

Radiation brings fear, and kids let it all out

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Kids say the cruellest things: A girl bullied at school with the taunt 'You've got the radiation!' (right) sits at her home in Chiba Prefecture, where she moved after fleeing Fukushima Prefecture in the wake of the March 2011 nuclear disaster. | KYODO

Radiation is a fearful thing. Colorless, odorless, undetectable except by special instruments, it's one of those evils you can dismiss from your mind altogether, until the special instruments start registering. Then suddenly it's everywhere, or seems to be — a ubiquitous and ineradicable contaminant.

Children, as we all know, say and do the damndest things. They mean no harm, they just know not what they do, sometimes. Their innocence is terrifying. Sometimes innocence looks anything but innocent. But all societies recognize it.

Children are not legally responsible for their actions. Parents and teachers may punish them in order to teach them responsibility. But it's a long process. Until it's complete, the evil they do, when they do evil, gets filed under "mischief," in recognition of the spirit in which it was — probably — committed.

When Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant cracked under the strain of a tsunami six years ago and irradiated large swaths of Fukushima Prefecture, refugees streamed out of the stricken area, settling where they could. Forty thousand of them remain out-of-prefecture, 5,100 in Tokyo. Most of them will never go home again. Will they ever be at home where they are?

Josei Seven magazine raises the issue of "nuclear bullying." Children too young, one might think, to even know the word "radiation" picked it up under the circumstances, and flung it with what seems like gleeful malice at disoriented new classmates who had enough to cope with already. Six years on, says Josei Seven, they're still flinging it.

"It started immediately," says one refugee, recalling her son's transfer to a Tokyo elementary school in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. "Fukushima kids are weird,' they'd shout at him. Kids would crawl under his desk and jab his feet with pencils. In the mornings he began saying he wasn't feeling well. At the time, frankly, I was too traumatized myself to take much notice."

Lawyer Yukio Yamakawa, director-general of the Tokyo Disaster Support Network, takes up the story with an account of other children he's spoken to. What starts with name-calling ("Hey, Radioactive!" "Hey, Bacteria!") easily escalates into what's hard not to call torture. One kid is forced to drink a bottle of ink. Another has his shoes tossed into the toilet. A third is met in the corridor by classmates poised as if brandishing guns: "Radiation! Bang! Bang!" A fourth suffers extortion of what adds up over time to ¥1.5 million: "You can afford it, your family gets (disaster victim) compensation payments!"

Yamakawa reports this taunt making the rounds: “Fukushima kids won’t live past junior high school anyway, so you may as well die now.”

“Tanaka-san,” as we’ll call the mother cited above, began to fear her son might commit suicide. A poem he wrote contained the line, “Oh, to be able to go to heaven.” Fully focused now, she transferred the boy to another school. The peace that followed was short-lived. Name-calling, exclusion — it started all over again. The homeroom teacher was well-intentioned and put a stop to it — what she could see of it. What went on behind her back was beyond her control. A lot did, its viciousness increasing.

“I’d been bullied myself as a child,” Tanaka says, incidentally reminding us that the problem is neither new nor necessarily nuclear-related. “I understood what he was going through.”

She transferred him again. That seems to have ended the ugliest persecution, but, once a victim, you don’t simply get over it. The boy as a small child had dreamed of being a botanist when he grew up. Now he simply says, “I have no dreams.” Fukushima No. 1 destroyed much that is quantifiable — lives, property, livelihoods — and much that isn’t.

What to make of little kids who inflict this torment on other little kids? Can innocence itself be evil? Or fictitious? One hypothesis Josei Seven raises is that children merely absorb what they hear from their parents. Lacking critical faculties and adult inhibitions, they act where grown-ups merely talk.

The energy and imagination they put into it make it hard not to suspect they enjoy it. Enjoyment of other people’s sufferings is a well-attested human trait, exploited for mass entertainment at least as far back as the Roman circuses. Nothing has happened since to root it out of us, and if radiation stimulates it today, in that respect at least it breaks no new ground.

Naked fear is a factor too. Radiation, unseen, unheard, is the most fearful of stalkers. Might school kids seriously believe their Fukushima classmates

are contagious? If so, the rational response would be to stay away from them, but fear and hatred merge, short-circuiting rationality and generating “Radiation, bang, bang!”

Radiation today, tuberculosis a century ago, different causes producing similar effects. Novelist Ayako Miura (1922-1999), herself a sufferer, made what might be called “tuberculosis bullying” a sub-theme of her novel “Shiokari Toge” (Shiokari Pass), set in late-19th-century Hokkaido: “It was an age when sufferers of tuberculosis were so hated and feared that they were even forced to leave the neighborhood.” A character who innocently brings up the subject arouses horror in his listener: “Mr. Nagano, even if you only mention the name of that dreadful disease it makes your lungs rot!”

“Radiation, bang, bang!” Last July a 26-year-old man slipped into a facility for disabled patients in Kanagawa Prefecture and slaughtered 19 of them, his apparent intention being to free the world from the scourge of disability. Disability, bang, bang. In February Satoshi Uematsu was declared fit to stand trial. A psychiatric evaluation found in him symptoms of a personality disorder but not of incapacity to distinguish right from wrong.

The disorder in question, writes psychiatrist Rika Kayama in the weekly *Spa!*, amounts to an extreme form of self-love. “Of course,” she writes, “we all love ourselves; we all at one time or another fantasize about being king or queen of the world ...” We’d all, in short, be insane, more or less, if we let our fantasies rule our actions. Most of us know when to stop.

Uematsu’s self-love, Kayama hypothesizes, took the form of a conviction of having a mission, a destiny to fulfill. Maybe we all have that too, to some degree. Adults usually stifle it. Children often don’t.