

Amid Destruction, Life Lessons

I've never considered myself a particularly courageous person, but when Sadie popped her head over my cubicle to ask if I was interested in going to Phuket to volunteer, I unhesitatingly said yes. We had just returned to work after the Christmas celebrations. Under any other circumstance the festive spirit of the season would carry on until after the New Year, but the mood that year was somber. Every day brought more news of casualties and devastations caused by the tsunamis that had hit Thailand, as well as various countries surrounding the Indian Ocean, on the morning of December 26, 2004.

Response to the disaster, which took the world by surprise, was swift. Governments pledged billions of dollars to aid the affected countries, agencies solicited donations, medical and rescue teams were dispatched, and individuals made contributions. The tsunami that hit the western shores of Thailand was only one of many that stemmed from an earthquake in the Indian Ocean. Also known as the Great Sumatra-Andaman earthquake, it eventually claimed more than 225,000 lives in twelve countries, ranging from Indonesia in the east to Somalia in the west. A further 125,000 people were reported to have been injured and over 1.69 million were displaced. With a magnitude of between 9.1 and 9.3, the earthquake was the second largest ever recorded in history.

At the office, we expressed our horrors at the unfolding story and discussed what each one of us could do. Some pledged to donate money, clothing or food to local Red Cross or fundraising drives. My friend and colleague Tara went a step further – as an

activist and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) member, she collected feminine supplies to distribute to affected women.

But contributing material goods didn't seem enough for me. Singapore, where I was at the time, has long been fortunate due to its geographic location. Just missing the "Ring of Fire,"¹ buffered from environmental occurrences by Sumatra on the west and located far enough south to avoid the worst of the northeast monsoon, it had become a trading entrepot in the 19th century and one of Asia's modern day economic stars. Yet just 583 miles north in Thailand and 659 miles northwest in Indonesia was destruction and death. There had to be something more I could do.

So when Sadie posed the question, if I wanted to go with her to help out at one of the many scenes of destruction, I jumped at the chance. We could have gone to any number of affected areas, but Phuket was only one and a half hours away by plane. Budget airlines had begun operating in Asia, which made it affordable for us, too.

Perhaps buoyed by our enthusiasm and naïveté, we rushed headlong into our adventure. Sadie brought up the idea on Thursday, and by 7:45 a.m. the next day, we were strapped into our seats in a plane heading for Phuket. Unusually for that time of the year, when swarms of tourists from near and far head for the fabled beaches of Thailand, the number of airline crew (six) outnumbered the passengers (five, including us). In under 24 hours, we had obtained the approval to take time off from our boss, who understandably viewed our plan as a harebrained one, but consented anyway; stuffed our backpacks with as much food and medical supplies as two petite girls could possibly carry; obtained tetanus and typhoid shots; and fended off questions from concerned family members and friends.

¹ An area of frequent earthquakes and volcanic activity circling the Pacific Ocean.

As the plane took off from Changi Airport and the glittering high rises of Singapore began to fade from my view, I braced for the worst. I had heard that there was no water to drink or to shower with, no beds to sleep on, and that we would be wading around in flooded streets. There were professional groups rounding up volunteers, but we didn't want to go with any organization – we wanted to go immediately and affect the most amount of change we could. In the midst of our frantic planning the day before, I had thought to call the Phuket Aid Center to see if they needed volunteers. Would we, as two 20-something year-old women, be of help or hindrance? The center confirmed that volunteers were welcome.

But what was I getting myself into?

We soon arrived in Phuket to find the city proper not physically affected. People went about their daily activities, on motorcycles and cars, shopping and working, shouting and laughing. There was plenty of water and food – and the ground was dry. Sadie and I found accommodation at a cheap hotel that had beds, air conditioning and televisions in each room.

The Dead

Conditions outside of Phuket, however, were different. Upon reporting to the Phuket Aid Center early that same afternoon, we were directed to join a group of volunteers that was heading out to Khao Lak. A coastal town 70 miles north of Phuket city, Khao Lak in Phangnga district was one of areas worst hit by the tsunami in

Thailand. As we neared Khao Lak town, I began seeing pockets of white, cloth wrapped figures lined up on the ground. What were they, I wondered?

The bus finally pulled to a stop at the site of several makeshift tents that had been set up by the side of the road. There were all sorts of people milling about: medical teams from foreign countries; volunteers of all shapes, sizes, colors and ages; local Thais; people who seemed to know what they were doing and others who looked lost; and perhaps the most prized of all – those who could speak both Thai and English. As us volunteers poured out of the bus, there was no turning away now from the smell that permeated the air – of the dead, or anything else we were about to encounter.

A few of us volunteers were herded to sort out a mountain of clothing donations. I had no idea where they originated from or how they would be distributed. But there were plastic bags to be removed, clothes to be separated, and footwear to be put aside. We were soon joined by some local Thais, who with us picked at the clothing, but with the intention of keeping the items for themselves.

Next we were instructed to cross the two lane street, to one of the sites of figures bundled in white on the ground. I could turn my head in the other direction when I was on the bus, but there was no avoiding them now: the dead bodies of the victims of the tsunami; the reality of the disaster. We watched silently as several local Thai men put the mummies into body bags, talking and behaving as if it was the most natural thing to do. Sadie, who's considerably bolder than I, joined them. I looked at her with a mixture of admiration and fear. The local Thais, however, thought differently – the bilingual Thai volunteer standing next to me whispered that the men were chattering among themselves to see if she would start crying. She didn't.

Soon the mishmash of volunteers joined in, lifting various parts of the lifeless bodies and placing them whole into body bags, zipping up the bags and transporting them 20 feet away under a tent. Since the bodies had been lying in the 90 degree heat and humidity level for so many days – it was the sixth day since the tsunami had occurred – the decomposition was horrific. Eyes had popped, mouths were swollen and open wide, flesh had stretched from gases, bellies were taut and rounded like balloons, skin had turned black and ash-like. Blood, ordinarily thick and bright red, came gushing out in a diluted, dark red stream from one of the bodies that we were moving.

The photos of the dead in the media and on the corkboards across the street had features intact. What we saw in the flesh was beyond recognition. It was hard to tell who the dead once were – Thai or foreign, male or female, young or old. The saddest were bodies of little children. To think that they once had lives as full as any of ours.

There were some 70 to 80 bodies at the site, and many more across coastal Thailand. A total of 5,395 people were confirmed dead in the country, including that of 2,400 foreigners from 36 countries. At temples, particularly for the Thai Buddhists who believe in cremation as soon as possible after death, the dead couldn't be burned quickly enough. Because the bodies had so decayed, the only way they could be identified were by forensics or physical markings such as birthmarks, tattoos, piercings or jewelry. Medical teams handled the forensics, and some volunteers were stationed at temples to take photos of corpses before their bodies would be destroyed forever.

I wasn't prepared to see, or handle, corpses. The only dead people I had seen before that day were my grandmother and father, but even that didn't lessen the shock of seeing rows and rows of dead bodies. There was no getting away from the smell of the

dead, either. It was everywhere in the affected areas. We were given masks to cover our mouths and noses, but they were ordinary surgical masks as seen on TV shows like *ER*. We were also given rubber boots and gloves to protect our hands and feet, but the kinds one would use for construction work and washing dishes, respectively. Any infections or diseases we could have contracted from handling the bodies were solely our responsibility to bear.