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Speaking as an Unrealistic Dreamer

Speech by Murakami Haruki on the occasion of receiving the International Catalunya Prize

Translated by Emanuel Pastreich

I last visited Barcelona two years ago in the spring. An amazing number of readers gathered when I held a book signing. Long lines formed and I still could not finish signing all the books even after one and a half hours. The reason it took so long is that so many of the female readers wanted to kiss me. That was time consuming.

I have held book signings in many cities around the world, but Barcelona was the only place in the world where the female readers asked for kisses. That one example is sufficient evidence of just what a fantastic city Barcelona is. And what good fortune it is that I have another chance to return to this city whose beautiful streets are resplendent with refined culture and a long history.

But, unfortunately, I am not going to talk about kisses today. I must talk about something a bit more serious.

As you well know, on March 11 at 2:46 PM a tremendous earthquake shook the Tohoku region of Northeast Japan. So great was the earthquake that the rotation of the earth was slightly accelerated, and the day shortened by 1.8 millionths of a second.

The damage caused by the earthquake was tremendous. The tsunami that followed left its deep and terrible talon marks on the earth. In some places, the tsunami reached a height of thirty-nine meters. Even if you run to the top of a ten-story building you will not be safe if a tsunami reaches thirty-nine meters. People near the ocean had no way to escape, so close to 24,000 people lost their lives. Out of that number, almost nine thousand remain unaccounted for. They were carried off by that tremendous wave that swept over the dikes. Their bodies were never recovered. Probably most of those bodies have sunk to the floor of the cold sea.

When I think about it, imagining myself as someone facing that tsunami, it wrings my heart. Most of those who survived the tsunami still lost family members and friends, home and property. They lost their communities and they lost the foundations for their lives and livelihoods. Some villages were reduced to ghost towns. There are many people from whom the very hope that inspires life has been torn away.

To be Japanese means, in a certain sense, to live alongside a variety of natural catastrophes. Much of Japan lies on the route of typhoons from the summer through the fall. Every year, inevitably, those typhoons cause terrible tragedy and many lives are lost. There are active volcanoes scattered across the archipelago, and then there are the earthquakes. The Japanese archipelago finds itself situated in a corner to the East of the Asian continent, riding atop four enormous tectonic plates. The location is precarious. We pass our days, as it were, atop a nest of earthquakes.

The season for typhoons is known and to some degree their trajectories can be predicted. But earthquakes cannot be predicted. The only thing of which we can be sure is that this recent earthquake is not the last; another great earthquake will follow, without fail, in the near future. Many scientists predict that in the next twenty to thirty years an earthquake with a magnitude of eight or more will strike the Tokyo metropolitan region. That earthquake might come in ten years, or it might come tomorrow afternoon. If an earthquake of that magnitude were to occur with its epicenter directly under a dense metropolis like Tokyo, nobody really knows how much damage it would cause.

Nevertheless, in the city of Tokyo alone, thirteen million people are living "normal" lives today. Those people continue to ride packed subway cars to the office and they continue to work high up in tall buildings. I have not heard any indications of a decrease in the population of Tokyo since the Tohoku earthquake.

"Why is that?" you might ask. "Why do so many people think it so natural to live in such a terrifying place? How can they keep from going out of their minds with fear?"

There is an expression in Japanese, "mujō." Mujō means that there is no steady state that will continue forever in life. All things that inhabit this world will pass away; all things continue to change without end. We cannot find permanent stability. We cannot find anything to rely on that will not change or decay. Although mujō finds its roots in Buddhism, the concept of mujō has taken on a significance beyond its original religious sense. This concept of mujō has been seared deeply into the Japanese spirit, forming a national mindset that has continued on almost without change since ancient times.

The mujō perspective that all things must pass away can be understood as a resigned worldview. From such a perspective, even if humans struggle against the natural flow, that effort will be in vain in the end. But even in the midst of such resignation, the Japanese are able to actively discover sources of true beauty.

In the case of nature, for example, we take pleasure from cherry blossoms in spring, from the fireflies in summer and from the crimson foliage in autumn. We do so as a group and we do so as a matter of custom. We enthusiastically enjoy such fleeting seasonal moments, as if the pleasures they offered admitted of no further explanation. The places in Japan famous for cherry blossoms, or fireflies, or autumn foliage, are crowded with people when their season comes. Hotel reservations can be quite difficult to obtain.

Why is that?

Because cherry blossoms, fireflies and autumn foliage all lose their exquisite beauty in a very short span of time. We travel far to witness that moment of the natural phenomenon in its full glory. Yet it is not merely a matter of observing a beautiful locale. Before our eyes, evanescent cherry blossoms scatter, the fireflies' will-o'-the-wisp vanishes, and the bright autumn leaves are snatched away. We recognize these events and we find in these changes a certain relief. Oddly, it brings us a certain peace of mind that the height of beauty passes-and fades away.

Whether or not that spiritual perspective has been influenced by those natural catastrophes of Japan is beyond my understanding. Nevertheless, we have overcome wave upon wave of natural disasters in Japan and we have come to accept them as "unavoidable

things" (*shigata ga nai mono*). We have overcome those catastrophes as a group and it is clear we have carried on in our lives. Perhaps those experiences have influenced our aesthetic sensibility.

The recent earthquake came as a tremendous shock for almost all Japanese. Even we Japanese who are so accustomed to earthquakes were completely overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the damage. Gripped by a sense of powerlessness, we feel uncertainty about the future of our country.

But, in time, we will pull ourselves together mentally and devote ourselves to the task of reconstruction. I am not that concerned about that point. We are a nation that has survived a long history of such disasters. We will not continue to be stunned by the blow forever. The damaged homes will be rebuilt and the damaged roads will be repaired.

Ultimately, we have appropriated this planet called earth for ourselves. It's not as if the earth came up and asked us, "Please come live here." Just because the ground shakes a bit is not a reason to complain. After all, such is the nature of the earth that it shakes from time to time. We have no choice but to live together with nature, whether we like it or not.

What I want to touch on here is not buildings or roads, but rather those things that cannot be so easily repaired. What I mean by that is things like morality, or ethical standards. Those are things that do not have tangible forms. It is not so easy to restore them to their original state if they are damaged. These are things that cannot be just put together if machinery is provided, materials supplied, and workers recruited.

To be more specific, I am referring to the nuclear power plant at Fukushima.

As all of you are no doubt aware, out of the six nuclear power reactors in Fukushima damaged by the earthquake and tsunami, at least three have yet to be repaired and are spewing radiation into the area. Meltdowns have occurred and the surrounding soil has been contaminated. Most likely, highly radioactive waste water is flowing out into the surrounding ocean. In turn, the winds are pushing that radiation out over a wide area.

One hundred thousand people who inhabit the vicinity of the nuclear power plant have been forced to leave their land. Fields and rice paddies, factories, shopping districts and harbors, have been left deserted. The people who lived there may never be able to return to their homes. And the damage from this accident may not be limited to Japan. It is with great regret that I say this, but the impact of the accident will probably extend to neighboring nations.

What was it that brought about such a tragic chain of events? The cause is clear. The individuals who designed that nuclear power plant did not take into account the possibility that a tsunami of that magnitude would hit the plant. Some experts pointed out that tsunamis of that size had hit the coast previously and demanded a revision of the safety standards for the plant. But the electric company did not take such suggestions seriously. Why? Because investing considerable funds to prepare for a tsunami that might or might not come once in a hundred years was not a welcome proposition for a company run for profit.

And the government, which should have strictly enforced safety precautions for nuclear power plants, was so busy pushing its nuclear power policies that it seems to have lowered its own safety standards.

We must investigate what happened and if there have been mistakes, we must make them public. Those mistakes have forced over one hundred thousand people from their land and left them to rebuild their lives. We ought to be outraged. Naturally we ought to be.

For some reason, the Japanese are a people who tend not to get angry easily. We are good at enduring things, but not very talented when it comes to letting our emotions pour out. That aspect of the Japanese is perhaps a bit different from what we see in the people of Barcelona. But this time, indeed, the citizens of Japan will become really angry.

But at the same time, we Japanese are the ones who allowed such a distorted system to operate until now. Maybe we will have to take ourselves to task for tacitly permitting such behavior. This state of affairs is closely linked to our own sense of morals and our personal standards.

As you know, the Japanese people are the only people in history to experience the blast of an atomic bomb. In August of 1945, atomic bombs were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from United States bombers. Over two hundred thousand people lost their lives. Almost all the dead were unarmed civilians. But my purpose today is not to debate the pros and cons of those acts.

What I want to talk about is not only the deaths of those two hundred thousand people who died immediately after the bombing, but also the deaths over a period of time of the many who survived the bombings, those who suffered from illnesses caused by exposure to radiation. We have learned from the sacrifices of those people how destructive a nuclear weapon can be, and how deep the scars are that radiation leaves behind in this world, in the bodies of people.

The way taken by Japan in the postwar period has two primary roots: the pursuit of economic development and the renunciation of war. Japan followed two new guiding principles after World War Two: never to take military action, no matter what the situation, and to pursue economic prosperity—and also to wish for peace.

There is a monument set up to pacify the spirits of those who lost their lives to the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. These are the words engraved there:

"Please rest in peace. We will not repeat this mistake."

What remarkable words they are! At the same time that we are victims, we are also perpetrators. That is the nuance of those words. Faced with the overwhelming power of the atom, we are all, all of us, victims, and at the same time, we are all perpetrators. In that we are threatened by the power of the atom, we are all victims. At the same time, in that we are the ones who uncovered the power of the atom, and we have failed to stop the use of that power, we are all perpetrators as well.

And now, today, sixty-six years after the dropping of the atomic bombs, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant has been spewing out radiation continuously for three months, polluting the ground, the ocean and the atmosphere around the plant. And no one knows when and how this spewing of radiation will be stopped. This is a historic experience for us Japanese: our second massive nuclear disaster. But this time no one dropped a bomb on us. We set the stage, we committed the crime with our own hands, we are destroying our own lands, and we are destroying our own lives.

How could something like this happen? That strong rejection of nuclear technology that we embraced for so many years after the war…where did it go? What was it that so completely undermined and distorted the peaceful and prosperous society that previously we had sought for so consistently?

Cenotaph, Hiroshima Peace Park

Fukushima Dai-ichi following the meltdown

The cause is simple: "efficiency."

The nuclear reactor is a highly efficient system for generating electricity according to the arguments of the electric power company. That is to say, it is a system efficient for increasing profits. The Japanese government started to doubt the stability of petroleum supplies, especially after the 1973 "oil shock," and pushed the generation of electricity by nuclear power as national policy. Electric companies poured immense amounts of money into advertising, buying up the media and planting the illusion in the minds of the people that nuclear power is safe in every respect.

And then, before we knew it, about thirty percent of Japan's electricity was being generated by nuclear power plants. Before the people could grasp what was going on, this narrow archipelago frequented by earthquakes was third in the world in the consumption of electricity from nuclear power.

And now we find ourselves with no way to go back. A *fait accompli* has been achieved. And those who harbor fears about nuclear power receive responses like, "Well then, it wouldn't bother you if you if you don't have enough electricity"—responses that sound rather like threats. And a general resignation has spread among citizens, a feeling that there's not much you can do about the dependency on nuclear power since to go without air conditioning during the hot and humid Japanese summers would be torture. The label of "unrealistic dreamer" has been slapped on anyone who expresses reservations about nuclear power.

And so we have carried on to the present day. And now, the supposedly "highly efficient" nuclear reactor has opened the gates of hell before us. Such is the lamentable state we have fallen into. That is the reality.

The "reality" which the promoters of nuclear power referred to when they called on us to "face reality" was, in fact, not reality at all. It was nothing more than skin-deep "convenience." When they made that "convenience" into a "reality" through a play of words, they were using a rhetorical sleight of hand.

This state of affairs represents both the collapse of a myth, the belief in the power of technology that has been a source of pride to the Japanese for so many years, and the failure of our morals and our ethical standards. We were the ones who permitted such a sleight of hand. Of course we criticize the government and the electric company. That is natural and it is also necessary. But at the same time there is something we must report about our actions. While we are the victims, we are also the perpetrators. We must fix our eyes on this fact. If we fail to do so, we will inevitably repeat the same mistake again, somewhere else.

"Please rest in peace. We will not repeat this mistake."

Once more we must make sure that those words are engraved in our hearts.

Dr. Robert Oppenheimer was the central figure in the development of the atomic bomb during the Second World War. But when Oppenheimer learned of the horrific results of those nuclear bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he was deeply disturbed. Reportedly he turned to President Truman and said,

"Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands."

President Truman took from his pocket a neatly folded white handkerchief, remarking, "Well here, would you like to wipe your hands?"

Needless to say, you cannot find a spotless handkerchief large enough to wipe away that much blood anywhere in the world.

We Japanese should have continued to shout "no" to the atom.[1] That is my personal opinion. We should have combined all our technological expertise, massed all our wisdom and know-how, and invested all our social capital to develop effective energy sources to replace nuclear power, pursuing that effort at the national level. Even if the international community had mocked us, saying, "There is no energy source as efficient as nuclear power. These Japanese who do not use it are idiots," we should have maintained, without compromise, our aversion for things nuclear that was planted in us by the experience of nuclear war. The development of non-nuclear energy sources should have been the primary direction for Japan in the post-war period.

Such a response should have been our way of taking collective responsibility for the many victims who perished at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We needed a substantial moral foundation of just that kind, just such an ethical standard, precisely that sort of a social message. That could have been a tremendous opportunity for us truly to contribute, as Japanese, to the world. But as we rushed down the path of economic development, we were swayed by that simple standard of "efficiency." We lost sight of that important

alternative course that lay before us.

As I mentioned before, no matter how terrible and serious the situation is, we can overcome the sufferings of natural calamities and continue on our way. And by overcoming calamities, we become stronger spiritually and our understanding is deepened. We will manage, one way or another, to achieve that goal.

The work of repairing damaged roads and rebuilding houses is the dominion of the appropriate experts. But when it comes to rebuilding damaged morals and ethical standards, the responsibility falls on all our shoulders. We will begin the task because of such natural feelings as mourning the dead, thinking of those who suffer from the disaster, and wishing that the pains and wounds with which they were afflicted will not have been in vain. We mourn the loss of the dead and we feel compassion for those who suffer this disaster. Naturally, not wanting the suffering and wounds to have been in vain, we should take up the task at hand. That task will be unassuming and will not draw attention. It will be a labor that demands patience and endurance. Just as in the morning on a sunny spring day the people of the village gather together, head out to the rice paddies, till the earth and sow seeds, so we must combine our efforts to carry out this duty. Each individual will carry on in his or her own way, but the effort should be of one mind.

In this great collective effort, there should be a space where those of us who specialize in words, professional writers, can be positively involved. We should weave together with words new morals and new ethical standards. We should plant vibrant new stories and make them sprout and flourish. Those stories will become our shared story. Like the songs that are sung when sowing the fields, our stories should have rhythms that encourage the people as they carry out their work. Professional writers took up that role in the past. We supported the rebuilding of Japan after it was reduced to scorched earth by war. We must return to that starting point again.

As I mentioned earlier, we live in the fleeting and insubstantial world of "mujō." This life into which we are born slips by, and soon, without exception, fades away. Faced with the overwhelming power of nature, humans are helpless. Awareness of the insubstantiality of experience is one of the core ideas of Japanese culture. But at the same time, we also have within all of us a positive mind, a respect for things that have passed away and a quiet determination to go on living with vigor in this fragile world filled with dangers.

I am honored that people of Catalonia have appreciated my works, and bestowed this outstanding award. The place where I live is far from here and the language that I speak is different. For those reasons, the culture is also quite different. And yet, at the very same time, we are all citizens of the world, shouldering similar burdens, and embracing similar joys and sorrows. And that is why so many novels written by Japanese writers have been translated into Catalan and are read by the people. It delights me that I can share with all of you this common narrative. The writer's work is the dreaming of dreams. But we have even more important work: to share those dreams with everyone. If one does not possess that sense of sharing, one cannot be a novelist.

I know that the people of Catalonia have overcome tremendous hardships in their history. Although you suffered terrible trials at times, you have carried on with tremendous vitality and preserved your rich culture. There is much that we can share between us.

If all of you in Catalonia, and all of us in Japan, could become "unrealistic dreamers," if we could come together to create a "spiritual community" that unfolds beyond the limits of borders and cultures, what a wonderful thing that would be. I believe that would be the starting point for the rebirth of all of us who have passed through assorted terrible disasters and terrors of unmitigated sadness over recent years. We should not be afraid to dream dreams. We should not allow the dogs of misfortune named "efficiency" and "convenience" to overtake us. We must be "unrealistic dreamers" who step forward with a strong stride. A person must die one day and disappear from this earth. But humanity will remain. That humanity will continue on without end. We must first believe in the power of humanity.

Let me say in closing that I intend to donate the funds from this prize to help the victims of the earthquake and of the nuclear power plant accident. My deep thanks to the people of Catalonia and everyone at Generalitat de Cataluña for giving me such an opportunity. Finally, I would also like to express my deep condolences for the victims of the recent Lorca earthquake.

Barcelona, June 9, 2011.

Murakami Haruki, born in Kyoto in 1949, is among the most successful and influential authors in the world today. He sells millions of books in Japan. His fifth novel, Norwegian Wood, sold more than 3.5m copies in its first year and his work has been translated into 40 languages, in which he sells almost as well. His translator, Jay Rubin, says reading Murakami changes your brain. His world-view has inspired Sofia Coppola, the author David Mitchell and American bands such as the Flaming Lips. He is a recipient of the Franz Kafka prize, has honorary degrees from Princeton and Liège. For more about his life and work, see his pulsating home page at Random House where the beat goes on.

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See also Roger Pulvers**,** Murakami, the No-Nuclear Principles, Nuclear Power and the Bomb

Notes

[1] The phrase"Kaku ni tai suru" (核に対する) here suggests both nuclear power and nuclear weapons. The standard term for "nuclear" employed in the case of nuclear power is "genshi." Murakami intentionally employs the term "kaku" more commonly associated with nuclear weapons here to suggest a link between the two technologies. Tr.

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