

Frame the Future Thought Pieces



Resilience Begins With Individual Empowerment



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Imagine the scene: A magnitude 9.1 earthquake, the largest ever recorded in Japan and strong enough to create a 40-meter-high wall of water, has just disrupted what would have been a normal school day. Your classmates are scared and disoriented. Though parents and teachers warned you about this moment, you never really expected the worst to happen.

Of course, for the children in the quiet coastal town of Kamaishi, Japan, this scene was a stark reality on the afternoon of 11 March 2011. Yet, despite the seeming impossibility of their plight, nearly all of the 3,000 elementary and junior high school students survived the earthquake and resulting tsunami — a phenomenon referred to as the “Kamaishi Miracle.” These students, who might normally be considered vulnerable members of society, survived at a much higher rate than the adult population. How?

Fortunately, for the children of Kamaishi, they had begun to receive a special education program that went beyond standard evacuation drills and helped them develop a new mindset towards disasters. They learned the importance of acting on their own initiative, using their own judgment amid unpredictable circumstances. It put responsibility and power into the hands of the individual. As a result, it was the students who took themselves to safety on that fateful day, helping others along the way.

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As we enter yet another phase of the COVID-19 crisis, it feels like a difficult time to be hopeful. However, I believe the story of Kamaishi shows the capacity of empowered individuals, regardless of age or experience, to protect themselves and others from danger.

I am reminded of Japan's early "mysterious" success in controlling the spread of the pandemic. Then and now, the government strongly emphasizes individual responsibility and action. They publicized science-backed information on best practices regarding sanitation and social distancing, but enforced no hard lockdowns, meaning in many ways that life continued as normal. Each individual understood their important role in suppressing the spread of infection and made sure to take appropriate precautions.

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For leaders of organizations and policymakers, there is no doubt an attractiveness in mandating people's actions. Perhaps it feels like an unfortunate but necessary step to ensure the greater long-term good. And with the influx of disruptive technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), there is an ever-increasing array of tools for us to monitor, influence, and control. Yet, however noble our goals, as historian and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari has succinctly put it, "technology favors tyranny." Individuals become pieces of data to be sorted, neglecting the intangible parts of our humanity in favor of efficient solutions. If we encourage an over-reliance on supervision, we create a pliable but ultimately unimaginative people — stopping the flow of free thought, creativity, and innovation.

So, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Do we allow our technologies to erode freedoms or enhance them? Do we tackle crises top-down or bottom-up? I, for one, hope we choose the latter. I hope we remember the children of Kamaishi and the good that can come from personal empowerment. To my mind, resilience begins with individual confidence to overcome adversity and self-belief that even one person can make a difference and save lives. Nurturing such belief will certainly be a challenge, but one that is evidently worth the effort.