

The Asian Tsunami Recovering & Rebuilding - A Culture of Hope

It was Boxing Day of 2004 and I was in an airplane, on my way to New Zealand. When I arrived, because I was now suddenly ahead by 18 hours, it was as if my life had leap-frogged a whole day. I never did experience December 26th, but the rest of the world sure did. Hundreds of thousands died that day and there were millions affected in the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, known by the scientific community as the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake. It was an undersea earthquake that occurred at 00:58:53 UTC (07:58:53 local time) on December 26, 2004. The earthquake triggered a series of lethal tsunamis that spread throughout the Indian Ocean, killing large numbers of people and devastating coastal communities across South and South East Asia, including parts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and elsewhere. This catastrophe is still one of the deadliest disasters in modern history. The disaster is known in Asia and in the international media as the Asian Tsunami, and is also called the Boxing Day Tsunami.

It was now more than a year later, and I was in Thailand, whose beach towns were hit the hardest. I had to experience the devastation first hand, see its affect, and learn about what was being done now to re-build the villages and revive the communities.

We drove down the coast to where the worst areas had been hit by the giant wave. Our guides were a wealth of information and stories. One in particular, 'Pig' (everyone in Thailand has an affectionate nickname), had been driving along the same coastline in the morning on December 26th, 2004, when his colleague called him to inform him about the encroaching Tsunami. It had already hit the southern coast of Asia and was now coming toward him, toward the region of Phang Nga. They predicted he had 20minutes to leave the area and find protection. He immediately turned up a mountain road and parked his car at higher elevation. It was from this vantage point that he watched the wave envelope the white sand beaches, all along the coastal communities and tourist-packed ocean-side resorts and hotels below. It made him feel sick and sad.

He had not been back to that location until today, and it was difficult for him to discuss his experience with us; and yet his account was personal and real and made for a very emotional day for us all. As we toured, Pig would intermittently ask the driver to stop, so that we could get out and he could tell us about how that area had been affected. We visited beach resorts, communities, businesses, villages, and local schools and orphanages. The following excerpts are based on some of the powerful experiences we had that day.

On our first stop, which was on a slight hill on the highway with a view of a beautiful bay and a long white sandy beach, Pig explained that there used to be rows and rows of beach resorts. Now there were no signs of any buildings or life whatsoever; just palm trees, some rocks, and white sand. Then, as we went





round the corner, we arrived at what seemed to be a small quiet town with a few shops to our right. When I turned to my left however, to the beach side, there was about 30 acres of land that was comprised of mounds of reddish dirt, rebar, blue tarps, and scattered wooden and metal supplies throughout. Pig explained that that area used to be one of the most thriving and popular beach hotel resorts, but now all that

was left were miscellaneous remnants of the massive buildings, having been somewhat flattened and re-organized by bulldozers, so the owners could re-plan. Brand new electrical posts and wires were now traveling through the property, and there were groups of builders clumped in scaffolded areas already having begun the rebuilding process. Overall however, it seemed very empty. We stopped so I could get a better view. I felt strange, almost guilty, being a complete outsider, taking pictures of this beautiful but sad wasteland and of its people; nevertheless, when I looked at the workers, they waved and smiled to me, and it made me feel welcome and more emotionally safe witnessing both their 'emptiness' and, paradoxically, their 'hope', as they rebuilt their dreams for a better future.



I felt the need to stay quiet. There was a sort of strange eerie feeling in the air, as if we could still see and hear crowds of people. My wife, Cheryl, also felt this energy. We mentioned it to Pig. He said we are not the only ones. In fact, many of the survivors of the tsunami had to move away, because the sounds of the lost souls, they said, still permeate the environment – the yells, the screams, the crying. Even the family members that still return from their homeland to give homage to their relations have reported these ghostly sounds of anguish. It made the paradox of happy alive people combined with their immediate experience of terror and death, very real and very present.

Pig took us down to the local beach. We passed down roads and saw many more buildings. On our left was a beautiful, just finished and refurbished, updated Spanish Villa with an expansive property, all ready to re-welcome happy holiday goers. On our right, however, it was quite the juxtaposition. What used to be attractive resort hotels, beach-side condos, shops and businesses, were now just hollow,



empty, gray cement, lifeless skeletons. In some of the open windows and doors on higher levels, ragged materials blew in the quiet, gentle wind. Much of it was still covered in sand, which in some spots had washed and drifted into clumps. The fields and parking lots, between the buildings, were in shambles with dead trees, garbage, tarps, building materials . . . The area looked like it had been firebombed – a war zone of sorts. Obviously the rebuilding had not yet begun there. We arrived at the beach. It was a beautiful long white sand beach. Again it was a weird feeling. Weird because the water was flat, calm, and innocent, and yet confusing as this body of water had been the source of absolute terror and death.



Pig walked us down to the beach. The pavement at the end of the road and along the beach pathway was cracked and much have it had been broken, and there was a short steep bank angling down toward the water, a bank that had been created by the powerful impact of the wave. We took off our sandals and Pig told us what had happened in the bay when the wave came that day. He explained how thousands of people used to come to this beach each day, all year round. He

said when the tsunami arrived, because the beach used to flatter and thus the water shallower than most other bays, the whole bay of water was sucked out a kilometer to sea. He pointed to some rocks toward the horizon, and said the water was pulled all the way back to that point, creating a vast stretch of empty sand. At this point of course, as the gigantic wave came into view, it grew even higher, so by the time it actually hit the beach, it was higher than the palm trees (about 30 feet high). The volume of water was unfathomable. Due to the volume and power, the wave hit the land, bringing most of the sand and all people, boats and any debris, with it, in land. Everything in its path was suddenly wiped away. There was a shrine built just up from the beach next to a sheltered beach bar and restaurant. I think we all had a moment of silence for a short prayer or blessing.



We left and passed through the town. Pig had said, because of how flat the terrain is, there was a police boat that was launched from the bay, 2 kilometers inland. 2 kilometers!?! We had to go and see it. He said the wave was so huge, that the boat was high enough to be flung over all of the telephone wires. It sounded inconceivable. We went to the location where the boat had been left. I had thought the boat would be a small, zodiac style raft, that may have been 20 feet long, but I was wrong. It was not a normal size boat; instead, it was a massive, 80 foot plus, gray coast guard-looking giant



steel ocean vessel that must have weighed over 60 tons! The thing had been launched 2 kilometers, over 25 foot high telephone wires and dropped on the side of a grassy bank – it was incredible to believe! I was dumb founded. It was such amazing proof of the power and impact of the tsunami. Because of this, the police vessel had been left there and the area had now been

turned into a memorial park. There was also a shrine that had been built in the parking lot for the loved ones that had been lost that day, with photos, messages, flowers, and gifts, piled high. I quietly walked around it and looked at the photos and read the messages. It connected me to humans I had never met and brought tears to my eyes. I realized how delicate life actually is.



We continued our car journey to other coastal communities. There were housing



development projects en route, so we visited one. There were rows and rows of new homes in a very nice new community that had been built specifically for tsunami survivors and their families. Most of these new developments were sponsored and built by international corporations. They had done a good job. Some houses were larger than others. Pig explained that different sized homes had been built for different families, to reflect their earnings and wealth, in order to keep the overall

living arrangements equal to their different property and housing lifestyles before the tsunami. It was obviously a well-planned and fair strategy. There were little shops, a lovely little kindergarten school, and also a wonderful area for building boats. I was most intrigued by the boat project. Pig explained that along with the businesses and homes, all of the region's fishing boats had been destroyed. Since most of



the income (and food) for these communities directly came from the fishing industry, new boats had to be constructed so that locals could return to the sea to fish. I examined the fishing boats – brand new beautifully built wooden boats. This was a fantastic housing and boat development project. It was projects like this one, that helped give *me* hope for these communities and their people.

We traveled to the end of a peninsula, through a small village, and out to the outermost point. This is where the national monument for the Asian Tsunami is built. There was an information board that showed the origin of the earthquake, and had map of all areas that were affected, and the number of people that lost their lives in each region and in each community.



The monument itself was a tall shiny black tidal wave curving over. There was colourful mosaic wall facing it. Through the middle, running down between them both was a path. On the mosaic wall were ‘shields’ listing the name of the dead and their nationalities.

The wave felt heavy and ominous. When I was standing between both ‘walls’ I felt somewhat claustrophobic and suffocated, as if I were one of the trapped helpless victims. It was a very profound experience.



Just 200 meters away was a large fishing dock being rebuilt by a team of builders, probably local fishermen. I walked over toward them. I waved and they waved and smiled back to me.



Again I felt strange: experiencing the power of the tidal wave on one hand, and then, on the other hand, ironically, being greeted by these hopeful happy locals, looking forward in their lives, rebuilding their hopes and dreams.



On our way back that day, we passed through another fishing town. I saw two more boats, large brightly coloured fishing vessels this time, that had been left after also having been launched inland. One of the vessels was pressed against the bank next to the road; the other, on the side of an old paved basketball court. Its bow had crashed through the back of someone's house. They hadn't bothered to move it, probably too costly and in the larger scheme of things, certainly not a priority for the community. Across the road, next to the vessel that had blown through the house, was a car with a bumper sticker on its window that ironically read:



Each of these sights – the two inland vessels and the bumper sticker – made for what could be another incredulous experience, and yet it no longer seemed shocking to me. The seeming terror and devastation, and yet the constant and continuous thoughts and messages of happiness, peace and gratitude just seemed ingrained in the integral fabric of this land, its people, and its culture. Wherever I looked, no matter the terror and devastation, there was a sense of godness and hope woven through it.

This experience made me realize how all humans are connected, and how delicate 'life' actually is. It also made me feel quite insignificant compared to the greater power of nature – a force that is unpredictable, a force that is to be respected, and a force that surrounds us all each moment of our life. It made me weep inwardly for the lives of many beautiful human beings who not only lost their lives that day, but also their dreams, their passions, and their futures. It made me feel closer to the people I love, give thanks for who I am, and made me more aware of what really is important to me, the need to live my passions and aspirations, each day. This day connected to me to something much higher, a greater realm of humanity and hope, a spiritual realm of life, where the reality of human connection, and the gratitude for life and living is a priority before anything else.