Tancho

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Cranes have captured the human imagination in many cultures, from the relief-carvings of ancient Egypt to the logos of modern airlines. The elegance of these birds, their size and their graceful flight convey a sense of freedom and wonder. In Chinese mythology, the crane is considered the Bird of Heaven, an emissary of paradise, who lives a thousand years. In Japan, cranes are symbols of longevity, fidelity, prosperity and good fortune. Origami cranes are presented as good wishes to convalescents and millions of paper cranes have been placed at the Hiroshima memorial as an expression of hope for a more peaceful future.

In February 2011, we visited the International Crane Centre at Akan in Hokkaido. This is the wintering site for a population of non-migrating red-crowned cranes (known as *tancho* in Japan). The rapid development of Hokkaido destroyed the birds' habitat and interfered with their breeding and migration. The cranes were considered extinct until a small population of about a dozen birds was discovered in 1924 and fostered by the efforts of local people. Despite the severe hardships they themselves faced in post-World War II Japan, local people sustained these birds as heavy snowfalls in 1952 pushed them right to the edge of starvation. Their artificial feeding preserved the cranes from extinction. High school students formed a Japanese Crane Club and in 1965 the Akan Society for the Preservation of Japanese Cranes was founded and in 1987 a national park was created in Kushiro marsh. The International Crane Centre, opened in 1996, is now devoted to studying the behaviour and biology of the birds and to their preservation. Although their numbers have now increased to about a thousand birds, they are still at risk because of restricted habitat and a limited genetic pool that makes them more susceptible to the outbreak of disease,

Now many people from across Japan, along with international visitors, return to the area each year. Some of them described to us their feeling of being "healed" of the pressures of their busy everyday lives when in the presence of these birds. Others expressed their view that the cranes represented "the essence of Japanese beauty." All of us who gathered in silence to admire these magnificent birds shared this sense of appreciation for nature.

As Japan experienced multiple disasters in March from earthquakes, tsunami and the breakdown of the Fukushima nuclear plant, our thoughts turned once again to the cranes as symbols of sympathy, healing and support.