

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

17.541 / 17.543 Japanese Politics and Society
Fall 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

Case #5: Community

The three days Eric Swenson hadn't been able to reach Uchida were the longest he'd ever spent. The news broadcaster said that Kobe had been flattened and that the homeless were being housed in schools. Eric called the neighborhood soba shop where Uchida frequently ate, but the phones were not working and the broadcasts said that no trains were running to Kobe. In desperation, he'd even sent a cable to the local Red Cross. Uchida was not registered with them. At night, Eric tossed in his single bed in downtown Tokyo, cursing the fact that he'd left Kobe for a business trip. He wandered through the maze of small streets next to the Ginza and thought of Uchida. He realized that he loved Uchida. Yes, he loved his bluntness, his abrupt humor, but most of all he loved Uchida's honesty.

Love was a hard word for Eric to feel comfortable with. He was not used to thinking in terms of love. Of course his mother loved him and said so at the end of every phone call. "Love you," she said in a light voice. His father ended his calls with "I love you, son." That always sounded a bit misplaced to Eric, and he replied with a weak, "Me too." Of course he loved them, but he never really enjoyed being with them. Visits home were full of expectation that a real connection might finally occur. At the same time, he was always relieved when nothing happened.

Uchida had come into Eric's life quite by accident. Eric had just arrived in Kobe to begin an internship at MITA, a small Japanese company. Company housing was not available, and friends had told Eric that cheap housing was available in the old section of the city. Eric had gone into Uchida's liquor store to inquire about this. Uchida had laughed when Eric related his problem.

"Of course there is cheap housing here," he'd said gruffly. "The houses are old and the Koreans are plentiful."

After several cups of sake, Uchida had offered Eric a room in his own home.

"I live above my store" he'd said. "I'm an honest man, and my father was the same. I have two children, Reiko, who is ten and smart and Taro who, is five and lively."

Eric had moved in that night. From the first he'd been accepted as a member of the family. Dinner was served promptly at six, and Uchida enjoyed the broiled fish or eel with fresh ginger that his wife, Tamayo, usually served. She fussed over Uchida's meals and laughed at his jokes. Eric played with the children before dinner and helped them with their homework after. Uchida insisted on a traditional bath each night, and Eric often bathed with the children, feeling completely accepted as part of the family. Contrary to his MIT habits, he almost never went back to the laboratory at night, telling Ito, his boss, that Uchida expected him for supper. Ito frowned at this, but Eric compensated by coming in to work for several hours on both Saturday and Sunday.

It was four days after the earthquake before Eric could reach Ito by phone. Ito was beside himself. The laboratory had been badly damaged. Luckily, the quake had happened at night, when no one was working. No, he hadn't heard anything about Uchida-san or his family. Eric should come back as soon as possible. There was a lot to do at the laboratory, and the government wasn't helping at all.

"In fact," Ito finished, "I wonder if they realize this is a major disaster."

It was a full week after the quake before Eric was able to take a train to Kobe. As it entered the city, there was a hush in the train. Highways were buckled. Buildings were toppled. It reminded Eric of pictures of Dresden after the bombing. One small child began to cry as the train pulled into the station. His high wails filled the car, but everyone was looking out the window and did not seem to notice. The woman next to him took out her handkerchief. Then another did the same.

Eric had to walk the two miles to Uchida's house. His heart leapt as he came up the narrow street and saw that part of the house was still standing. A neighbor, Emiko, waved to him, and Eric smiled and waved back. Then he noticed that she was beckoning to him and looking very concerned.

"I'm glad your back," Emiko said bluntly. "Uchida-san has had a terrible time."

"Then he's all right," Eric whispered.

"Yes," Emiko answered. "No", she corrected herself. "The family was buried for three days. Taro-chan had a concussion. He died on the way to the hospital."

"No," Eric said, "no that's not possible." He tried to imagine Taro dead. When Eric had left for Tokyo, Taro had cried and Eric had taken off his watch and placed it on Taro's wrist. "I'll be back," he'd said gently. "Do you think you can take care of it for me?"

"I can," Taro had answered earnestly, his eyes still bright with tears.

"The rest of the family were lucky to get out alive at all," Emiko added quickly. Her voice lowered. "If it had not been for the Yakuza many of us would still be buried."

"The Yakuza?" Eric said stupidly.

"Yes, they helped quite a lot. You know, it is in Yakuza tradition to help the underdog. In this case they followed that tradition. Of course, their connection to the construction companies helps. There'll be plenty of work after all this."

Eric nodded, still trying to digest the news about Taro. He moved past Emiko, who was still talking, and bolted towards the house. The front of the shop had been destroyed by the quake, and part of the second floor had collapsed as well. Tamaya's bucket was next to the door. Eric's heart pounded. They were home. He ran up the side stairs.

"Uchida-san," he said softly, entering the low doorway. The room was orderly, and boxes of liquor were piled next to a collapsed wall. Uchida was seated at his low desk, looking at some papers.

"Ah, Eric-kun," Uchida greeted him. "You're back."

"Yes, I heard."

"Taro-kun loved you," Uchida-san said simply. "Now you're my only son."

Eric fought back his tears and, straightening his back, answered in a low voice, "I would like that very much."

Then Uchida smiled. It was a slow smile that never reached his eyes. He tapped his pencil on the desk. "I have calculated that at least half the damage and certainly half of the deaths could have been avoided. The government never acted. The Prime Minister didn't act until more than twenty-four hours had passed. Did you know that?"

Eric nodded.

The Prime Minister refused help. The Swiss wanted to send dogs to help find the wounded. America offered help as well.

Eric nodded again. He wondered what Uchida was getting at. Everyone knew that Tokyo had been slow to react. Uchida clenched his fists. The room was utterly quiet. Eric did not dare ask about Taro's funeral. Suddenly, he realized that for Uchida Taro was beside the point.

"I called government officials," Uchida continued. "I told them how Taro-chan had died. I told them we were buried for more than three days. Why had nothing done? Why hadn't they accepted the Swiss dogs? Why was nothing being done here? I called your boss, Ito-san, as well. His laboratory was destroyed. He said that there was nothing he could do to help.

Again Eric nodded. He was not sure how to respond. Uchida was usually so rational and understanding. Why had he called Ito of all people?

"I spoke to the neighborhood group. They agreed with me, but were reluctant to sign a petition. Can you believe that? We have a government, but we are dependent on gangsters. What has happened to Japan? Why doesn't the government care? Does the government think too many Koreans live in Kobe? We could learn from America. A large American company based in Kobe has organized its employees into water brigades."

Eric sat quietly next to Uchida as he completed his tirade, a scene that was to be repeated many more times over the weeks to come. Uchida called everyone he knew with the same list of complaints. He wrote a petition and went house-to-house, explaining its purpose and asking others to sign it. He even demanded that the government take responsibility for paying him compensation because of the loss of his only son. "Taro-kun was part of my pension," he said in a pained voice.

At first, the neighbors were sympathetic. Everyone liked Uchida and Tamayo, and most of them had known Taro. But slowly the mood of the neighborhood changed. People wanted to rebuild and forget. The government began to help, and the neighbors wanted to be part of a rebuilding effort. Finally, at the last neighborhood meeting Uchida's speech was met with silence.

But over the next several months, the situation did not improve. Uchida was either morose or angry, and Reiko and Tamaya kept out of his way. Meals were brief and unpleasant, and everyone made an excuse to leave after the last bowl of rice was served. Eric worked at the laboratory late and often did not return for supper. He often thought of moving out.

Yet he continued to live at with Uchida and his family and worried about them constantly. He knew that sales at the liquor store had fallen off; many of the old customers now purchased their liquor elsewhere. Some neighbors turned away when they saw Uchida approaching. Reiko reported that her schoolmates were teasing her. Yesterday, a number of them had blocked her way to school, pushing her until she cried and ran home. Often they stole her lunch, and each morning the pencils in her pencil box were broken.

Reiko never complained, but yesterday Eric had heard her crying and had coaxed the story out of her. Reiko said that when she rapidly told the teachers about her problems they either dismissed them or turned away, even as she related the latest incident. Eric held her trembling body and felt a fierce rage towards Uchida -- and then towards everyone.

A week later Eric was helping Uchida stack boxes. It was Sunday, and the family had slept late. Eric was relieved that Uchida seemed to be in a better mood. Tamayo had made his favorite rice balls for a snack, and they sat on a low bench eating and laughing. Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

Uchida shook his head and pulled the sliding door open. Two men dressed in white with sun glasses and short cropped hair greeted him.

"Uchida-san, its good to see you," the taller one said.

"Yes," Uchida replied, "good to see you also, Sato-san"

"I see that your house is rebuilt and that you are back in business," Sato said, stepping into the store.

"Thank you for your help," Uchida-san answered. "I owe you a great debt."

"Not at all." Sato smiled and took off his sunglasses. "It's too bad about Taro-chan. I love children."

Eric noticed that Sato's teeth were filled with gold and that his first finger joint had been chopped off. The man next to him never smiled. Yakuza, Eric thought watching Uchida carefully.

"I won't keep you long," Sato continued.

Uchida was silent.

"I just came by to see how you were doing."

"Fine," Uchida said quietly.

"And to ask for a small donation to help the people of Kobe," Sato added quickly. "You're store is mostly rebuilt, but there are people who are far less fortunate. They don't have housing, and the government isn't moving that quickly. Some of the families don't even have a regular water supply."

"Yes," Uchida answered. "I've heard about that."

"Children younger than Taro-chan," Sato added.

Uchida did not move. It seemed suddenly that his square body had shrunk and that, in a moment, Uchida had become old. Eric wanted to put his arm around Uchida, but instead stepped threateningly towards Sato's smiling face.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Sato said and turned quickly to leave the house.

Uchida put his hand on Eric's shoulder. His head was still bent. "What should I do?" Uchida asked softly.