

The Pain Of Others

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Readings

(From *The Big Wave* by Pearl S. Buck, a novel for children in which a tsunami strikes a fishing village in Japan. This is the morning after the tsunami hits, and the boy, Kino, is worried about his friend, Jiya, who has lost his entire family):

Kino looked out the open door, and he saw the ocean sparkling and smooth. The sky was blue again, a few clouds on the horizon were the only sign of what had passed—except for the empty beach.

"How cruel it seems for the sky to be so clear and the ocean so calm!" Kino said.

But his father shook his head. "No, it is wonderful that after the storm the ocean grows calms, and the sky is blue once more. It was not the ocean or the sky that made the evil storm."

"Who made it?" Kino asked. He let tears roll down his cheeks, because there was so much he could not understand. But only his father saw them and his father understood.

"Ah, no one knows who makes evil storms," his father replied. "We only know that they come. When they come we must live through them as bravely as we can, and after they are gone, we must feel again how wonderful is life. Every day of life is more valuable now than before the storm."

"But Jiya's family—his father and mother and brother, and all the other good fisherfolk, who are lost—" Kino whispered. He could not forget the dead.

"Now we must think of Jiya," his father reminded him. "He will open his eyes at any

minute and we must be there, you to be his brother, and I to be his father."

(From [Regarding the Pain of Others](#) by writer and human rights activist, Susan Sontag, who died on December 28th, 2004)

"Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated."

(From a February 5th [CBS News story](#) about the tsunami relief effort):

The flight deck aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, off the coast in the Indian Ocean, continues to be a center of activity - with an intensity that was explained by Robert "Rusty" Blackman, a three-star Marine Corps general and commander of the U.S. effort.

"The sons and daughters of America that are here and will be here, are very proud of what they're doing," says Blackman. "Their hearts are broken, but at the same time they are very proud of what of they're accomplishing, and what they will accomplish in the weeks and months to come."

He says he's broken-hearted by what he's seen and experienced, but says that he feels, "perhaps for the first time in my career, a new sense of service."

"I've been in service of my country for 34 years, and this is a different kind of service," says Blackman. "It's perhaps one, when all's said and done, that I will be most proud of."

The big wave. Wave after wave after wave. And though the sun may be shining now and the ocean has quieted, the waves of pain and suffering have not stopped for hundreds of thousands of people who need medical care, who need food and shelter, who are facing the seemingly impossible task of rebuilding their lives from the ground up after nearly unimaginable devastation struck on December 26th of last year.

How do we respond? How else *can* we? With compassion. We read the stories, see the pictures, maybe we have connections to someone who actually experienced it, maybe

we have lost someone we know...but we live in the knowledge that each heartrending *individual* story has to be multiplied by the hundreds of thousands as the death count-- just the death count, to say nothing of the survivors, those to which we hope we can extend a helping hand--the death count climbs hourly like a gruesome odometer gone awry. We are touched by each story, ache at the viewing of each new photograph, stand helpless before the difficult reality of aid distribution, think sadly of the numbers of people that have not even been reached yet, and feel faintly, distantly, a tiny measure of the hopeless exhaustion that survivors must feel as they begin to rebuild...and we do what we can. People are moving to translate their compassion into action across the world. Charitable organizations are reporting record donations as they scramble to keep up with the generosity being expressed. In that way, it seems like a hope-filled moment, an opportunity for a new direction for this world torn by strife and war and poverty...

Because it suddenly feels so simple, doesn't it? It feels like positive action borne out of compassion just might put something right again. Horrible as the tragedy has been and continues to be, it seems to strip away so much that separates us, so much that is now seen to be clearly pointless and destructive, and there is the budding awareness that we are, indeed, a human family, that politics and aggression and greed and religious conflict and corporate ruthlessness, that all of this can be transcended to work for the relief of human suffering...It's so stunningly simple, right?

Well, it *is*...and it *isn't*.

The truth that we are, indeed, a human family is simple enough. To act in accordance with that truth, however, requires complex maneuvering in the messy worlds of economics and politics and religion, not to mention the struggles we encounter within ourselves. It calls on us to work beneath the level of airy sentimentality in the service of practical reality. It demands that we affirm the interdependent web of all living things while understanding that it is solitary beings who are connected in that web, solitary beings that often can fool themselves into believing that they are somehow eternally insulated from the ramifications of *being connected* with all other living things. It challenges us to be honest with ourselves about what we truly think and feel so that we act from clarity rather than cloudy sympathy.

I *do* believe that this disaster provides an opportunity for us to respond to one another, all across this world, in a more compassionate way. At the same time, my reaction to this tragedy has provoked a myriad of sometimes contradictory, troubling and troublesome thoughts that I cannot ignore. Paradoxes within myself.

For instance, I have been appalled by the "rush to explanation" by many religious leaders and writers, and the *lack* of compassion that many of these interpretations reflect. In Indonesia, [the Washington Post reported](#) unnamed imams blaming the tsunami on "lay Muslims who were shirking their daily prayers and following a materialistic lifestyle." The same article quoted Sephardic chief rabbi Shlomo Amar in Israel as saying that the disaster was "an expression of God's wrath" punishing people for their "needless hatred of each other, lack of charity," and "moral turpitude." Some [Hindus see the tsunami as a judgement](#) on the presence of Christian missionaries in Hindu territory. Many Christians see the disaster as a judgment of God on the Muslim faith and a call to the survivors to turn to Christ. It is easy to become impatient with all of these heartlessly tidy explanations, especially in the face of such massive suffering.

And yet, finally, while I could be dismissive of all of these explanations, I came to realize that I, too, was creating explanations. I had to own up to my own theological construct about what happened and why, and acknowledge some admittedly uneasy feelings.

You see, there is a part of me, and this feels dangerous to say, but a part of me—and I've heard hints of it from others as well—that feels absolutely awestruck at the unequivocal expression of the power of nature. Muslim Professor of African Studies at Howard University, Sulayman Nyang [said in the Washington Post article](#) that the tsunami "puts an end to the illusion of human omnipotence." There is a certain reassurance in that, isn't there? I realize that it is a reassurance that can only be felt at a safe distance from the tragedy, a philosophical abstraction that cannot be entertained in the midst of struggling to rebuild a life, yet I have to own up to my own context. We may not believe that it's God setting things right, but there is a certain comfort in knowing that even if we humans were to screw up this planet to the extent that it could no longer sustain us, still, the earth itself would continue, as it has for billions of years. There are natural processes that go on in spite of anything we have done or will do. It is *bigger than us*.

I realized that part of my frustration with many religious interpretations was not so much about their introduction of God into the causes of such a disaster, as their understanding of the overriding importance of human actions. We sin and *the universe* wails in distress!...Can we really believe that? Our actions have consequences, some form of karma is at work, but to believe that nature responds so directly to our admittedly destructive behavior is not, I don't think, what is meant by an interdependent web of living things. To believe that we exert that kind of control over the cosmos is often what has gotten us into trouble in the first place...And while I may

subscribe to a more naturalistic explanation for what happened, I realize that it is of no use to those in need. They don't need explanations. The question that needs to be answered, as Pearl Buck so beautifully pointed out, is not "why?" but "what now?"

Another unsettling realization that hit me is that our expressions of compassion are inevitably about hard choices.

I saw a story on one of the news magazine shows about a late middle-aged couple who were vacationing in Thailand. They were walking on the beach and saw the wave coming. They ran for higher ground, hurrying as best they could, when the wave hit. They were carried a long way inland, the man still held onto his wife's hand, and he realized that she was unconscious and could not swim or keep afloat. He managed to maneuver her onto some debris, to keep her afloat, and then held onto her hand for dear life...for dear life, literally.

The story could have ended there, with the inspiring postscript being that they both survived. She was recovering from relatively minor injuries, joking about the fact that, since he had saved her life, he made himself completely responsible for her from now on, and their love story continues. That *is* inspiring. But, to the credit of the editors for this show, they let the man tell more of the story. As he held onto his wife's hand and the water carried them onward, there were many other people he saw who cried out for help, who reached out desperately. He could have helped them, he said, but he would have to let go of his wife...and he wouldn't do that. As the tears appeared in his eyes, the interviewer asked what he would ask for from the viewers who were hearing his story. Not forgiveness, he said, as the people who could forgive him were most likely all dead. He needed to tell it—that was all—to tell his story and have people listen.

It reminded me that all of our actions are partial, tragically incomplete, imperfect at best, and yet we must act.

Hard choices. I heard a man on the radio from a local charity talk about the fact that the focus on the tsunami disaster would inevitably funnel a lot of dollars away from local need to the need overseas. He expressed that he was, of course, glad to see the massive response to this disaster, but urged people not to forget those who were in need close to home, not to ignore the ongoing need, the daily plight, of so many suffering people who were not given media attention.

And so it is that we give of ourselves with the humbling recognition that all we can do is not enough and yet with the knowledge that we have ample opportunity to do more.

But in order to do that, we have to face up to the world as it is. It is tempting to think that our response to such a tragedy should rise above politics, but politics quickly comes into play. From the initial blunder of this administration's response to the later strategy for seeking to win Muslim favor; from the selection of "ambassadors" to travel to the affected areas to the speeches that purportedly address the problem; from the scorekeeping on relief funds to the stories of warring factions using the chaos of the relief efforts to gain temporary advantage; this is all taking place within a political context whether we think it should be or not.

Susan Sontag reminds us in the book entitled, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, that news reporting, and images in particular, come from a particular bias, if only through the very act of selection. Though we are led to believe, especially in contemporary times, that we have access to "the world" through our media outlets—she mentions the radio news slogan that says, "You give us twenty two minutes, we'll give you the world"—this world we are offered, she writes, "is (unlike the world) a very small place, both geographically and thematically, and what is thought worth knowing about it is expected to be transmitted tersely and emphatically."

If we are truly to use this opportunity to create a global culture of concern, we need to be attentive to what we are being shown *and* to what is being left out of the news coverage. If we are to respond as best we can to human need, we have to nurture that response in every aspect of our lives, from politics to religion to economics to our daily encounters and our personal relationships. If, for instance, we are to praise the 350 million which the U.S. has now pledged to tsunami relief funds, we must also be aware that this is approximately equivalent to what we spend in Iraq in a day and a half. If we seek to soothe the suffering of those whose plight we could not have averted, how much more should we work to prevent the suffering of those who are victimized at the hands of other humans?

The images of this disaster surround us. Susan Sontag urged us to look closely at and think deeply about the images we see. These images may well serve to put a human face on the stark, abstract numbers of dead and injured; they may allow us access to our own reservoirs of empathy and concern. She did not believe that it was a profusion of images that made us apathetic or dampened our compassion, but rather the inability to transform that compassion into effective action.

In order to transform that compassion into effective action we need to understand something about the human suffering that we seek to alleviate. We may not know what brings the evil storms, not in any way that would allow us to prevent them, but

we can uncover the truth about why some people are so much more vulnerable to storms than others. We may not be able to avert disasters, but we can uncover the reasons that some disasters are deemed more newsworthy than others and strive to give voice to those who are ignored. We may not be able to truly "feel the pain" that others experience, but we can seek out ways to listen deeply to their own words. For that, we need to look beyond the pictures.

"[Photographs] are not much help if the task is to understand," Sontag writes. "Narratives can make us understand."

Narratives can make us understand. And I am reminded of the man on the news who needed to tell his story, and needed to know that people were listening. All of us who gather here today are most likely quite distant from the tragedy that occurred. Though we are part of the interdependent web of all living things, we are also far away from the realities of daily existence that so many of those survivors are facing. We are solitary beings reaching out. And yet, as we listen to the stories, we feel connection. There is no longer an "other" in the human family, only brother and sister, mother and father, son and daughter. We see a way, suddenly, toward a different kind of service, a different kind of relation to the world. It will not be easy to realize. It will take untiring work to sustain it. It will always be partial and it will never be perfect. But this service we commit ourselves to, impractical as it may be, idealistic as it at first appears, ...perhaps, when all's said and done, it will be this service that we are most proud of.

Closing Words (#688 - Nancy Wood)

Hold on to what is good

even if it is

a handful of earth.

Hold on to what you believe

even if it is

a tree which stands by itself.

Hold on to what you must do

even if it is

a long way from here.

Hold onto my hand even when

I have gone away from you.