his weekdays laboring in the dry cleaning plant, his salary a quarter of his former earnings as a salesman. His work space is the equivalent of one tatami mat. He labors in silence. On a busy day, 200 garments pass through his hands. But here, for better or for worse, no one records his "results."

Looking back on the 17 years at a Mitsubishi Motors dealership, Iwata sees himself as having been perpetually pursued by numbers -- number of homes visited, number of orders received, number of vehicles sold at such-and-such a discount.

Once, one of his subordinates committed suicide.

Feeling himself under pressure to raise his sales at whatever cost, the man began selling vehicles at unauthorized discounts, going deep into debt to make up the difference out of his own pocket.

It was a terrible shock. He could barely remember how he got through the funeral. He couldn't sleep. He was diagnosed as suffering from depression. That's when he took a month off, returning only to find his job no longer existed.

Shortly before his death, the salesman had received a letter from a credit card company. Iwata remembers seeing it on the man's desk. Was the man in trouble of some kind? He wanted to ask, but somehow couldn't find the words.

Iwata was his boss. Why didn't the man at least talk it over with him? Still, Iwata knows he would have been unable to dismiss the importance of increasing sales. But, was business more important than life itself?

Such doubts were not new to Iwata. From time to time in his late 30s and early 40s he'd taken motorcycle trips to Fukui Prefecture. Somehow just standing on the seacoast watching the waves roll in had a calming effect.

These rare moments of peace encouraged reflection. Was he sacrificing too much of his life to his work? The constant pressure to sell was getting to him.

Once -- he was a manager by this time -- he saw an announcement in the newspaper calling for volunteers to gather up dead leaves in the mountains. On an impulse he went.

The work itself was simple, but the feel of the earth, the fragrance of the trees, were unexpectedly refreshing. In this way, his love of forests began. "Someday," he thought, "I'd like to live in the midst of nature."

In April, after nearly two years at his dry cleaning job, he rented a log cabin in the forest in Takayama.

This was it: The castle he had dreamed of. But at times he recalls something his dead employee said before killing himself: "When I retire, I'd like to get a station wagon and drive all over Japan, just my wife and I."

Both he and Iwata, each in a different way, had been cheated out of a happy retirement.

Iwata's feelings are complex, torn between regret for a past long gone and the irreplaceable satisfaction that comes over him in his new forest retreat.

Rent is 500,000 yen a year--no small sum, given his sharply reduced income. He signed the contract on the strength of the 1 million yen accruing from a discontinued life insurance policy.

He wants to save several million yen for his old age, but weighing larger still is the issue of what to do with the 1 million yen he has in hand now.

Here in his "castle," where his time is his own, his timepiece is a gold-colored clock presented to him by Mitsubishi Motors, commemorating his sales record. "Yes, I'm fond of it," he says. "It's proof of what I was able to do back then."

Now, still strong, still alert, he values the time this retreat gives him to look into himself and reassess his life. For a long time past he wanted to live surrounded by nature. Now, at least on weekends, he does.

Introspection is restful, but also painful. Not long ago he received an e-mail from his 26-year-old younger daughter: "Back when you were selling cars, you didn't have much time for us."

That hurt. But yes, it was true. He had thought his family understood, but maybe, it occurs to him now, he had simply wanted to believe they understood.

Certainly, the demands of his job left him little time for his family. But what could he say now? Whatever justification he offered would be little more than an excuse. "You're right," was the reply he finally sent his daughter.

Too late now, he reflects--but regrets for a time that will never come again are hard to push away.

Iwata is now near the age his own father died. His father was a miner. He had seven children. Iwata was the youngest. His father died when he was 10 and he has few clear memories of him.

What did his father think each morning as he went off to work? What hardships did he endure; what pleasures did he enjoy? How did he feel toward his children? Iwata would like to know. This looking over his shoulder seems to grow more frequent as Iwata grows himself older.

What about his own daughters? How will they remember their father? He hopes they will eventually come to understand something of what a salaryman's life was like when they were children.

On the wall of his weekend retreat hangs a framed scroll, the calligraphy reading, "After the flower comes the fruit." He saw it on the wall of an acquaintance's coffee shop. It appealed to him, and he had a copy made.

He takes it to be a warning not to be distracted by showy surfaces. The true essence of a thing--the fruit--develops quietly and invisibly.

In his forest "castle," Iwata loses himself in contemplation of the scroll. How will the "fruit" within himself turn out

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