Who by Water

Reflections of a Tsunami Psychologist

Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery

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For those who died and for those who lived

Contents

Author's Note

The Buddha taught many ways to liberate the mind from suffering. The Brahma Viharas—lovingkindness, compassion, equanimity and sympathy joy—are especially beloved among those practices. But the Buddha also taught that death contemplation is essential to liberation and urged his disciples to meditate on our bodies and bodies that had already become corpses: fetid, bloated and festering, until only scattered unbleached bones remain.

Such practices are decidedly difficult; they can and often do create a tremendous amount of fear and aversion. But they are also powerful antidotes to our infatuation with our physical body which, after all, is impermanent, and ultimately belongs to nature, not to us.

This book, with its fractured images of decomposing bodies and grief so fierce, "You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen" (Robert Frost, "Birches"). It was written with an unassailable conviction that even within the ravages of precipitous and unimaginable tragedy, we are also capable of transformation through spiritual insight.

When Ajahn Nyaniko, Abbot of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, suggested that this book be printed for free distribution, I was humbled and

grateful, to share these direct experiences of cataclysmic proportions with this readership.

In conventional thinking, books for free distribution have little or no value. "Free" means a worthless give-away, tattered, no longer of any use or of interest.

In the Dhamma tradition, a book offered freely is a concrete manifestation of the priceless nature of the Buddha's teachings. There is no monetary equivalent to its value.

Readers of previous printings will notice a new cover; a photo of an empty, pristine beach in Phuket (a city and island) in the Andaman Sea. Its simplicity—sand, sea and sky—is in stark contrast to the second black and white photo of piles of rotting corpses with workers in protective garments, standing over them. It's a surreal scene of breathtaking tragedy which reminds us of that even on a gorgeous day, in a location that appears as a heaven of earth, death can come in a split second, with or without warning.

As in previous editions, the names and nationalities of the people who were assisted in the aftermath of the tsunami have been changed to protect their identities.

The numbers of casualties, displacements, and injuries noted in this book are best estimates culled from various documents and reports.

One of the most significant changes for me has been the deaths of two treasured friends who both worked to repair despair and brokenness: Leonard Cohen and Daniel Ellsberg. They were among the first readers of the original printing of this book. Their unsolicited praises and contributions were gracious, generous and deeply appreciated.

Suffering shatters. Yet even within an instant tragedy that flesh and blood can hardly stand, lies the possibility of transcendence. We can see the way things are, rather than the way we want them to be. To do so with wisdom and perhaps even with gratitude, has the capacity to transform ourselves and even this sad, weeping world.

Any and all mistakes or omissions within this book are mine alone.

Ronna Kabatznick
Berkeley, California

Introduction

Ajahn Nyaniko

Death contemplation, in Pāli, *mārananussati,* is a practice recommended by the Buddha for gaining insight into the truth of the impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of all phenomena. These practices, including meditating in charnel grounds, regularly fosters a sense of urgency about how we spend time knowing one day, sooner or later, our lives will end. Death contemplation also helps develop wholesome qualities such as kindness and compassion, as well as a sense of interdependence; death is inescapable for everyone.

For many of us, the Buddha's teachings remain abstract and theoretical: we can believe in them intellectually, but it takes time and life experience for them to be truly internalized. The devastating tsunami of December 26th, 2004 is a ghastly example which forces us to look at death directly.

For those who witnessed the tsunami—one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history—every aspect of death that we normally turn away from was exposed. The raw, disgusting nature of rotting bodies in a tropical climate revealed the loathsome characteristics of death for all to experience.

Ronna Kabatznick recounts these wretched realities in a precious and rare account from which many of us will recoil. Yet it is a rich narrative which invites us to develop insight into the true nature of our human existence, rather than a theoretical contemplation.

Death contemplation is traditionally taught to have two aspects: certainty and uncertainty. First, death is an absolute certainty. We will all die at some point. At the time of death we will have to abandon everything—our possessions, our loved ones and our bodies. Second, when our death will occur is uncertain. Death could come to us today, tomorrow, in a month, or many years from now. The way we will die is also uncertain. It could be through natural causes such as old age, or it could be sudden such as a car accident or on a pristine beach in the tropics. Death could occur through any of the four elements—earth, water, fire or air.

Dr. Kabatznick reminds us that in the Jewish tradition, death contemplation is intentionally disorienting. It aims to stop us in our tracks and consider themes of life and death and to consider the ways we could die, "Who by fire and who by water?…Who by earthquake and who by drowning?" The tsunami shows us what "who by water" looks like.

As a psychologist, she went to help grief-stricken

survivors grappling with a maelstrom of epic proportions. She faced people insane with grief and confusion when they had to identify the rotting and disintegrating corpses, of all ages, nationalities and social status. She witnessed people's visceral reactions when their denial and hysteria could barely find expression—amidst thousands of stinking and distended bodies devoured by maggots as the flesh dissolved.

Sometimes the Buddha has to grab our heads and force us to look at the bitter realities of death, because we are so deeply conditioned to turn away from it in any way we can. But these are the realities that can liberate the heart from fear and establish equanimity when we turn our meditation towards such realities when we are confronted with them, intentionally or unintentionally.

Read this book. Go deeper into your practice of death contemplation. Imagine yourself among the disintegrating corpses and the wails of those standing above them. The results will brighten the mind and cool the heart as we start to accept the truth that death is where we are heading. It is then we are able to let go of any hope of it being otherwise.

Who by Water is now being reprinted for free distribution over 20 years after a massive earthquake off the west coast of Sumatra reached the shores of southern Thailand, sweeping away beachgoers,

surfers, and shoppers strolling on sidewalks. The images and stories this catastrophe created are worthy of seeing and reading.

I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Kabatznick for sharing her experiences and insights from that time.

May this book help you, the reader, on your path to gaining insight into the true nature of things. May it create a skillful urgency to express kindness and compassion for others now and throughout this fleeting lifetime.

Nyaniko Bhikkhu
Abhayagiri Monastery
March 2025

Preface

Daniel Ellsberg

On December 26, 2004, the day after Christmas, the Indian Ocean tsunami—"one of the greatest natural disasters in recorded history"—killed a quarter of a million people by colossal waves hitting the coastlines of fourteen Indian Ocean countries. Nearly eight thousand of these deaths occurred primarily on the beaches of Thailand.

Like the firemen who labored up the stairs of the World Trade Center on 9/11 while everyone else inside was obeying the normal human impulse to flee down, others promptly went to stricken coastlines to help. Ronna Kabatznick was one of those people. She was already in Thailand with her husband--the poet and political analyst Peter Dale Scott--where she had been on an extended Buddhist meditation retreat. She wrote:

> My purpose quickly became clear. I was to be a companion and a support to survivors seized by overwhelming loss and by what the Buddha described as the inevitable realities of life: sorrow, grief, pain, lamentation, and despair. I would receive their pain with compassion and equanimity and provide whatever comfort I could in the midst of this nightmare.

How many of us could have lived up to those fine hopes, under the conditions she encountered? The work was comforting stunned survivors and relatives and helping them search for the bodies of loved ones in vast, improvised morgues with hundreds of bodies that "had been drenched in seawater and exposed to Thailand's searing heat, leaving most of them blackened, bloated, and unrecognizable. Some were teeming with maggots and worms…the overwhelming odor of death was horrifying and sickening."

I quote that passage—unique in the story for its vivid, repellent detail—at the risk of turning potential readers off by reading this as a horror story, which this book is most assuredly not. I quote it to underpin my own astonishment at the author's utterly convincing account of success in fulfilling her original sense of purpose under these circumstances.

I should say that Dr. Kabatznick does not in the slightest describe her experience in those terms. That is part of what is so convincing, and impressive, in this narrative. She tells her story in a flowing, seemingly artless and unadorned style that is as clear and simple as spring water, with a total absence either of sentimentality or self-congratulation.

How was Dr. Kabatznick able to measure up to the challenge? (Many readers will ask themselves,

as I did, whether they could have done as well.) It's clear from her account that three elements in her background contributed: her doctorate in social psychology, more, her deep roots in Jewish tradition, and, above all, her decades of Buddhist study and meditation, including, in the long months of her retreat, reflecting on suffering, impermanence and death.

I have long questioned the value of pondering death and suffering in Buddhism; but I'm unreservedly impressed at the strength it gave this practitioner to give compassionate support to people in unspeakable grief. That's a model that may serve many readers well in years and decades soon to come, as our human-heated planet delivers more and more such "natural" disasters.

If I can persuade you to read this beautiful book, you'll thank me for it.

Daniel Ellsberg (1931 - 2023)
Kensington, California

What do you think, monks? Which is greater, the tears you have shed while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time—crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing—or the water in the four great oceans?

As we understand the Dhamma taught to us by the Blessed One, this is the greater: the tears we have shed while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time—crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing—not the water in the four great oceans.

Excellent, monks. Excellent. It is excellent that you thus understand the Dhamma taught by me.

– The Buddha

Who by Water

As the events of September 11, 2001 taught us, life changes quickly. Almost 3,000 people left their homes for work in downtown Manhattan that morning and never returned. The abrupt end of so many lives was a reminder that death can come in the blink of an eye and that the irredeemable nature of loss is a timeless abyss.

In the post–9/11 world of 2002, it seemed the right time to take a long-contemplated sabbatical. There was no reason to wait. At fifty, I was ready to act on a creeping sense of "now or never" too persistent to ignore.

My daily life as a happily married woman and a solid career were in no need of repair. But in response to a burning and growing need to explore what it means to live and to die, I considered looking through a different cultural lens, in a place of unfamiliar routines, rituals, and rhythms. Such a perceptual shift might provide me with a focus and an openness to explore my spiritual heart while removed from customary patterns of my outer life.

A Thai colleague and friend, Patriya Tansuhaj, who had plenty of contacts at both universities and monasteries in Thailand, knew that my husband and I practiced meditation; she suggested that I

seek a teaching position in Thailand. "You can visit monasteries and pay respects to meditation teachers while you're there," she said. "You'll love it."

I spruced up my résumé and sent it to various universities. Within a few weeks I had three job offers. After reviewing the options with my husband, Peter, a poet and political writer, I accepted a position at Naresuan University in Phayao, a sleepy lakeside mountain town in northern Thailand about 450 miles north of Bangkok. I would teach, and Peter, an enthusiastic birdwatcher, would stalk the bulbuls and minivets and write. We would both engage in small-town life in a Buddhist country, where the cycles of life and death are visible and accepted as a natural part of the process.

And so, we launched a two-and-a-half-year sabbatical from our established lives barely a year after the attacks of September 11. It began with work as a professor and eventually included two long forest meditation retreats and two trips to India. It ended with a different kind of catastrophe: The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Maintaining Jewish roots wherever we are in the world is important to both my husband and me. Within two days of arriving in Bangkok, we made our first connection with Yosef Kantor, the Chief Rabbi of Thailand. A husky, bearded man then in

his early thirties, Rabbi Kantor is part of the Chabad network of more than 3,500 global Jewish outreach centers located from Alaska to Timbuktu. Born and raised in Australia and educated at a New York yeshiva, Rabbi Kantor moved with his wife, Nechama, and their young children to Bangkok in 1993; there they established an international community inclusive of all Jews, from observant to secular.

The community, which continues to thrive, is made up of locals and transients, expatriates, retirees, Israelis, gem merchants, backpackers, business people, honeymooners, and people like my husband and me, who had come to Thailand for an extended period of time. We arranged to spend Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, with this motley congregation of several hundred at Kantor's Beth Elisheva Synagogue.

At sundown on the tenth day of Tishri, the month of high holidays, Jews around the world gather as they have for thousands of years, dressed in white, to begin the twenty-five-hour process of prayer and fasting. Even unaffiliated Jews, who forgo Jewish rituals and holidays during the rest of the year, often seek out and attend Yom Kippur services, a testimony to the sanctity of this holiday. The congregants are likened to angels, who have no

physical needs. Instead of attending to the body, we attend to the spirit. It is a process of fierce self-examination, in hopes of attaining transformation and renewal. We do this by wholeheartedly engaging in spiritual purification of past transgressions and misdeeds, including forgiveness for ourselves and others. In unison, we confess a list of transgressions.

We also confront the fragile trajectory of our lives. We all know intellectually that we will die someday, but we rarely act as if we know it. We live as if we had time, when in fact the next moment, or future ones are unknowable. The bleak "dust to dust" imagery and haunting melodies on Yom Kippur direct us away from this denial to an internal place from which we can contemplate the meaning of our lives and the inevitability of our deaths.

Central to the Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and the Yom Kippur liturgy is the thousand year old poem, Un'taneh Tokef (We shall ascribe holiness to this day.) The content, some of which is quoted below, is one of the most stirring and evocative invocations ever written. It includes some of the assorted ways we may exit this vale of tears:

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on the fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed how many shall pass away and how many shall be born;

Who shall live and who shall die;

Who shall reach the end of their days and who shall not;

Who by fire and who by water;

Who by sword and who by wild beast;

Who by famine and who by thirst;

Who by earthquake and who by plague;

Who by strangulation and who by stoning;

Who shall have rest and who shall wander;

Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued;

Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented;

Who shall be exalted and who shall be degraded;

Who shall be rich and who shall be impoverished.

But repentance, prayer and righteousness shall avert the severity of the decree.

These recitations move us to imagine the conditions of our own death, thus driving home its inevitability. In this process, our denial is poked, prodded and challenged, along with our most cherished illusion—that we are in charge of our destiny.

We can take every conceivable precaution, but nothing negates the truth of how profoundly vulnerable we are. When we see that we are going to

die with clarity, we sober up. What's the point of being greedy, angry or arrogant? Our responsibility is to open ourselves to the frailty of life; to empower ourselves to use the time we have to live with virtue, humility, generosity, discernment and compassion.

We turn to the wisdom of the sages who encourage us to make the most of each day as if it were our last because it could be. We can ask ourselves who do we need to forgive? What have we left undone? What are we leaving unsaid?

Un'taneh Tokef concludes with a call for moral responsibility and an ancient three-part prescription for redemption, offering ways we can shift from the denial of death to a purposeful engagement with life: *t'shuvah* (repentance), *t'fillah* (prayer), and *tz'dakah* (justice, benevolence, philanthropy and charity).

The mood in the Beth Elisheva Synagogue was somber, as it was meant to be. The view from my seat in the women's section was of a sea of white. White is the color of angel garments. Such garments are also intended to remind us of the linen shrouds we will be buried in one day. We have no need for food or drink during the twenty-five-hour fast. We are there to let our spirits cry out, as if our bodies were dead.

"Who shall live and who shall die?" asks *Un'taneh Tokef*. I looked around the synagogue, just as I had when I was a young girl at the Congregation Adath Israel in Middletown, Connecticut, and then continuously throughout my life. Even though I was among strangers, I felt connected to everyone, knowing that we were bonded by the same destiny, to shuffle off this mortal coil. I thought about who was here last year, yet isn't here now and who is here now but won't be next year. Me? My husband? The women and children sitting on either side of me? I wondered how we would die. By fire or by water? By disease or by disaster? Will death be quick or prolonged? Calm or painful? Alone, with strangers, or surrounded by people we love? We don't know.

I also thought about my parents and my older brother, Jeffrey z"l, all dead. Then I imagined my younger brother, Brian, living in London, and how he must be remembering them, too. My heart sank into memories of all the people I had loved and lost, expected and unexpected, not just in the past year but throughout my life—by accident, stroke, suicide, heart disease, cancer, broken hearts, drugs, alcohol, AIDS, just to name a few.

I looked around the room again and tried multiplying that sinking feeling by the number of people

in the congregation, the city, the country, and the world. My heart felt as heavy as a mountain. Although the air conditioning was humming to capacity, I was uncomfortably warm, stifled, inside and out. There was no escape. Illusions were collapsing as the trauma and truth of transiency moved into high gear. The moral drama had begun.

I could not foresee how these prayers, this death rehearsal, and my meditation training would soon become so relevant for me and for so many others. I had no clue that I was about to enter the valley of death.

On the midnight flight between Bangalore and Bangkok the night after Christmas, 2004, my heart was filled with inspiration and gratitude. The decision to make a pilgrimage to Nepal and India had proven to be fortuitous. It was a capstone near the end of a two and a half year sabbatical in Thailand. Accompanied by two Australian friends who happen to be brothers—Tan Achalo, a Western monk, and Craig, a photojournalist, we visited Buddhist holy sites and paid respects to meditation masters from several traditions.

Our spiritual adventure culminated in a weeklong teaching by the Dalai Lama at Sera Jey monastery in South India. It was a grand,

ceremonious occasion and a milestone event. Loud horns, bells, drums and cymbals sounded in the incense-filled air, while maroon-robed monks chanted before and after each three-hour teaching session.

The Dalai Lama's tone was emphatic, urgent even, as he relayed ancient teachings on the intrinsically pure nature of mind, commonly clouded by destructive emotions. "Make the best use of this precious human life," he implored. "Use your time wisely. Life is fleeting and unpredictable. Death will claim us all."

The conditions at the monastery were rough, due to the constant crowds, acres of garbage, irrepressible beggars, and insufficient toilets. But the outcome was worth it.

For the previous year I had been on a meditation retreat in Thailand with Ajahn Ganha and Ajahn Anan, two of the country's *Kruba Ajahns*, reverently esteemed forest meditation masters. These senior teachers are considered highly evolved embodiments of the transcendent power of the mind.

While I was on retreat, my husband, Peter, continued living in Northern Thailand, writing a prescient book on American foreign policy.

Our plans were to spend another few months or so in Thailand, saying good-bye to friends and

asking for forgiveness from our teachers, which is the formal way to take leave of a Buddhist master. We would soon be back in Berkeley, set to resume our lives there.

On Christmas Day, I had taken the bumpy, eight-hour cab ride from Sera Jey monastery to the Bangalore airport. Even though it was close to midnight, the airport was packed, with long lines at every check-in point. The flight number, time of departure and gate number of my flight had all changed between the time I received my boarding pass to when I cleared customs. I barely made it onto the plane.

Finally on the aircraft, I struggled to settle into my cramped window seat. There the memories of this journey to Nepal and India and the anticipation of being back in my husband's arms the next day eclipsed any discomfort. I was overflowing with a sense of gratitude; a feeling of emotional fullness floated naturally into my awareness. I made a determination to do whatever I could to help others.

It was 4:00 a.m. when I arrived in Bangkok. The empty, immaculate airport felt cold and lifeless, with stray souls like me waiting for connections. My flight to Chiang Rai in northern Thailand wasn't until 8:30 a.m. and within an hour, the airport began to bustle. It was the day after Christmas. Travelers

of all ages and types from around the globe—some with cramped knapsacks, others with high end designer suitcases and bags—were lining up for shuttle flights, which left every thirty minutes, to Phuket and Krabi.

Those islands, located about two hours apart, are pictures of paradise—surrounded by white sand beaches and tourmaline waters dotted with limestone rocks. Phuket and Krabi are a mixture of sensuality, natural beauty, and commercialism—brimming with bars and brothels, noodle shops, massage parlors and spas, inexpensive tailors, and jewelry stores. A haven for hedonists, they offer a place for everyone, from marijuana-smoking backpackers staying in grass huts on the beach, to the super-wealthy anticipating ultra-pampering at lavish hotels.

The hard plastic seat in the airport's departure lounge was a fine place from which to watch the growing number of international tourists eager to board their short flights. Many would likely arrive at their destinations and be sunbathing on pristine beaches, swimming, scuba diving, snorkeling, or playing tennis before my flight even took off. The airport crowd was so different from the crowd I had just left in the monastery in southern India. There, about 30,000 monks had crammed into a gigantic,

overflowing, open-air hall, hungry for spiritual insights and awakening. Here, tourists were on vacation, seeking ease, exercise, exotic adventures and novelty.

Arriving in Chiang Rai around 10:00 a.m., Peter was there to greet me, and the imagined sweet embrace became reality. Almost immediately, he asked if I had heard about the tsunami in southern Thailand that had begun off the coast of Indonesia. I had not. It had occurred during the ninety minutes I was in the air. Already, he said, thousands in Thailand were dead, injured, missing and displaced.

The news seemed unimaginable until we returned to our apartment and turned on the Thai government television station. Our first glimpse of the extent of the tsunami damage was wide-angle shots of bikini-clad corpses on the beach, with stunned survivors frantically searching among surfers and sunbathers for loved ones. There were also shots of demolished homes, restaurants and hotels, capsized fishing boats, crushed cars, (no doubt with bodies in them), and piles of debris. Seawater continued to gush through broken storefronts and down streets and alleys.

Footage from people who had managed to capture the tsunami on video—before, during, after—was also being broadcast. One showed a large yacht

cruising on the Andaman Sea as the first tsunami wave instantaneously toppled it and those onboard. Another segment showed a man hanging onto a tree branch, his arm outstretched, just inches from the potentially life-saving grip of a man bending over a balcony, eager to offer it. I was reminded of Michelangelo's fresco of God giving life to Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But the hands never connected; the stranded man dropped to his death, engulfed by the raging waters.

Rabbi Kantor emailed the following day, reaching out for assistance. Thailand is a popular destination for young Israeli soldiers on furlough or celebrating the completion of military duty. Once the tsunami became international news, the Rabbi began fielding frantic phone calls and emails from families and friends several time zones away. Could the Rabbi help find them? Could he return their calls with updates? Offer tips on how to locate their missing loved ones?

I responded immediately. I didn't speak Hebrew, but perhaps I could help in other ways, as I was no stranger to death. Over many years, I have witnessed the dying and the ways in which mourners approach post-death rituals. Rabbi Kantor instructed me to fly to Phuket and head to the Phuket International Hospital, where the Israeli forensic

team—all English speakers—was posted. "They'll put you to work," he said.

I threw some clothes and toiletries together in a small bag and left that afternoon.

> Ardently doing one's duty today,
> for—who knows?—tomorrow
> death may come.
> There is no bargaining
> with Death and his mighty horde.
> Whoever lives thus ardently,
> relentlessly
> both day and night,
> has truly had an auspicious day:
> So says the Peaceful Sage.
>
> – Majjhima Nikāya 131.3

"Dr. Ronna, Dr. Ronna! *Chuay noi! Chuay noi*!" (Help! Help!) A Thai nurse in a starched white uniform and cap grabbed my arm and ushered me past walls plastered with pictures and descriptions of missing persons. There were photographs of every sort—brides and grooms, babies, toddlers, tennis players, waiters, fishermen, couples, and families, all smiling and full of life. Each photo was accompanied by versions of the same frantic plea. Have you seen my daughter? My twin? My baby? My soul mate? My friends? These newlyweds? My father? Please contact immediately.

The nurse led me to a Dutch man screaming and kicking in anguish. "What am I going to do?" he cried repeatedly. When the tsunami hit, he had been riding his motorbike. He had apparently zigzagged his way back to the small seaside resort he owned to find it destroyed, a pile of rubble. Where were his sisters, the resort guests, and the thirty employees? Had they really met their death amongst the bar stools, lounge chairs, and kayaks or in the raging sea?

I pulled him to my chest while he wailed and then wept. Over the next eight days, each lasting twenty waking hours, my tear-drenched blouse never dried. Countless mourners—parents, spouses, siblings, children, and friends—needed similar gestures of comfort as they released the keening cries and howls of sudden loss into my being.

> …The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. The sea is History.
>
> – Derek Walcott, "The Sea Is History"

This was post-tsunami Thailand. On that sunny, tropical morning, December 26, 2004, three monstrous waves had swallowed and then spit out 5,385 lives. More lives had vanished in the water. In this idyllic setting, who could have foreseen, *this will be the day that I die*. The Indian Ocean tsunami turned

out to be one of the most devastating natural disasters in recorded history, eventually leaving an estimated 227,898 dead, 125,000 injured, 45,752 missing, and 1.69 million displaced over a 22,540-square-mile area.

The Thai government eventually reported 4,812 confirmed deaths, 8,457 injuries, and 4,499 missing persons.

It had all begun beneath the Indian Ocean off the coast of Sumatra two hours earlier. The violent shifting of the Earth's tectonic plates displaced millions of tons of water, sending a rolling mountain of powerful waves, between 115 and 130 feet high, in every direction. That 9.1 magnitude earthquake is estimated to have released the energy of 23,000 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs. Within hours, killer waves radiating from the epicenter slammed into the coastline of fourteen Indian Ocean countries, swallowing stunned and defenseless people and property from Indonesia to India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Tanzania and Thailand.

The vast expanse of incalculable destruction was reminiscent of Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall" (1963):

> I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared
> out a warnin'/Heard the roar of a wave
> that could drown the whole world.

The tsunami was not selective. Age, gender, citizenship, status, religion and race were all irrelevant. Death is always democratic and grants no exceptions.

My purpose quickly became clear. I was to be a companion and a support to survivors seized by overwhelming loss and by what the Buddha described as the inevitable realities of life: sorrow, grief, pain, lamentation, and despair. I would receive their pain with as much empathy and equanimity as possible, to try to provide whatever comfort could be had in the midst of this nightmare.

For the previous eighteen months, I had been reciting the short and unadorned daily reflection on impermanence encouraged by the Buddha: "All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me." This reflection is similar to the ones we practice every Yom Kippur. In fact, every day in the monastery feels like Yom Kippur because both traditions lay out paths for purification.

The Phuket International Hospital, where I worked for two and a half days and nights, was filled to capacity with injured tsunami survivors.

The modern, light-filled hospital was usually a hub for medical tourism. Services ranged from colonoscopies and dental implants to sex-change operations and plastic surgery. These procedures had been quickly upended to deal with the crisis.

The hospital and the emergency room were receiving a constant stream of people afflicted by massive physical and psychic trauma. Among the gurneys and IV poles were huge cartons of medicine, arriving continuously, and piling up in hallways and in any open space. Uninjured survivors were frantically searching the hospital admissions lists, bulletin boards, beds and bathrooms hoping to find their loved ones. The energy was one of mass hysteria; people thrashing amidst injury, ambiguity, mortality and madness.

There was no designated psychiatric ward for patients in the throes of shock and trauma.

Everyone seemed to be in that state. The one resident Thai psychiatrist I encountered had barely slept since the tsunami had struck. (In 2004, there were only forty to fifty psychiatrists in the entire country!) I offered to cover for him while he rested. "Are you sure?" he asked as he piled dozens of metal charts onto my outstretched arms.

During those days and nights, I went from room to room visiting patients. I listened to survivors'

stories while nurses and doctors rushed in and out, delivering painkillers and tranquilizers, changing IVs and bandages, inserting or removing catheters, and conducting pre- and post-op consultations. Administrators and diplomats were frequent visitors as they worked to arrange medical transport for the wounded, many of whom had no clothing, money, passports, mobile phones, and other necessities.

Whether groggy from medication, trapped by trauma, or alert with anticipation, most patients, no matter how sedated, seemed eager to tell their stories. "We were waiting for our omelets when…" "I was playing with my children when…" "We were walking on the pier when…" "I was talking on the phone when…" "I was buying groceries when…" "I was riding a motorbike when…" They first described the panic and chaos—people running, yelling, hurling themselves into trees or holding onto railings they prayed wouldn't collapse—then their first glimpses of death and destruction, with or without their infants, toddlers, children, partners, and friends.

I listened carefully to each story, aware that their shock and grief needed to be voiced. I could feel each person trying to piece together what had happened, like a puzzle, one memory at a time. Their need to narrate the details—to let the truth be told

and heard in all its confusion, pain, and disbelief—was as poignant as it was persistent. The telling and retelling of stories was not an end in itself but a first attempt in the long, uneven process of accepting the excruciating truth embedded in them.

Regardless of their physical condition, nearly everyone I visited was frozen in shock or completely consumed by grief, uncertainty, and dread. They were reliving the tsunami—the deafening roar of crashing killer waves and the desperate cries of victims—especially during sleepless nights, as they tossed and turned in their hospital beds. Where were their families and friends? How could they search for them from a hospital bed? What about those searching for *them*? How would they find them here or anywhere? Each person asked me the equivalent of "What should I do? Where should I even begin?"

Some patients were simply happy to be alive, no matter the state of their injuries and losses, and viewed their survival as nothing short of a miracle. This was the view of a young couple from Canada who shared a hospital room—he had a broken back; she, a broken leg. But when doctors told them the man might not ever walk again, they both cried. "What began as a blessing has turned into a curse," cried the young woman.

A number of other patients were ready to return to life, as they had known it. A retired man in his late sixties declared unsentimentally, "Life goes on, you know."

I checked on the Dutch man whose resort had been left in rubbles. He still hadn't learned the fate of his relatives, friends and guests. The nurses said he'd barely slept and had refused all offers of sedatives. When I entered his room, the curtains were drawn in daylight and the television was blaring. He stared at me, expressionless. "How are you?" I asked. "I just want to watch TV," he said, and turned his head back to the screen.

At midnight, while I was still making rounds, my phone rang. "*Sawadee phi mai*!" (Happy New Year!), said the caller. It had to be a wrong number. But no, it was Craig, the Australian photojournalist with whom I had traveled to India.

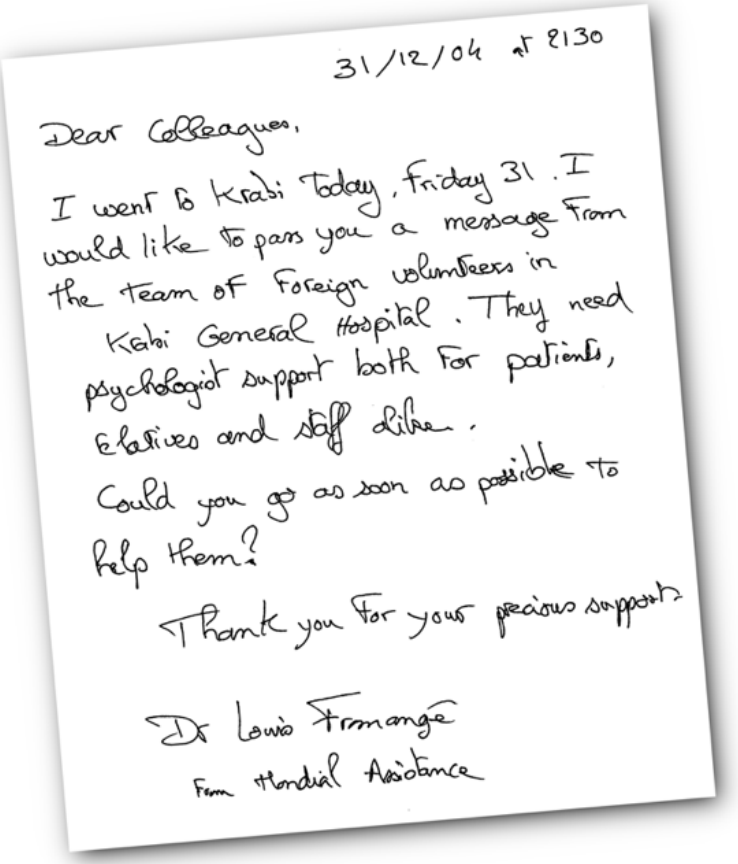
Craig was now working in Phuket to cover the aftermath of the tsunami. He was shooting pictures of a midnight vigil for tsunami victims in which a sea of monks holding candles chanted as thousands of survivors wept. Only a few blocks away, tourists unaffected by the tsunami were ringing in the New Year, drinking, dancing, and laughing. Their oblivious behavior filled me with sadness.

Craig was part of the first news team to putter out

by motor boat to Kho Phi Phi, a small, narrow island that had been completely destroyed by the waves, where only a handful of people survived. His job was to document when death comes to meet life: the tsunami aftermath envisioned as a modern Pompeii where people died in shops and in cars, trapped beneath boats, inside elevators, and on staircases. He shot the strewn detritus of everyday life: broken tables and chairs, woks, a flip flop, beer cans, suitcases, cracked toilets, waterlogged computers, mattresses, scuba gear, sunglasses and hairdryers. A pair of Bermuda shorts dangled from a small bush.

The juxtaposition of these gut-wrenching images of death and destruction against the calm turquoise sea and a clear, sunny sky was difficult for him to fathom. Later, a European man in his twenties in search of two missing traveling companions summed it up by saying, "Look up, it is heaven. Look down, it is hell."

At about 6:00 a.m. on New Year's Day, a nurse I had worked with through the night gave me a note handwritten in English. She had no idea who it was from or how it had arrived. The writer wanted to know if there was a psychologist available to come to the Krabi Government Hospital. It had already been five days since the tsunami had struck; they were desperate for help.



31/12/04 at 8130

Dear Colleagues,

I went to Krabi today, Friday 31. I would like to pass you a message from the team of foreign volunteers in Krabi General Hospital. They need psychologist support both for patients, relatives and staff alike.

Could you go as soon as possible to help them?

Thank you for your precious support.

Dr Louis Fromange
From Mondial Assistance

When I left the hospital that morning, it was the first time I had been outdoors in two and a half days. I called Craig to say I was leaving for the seaside town of Krabi in the southwest corner of Thailand, about a three-hour ride from Phuket. Since he was only a few blocks away, we met outside the hospital and chatted briefly. He was loaded down with camera equipment after a long night shooting footage. A television reporter was standing by, preparing for a live broadcast. "Ready for another day in paradise?" Craig asked. His dark humor was difficult to digest until I noted this was Craig's way of coping with an impossible situation.

The van heading to Krabi was packed with large black boxes, reminiscent of props from a James Bond movie. I assumed they were filled with forensic equipment—microscopes, test tubes, DNA collection kits.

We stopped at one of the many beach areas that had become body collection centers, staffed by the Thai army, doctors, and volunteers. We were met by the miasma of death and wails of grief along with the sound of lapping waves. The beach was littered with sea-soaked bodies and people picking through them, searching for loved ones, exactly as

my husband and I had seen on television. I hoped none of the people there, dead or alive, were those I'd seen in the Bangkok airport just a few days earlier. A Tibetan proverb came to mind. "Tomorrow or the afterlife, which comes first, no one knows."

Even elephants joined the search for washed-up bodies hurled by the ferocious waves into the dense forest undergrowth nearby. These large, rambling creatures enabled rescue teams to go where heavy earth-moving machinery could not.

Hundreds of body bags were aligned in neat rows on a grassy area close to the beach. Nearby, several large piles of unidentified decaying corpses lay rotting in the blistering sun, covered with flies and insects. Mourners were standing among them. Once again, I recalled the wisdom of the sages: "Do not comfort the bereaved while the dead lie before them." The shock of grief needs both honor and time.

Caskets, body bags, sheets, and other death-related equipment, I learned, were being shipped from Bangkok but were running out quickly. Shortages were the norm.

Only a few feet away, volunteers were building makeshift coffins, their hammer blows providing a staccato soundtrack. "Who by Water" lay at my feet.

Reflect upon three things and you will not come to the hands of transgression.

Know where you came from, where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give a judgement and accounting.

From where you came—from a putrid drop;

Where you are going—to a place of dust, maggots and worms;

And before whom you are destined to give a judgement and accounting—the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One.

– Pirkei Avot 3:1

From dust you were taken, for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.

– Genesis 3:19

The van driver drove me to the makeshift morgue in the town of Krabi, located on southern Thailand's west coast. Krabi province is characterized by craggy, sheer limestone cliffs, tourmaline waters, dense mangrove forests, and more than a hundred offshore islands.

The makeshift morgue was actually housed in a *wat*, or Buddhist monastery. It was there that I walked into the valley of the shadow of death.

The floor was covered with at least 500 corpses in various stages of decomposition. Many more were lying outside. Masked workers were spraying the grounds with disinfectant, and, until it ran out,

placing dry ice around the bodies to reduce the deterioration and the stench.

Nothing in my experiences of being with the dying and the dead had prepared me for this surreal scene. Like the bodies at the collection center at the beach, the corpses here had been drenched in seawater and exposed to Thailand's searing heat, leaving them blackened, bloated, and unrecognizable. There were so many maggots and worms swarming over bodies and teeming from orifices, it felt like the room was undulating. It took me a moment to steady myself from this illusion.

Although I was wearing a surgical mask and both of my nostrils were filled with menthol ointment, the staggering odor of death cut through. The smell was sickening. Inside the morgue, I estimated the ratio of dead to living was approximately fifty to one. There was no way to tell exactly, since the corpses were so densely packed.

Among the living were members of ZAKA (a Hebrew acronym for "identification of victims of disaster"), an Orthodox Jewish volunteer rescue service. Members are trained to give identities to body parts after wars and suicide bombings to ensure complete burial in accordance with Jewish law. Now in Thailand, these seasoned experts of human tragedy referred the aftermath of the tsunami as a

disaster of Biblical proportions, comparable to the apocalyptic flood described in Genesis. In Indonesia, officials, who at first turned down the Israelis offer to help, later accepted. They were overwhelmed by the more than 100,000 dead. Countless were missing, even entire islands. Millions more were displaced and homeless.

Dressed head to toe in protective gear reminiscent of astronauts' suits, the ZAKA team members and accompanying Israeli forensic experts—dental, fingerprint, and DNA specialists—had initially come intending to identify missing Israelis. But the demand for identification was so extreme, the team collected every shred of personal and physical evidence on every victim regardless of faith, nationality, or race. The team members' responsibility to each survivor was as important and consuming as their responsibility to each corpse.

There were so few living beings in the morgue that when anyone spoke, the living listened. A crescendo of excited voices erupted. The team had just identified an Israeli woman by the Hebrew words on the label sewn onto the back of her bra. After a few seconds of excitement, everyone returned to their tasks at hand.

There was no shortage of bodies and body parts for the Israeli rescue team to collect, test and match.

They were everywhere. Before our eyes, everything was disintegrating and returning to the elements, dust-to-dust.

The temple had become a massive, open charnel ground, a cemetery meditation, exactly as the Buddha had described it:

> …Here a hand bone,
> there a foot bone,
> here a shin bone, there a thigh bone,
> here a hip bone, there a back bone,
> here a rib, there a chest bone,
> here a shoulder bone, there a neck bone, here a jaw bone, there a tooth,
> here a skull…
>
> – Majjhima Nikāya 119 11-14

These were no longer abstractions. Lifeless, swollen, these "bags had become unsealed, and many of the unattractive things" enumerated in the Buddhist contemplation of the body were at my feet: skulls, deteriorating body parts, pus, mucus, bones, blood. Some of the victims were naked, but there were also corpses in bathing suits, sundresses, tank tops, shorts. Service employees still had their name tags pinned to their uniforms. Many of the intact faces and skulls shared the same expression: mouths wide open, frozen, mid-scream. This physical reminder of an unbridled terror of imminent

death, without any means of escape, broke my heart.

I wondered about their lives: Whom did they love and how did they live? What made them laugh and cry? I also wondered about their secrets and sorrows, their triumphs and tragedies, loves and losses, their unfinished business. Not that any of this mattered now. For the dead, there had been no time for confession, repentance, or forgiveness the day before death, as the sages counsel.

The most distressing scenes were the dead infants, toddlers, children and teenagers. Those whose lives were swiftly cut off before their passions and personalities could unfold in their own ways and in their own times.

My thoughts then turned to the surviving relatives and friends, dealing not just with the shock of sudden death, but also with the death of potential—the pain of remorse and of lost opportunities to forgive and resolve. In that sense, there were two kinds of victims: those who died and those who lived.

Then, as if the universe were listening, I met a striking couple in their late forties who had flown to Thailand on a private jet as soon as they received news of the tsunami. Their 25-year-old daughter had been killed. Another daughter, 21, who had come to Thailand to visit her sister for the holidays,

had survived. She was severely injured and recovering from her second surgery, with more to come.

The mother-mourner, chic in pastel linen and a wide-brimmed hat, was unusually chatty given the circumstances. She went into great detail about their various government connections and the work of a private detective. In short, they received all sorts of priority treatment including private medical transport for their daughter back to a leading hospital in North America. I listened closely and wondered about her unspoken emotions.

Once she removed her sunglasses, her swollen and bloodshot eyes spoke the unspoken. She looked pummeled. It didn't take long before she told me how worried she was about her husband, who sat on a table nearby, dressed in a short-sleeved shirt and baggy shorts, smoking a cigar. He and their older daughter had fought bitterly and sometimes hadn't spoken for months. Their contentious relationship occasionally bothered him, but now his daughter's precipitous death precluded his asking for the forgiveness that the sages advise. "What kind of emotional baggage would he carry?" his wife wanted to know. Presumably riddled with guilt too painful to touch, his wife wondered how was he going to deal with the death of his daughter? "He's already had two heart attacks," she confided.

The burden of his regret and unshed tears was obvious. My heart went out to him. Who among us hasn't been torn by what we've done and can't undo, or by what we haven't done and can no longer do?

Logistics intervened: what to do with their daughter's remains? The young woman had been teaching English in Thailand for the past three years and loved the country, so her parents agreed to a Thai cremation at a local Buddhist temple. But a time slot for the ceremony couldn't be guaranteed. The demand for cremations was high for both Thai and tourist casualties, as were the costs involved. Crematoriums at the local monasteries were operating 24/7. The couple was relieved to learn from one of their connections that an early morning cremation time had been arranged for the following day. They invited me to attend.

I would have liked to have been there to offer moral support. I cringed at the idea of this couple being there on their own. But I was unable to accept their invitation. I had arranged to accompany a devastated father to pick up his son's death certificate, something "no parent should ever have to do." The son, whose body was barely recognizable, had been a star athlete with professional potential. "I thought he had his whole life ahead of him," the father said,

and added, "When you lose a parent, you lose your past, but when you lose a child, you lose your future."

The father apologized for not having shaved and for wearing dirty clothes—not that I noticed or cared.

"As soon as I heard about the tsunami, I left with only my passport, a few toiletries and the clothes on my back," he said. Then he asked, "After this, would you mind going to a store with me so I could buy a couple of clean shirts?" I agreed.

When it came time for his turn in the long line for death certificates, a Thai official unceremoniously asked for the victim's name, date of birth, and nationality. The father stated the information slowly and clearly. The official removed the death certificate from an envelope, presumably to check it for accuracy, and then handed the document over to the father. He simply stared at it. I imagined he was trying to take in the reality of his son's death, as unimaginable as it was.

I noticed tears streaming down the face of the official. I wondered about his personal losses and about the number of death certificates he had handed out that day. Would the long line ever end? We moved aside. It was another person's turn to deal with the bureaucracy of death.

Together, the father and I walked a few blocks to an air-conditioned department store. As we made our way past sleek cosmetics counters, stylish young women, eager to spray us with a choice of perfumes, greeted us. For a fleeting moment, I considered a squirt. Normally I prefer luxury perfumes, the holy scents of sandalwood incense and of pure jasmine oil. Wouldn't a bit of manufactured fragrance be a welcome relief from the stench of death? But while the scent of death is sickening, it is also the scent of truth.

While the father paid for his shirts, I called the parents of the young English teacher who had been killed and the daughter who survived. The mother answered my call immediately and reported that the first signs of smoke were billowing out of the crematorium smokestack as their daughter's body was in the process of being consumed. "This is such a spiritual moment for me," she told me. I asked after her husband. "Numb" was her reply. Then she wondered aloud, "How are we going to tell our mothers that they outlived their oldest granddaughter?"

Outside the temple-morgue, monks from local monasteries gathered around the clock to chant the traditional funeral verses in Pali: *Annicā vata saṅkhārā, uppādavaya-dhammino; uppajjitvā nirujjhanti,*

tesaṃ vūpasamō sukhō. (Conditions are, rising and falling away; having been born they all must cease. The stilling of all conditions is true peace.)

Peace was hardly the state of the mind of a desperate Thai mother who was determined to find her eight-year-old daughter, Ploy. Ploy had been playing at the beach with some friends when the tsunami waves struck. While combing through photos of the dead posted on the Internet, the mother thought she recognized her daughter, a decaying corpse dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. The t-shirt on her chest was inscribed with a number, sometimes in English, other times in Thai.

Now in the makeshift Krabi morgue, the mother and I held hands and tiptoed up and down the aisles of corpses in various stages of decomposition. With just tissues over our mouths and noses, we tried to match the number in her hand to the number on a child's chest. Maggots were crawling over bikini-clad corpses and worms were gushing from the eyes and mouths of toddlers, but we couldn't find Ploy's body.

The mother refused to give up her search for her only daughter. There were hundreds of festering corpses of all ages still left to pick through, and hundreds more were being unloaded from grimy pickup trucks throughout the day. Once we left the

morgue, I gazed up to look at the star-spangled night sky and then to the teenagers and members of the Thai army delivering more blackened bodies, some stiff from rigor mortis.

My phone rang. It was Ajahn Anan, asking "Sa-bai dee mai?" (How are you?) I could offer no coherent answer to his question. Hot, salty tears streamed down my cheeks and onto my quivering lips. Ajahn Anan's call of kindness evoked in my heart the ubiquitous suffering and loss that defines and pervades the human condition. Yet there is a sonorous depth of disquiet to be part of something of such magnitude—to be among thousands of people grappling with it in every way imaginable, from spasms of unconfined grief to the tears Voltaire called "the silent form of grief."

Ajahn Anan's composed voice actually punctured my despair and released the doubt I had been harboring: Could I actually help people trampled by immeasurable grief? His boundless compassion nourished my confidence that had been lying fallow.

Before this unexpected call ended, Ajahn Anan instructed me, "*Mi upekkhā. Glap bpai chuay khon.*" (Have equanimity. Return and help people.) These simple words helped shift my attention back to the Thai mother searching for her daughter, Ploy. I

grounded myself with a few deep breaths before heading back to the morgue.

There was a long line of people and nationalities with numbers in hand waiting for me to accompany them inside. The shocking sight and smell was so intense and horrifying, many seekers turned around and left. They then pinned their hopes of finding their loved ones through forensic testing. They were anxious for my reassurance that their loved ones would be identified through scientific means.

Of course, no one could make that guarantee.

I returned to the morgue to talk with the workers. With so many corpses being added every hour, was there any order to the bodies on the ground? I noticed that the numbers of the dead were not in sequence—number 473 was next to 112. The only thing that made sense from their information was that infants and toddlers had been put to one side, mostly wrapped in white, like mummies. How I wished I had known that when I was searching for Ploy, not that it would have made a difference. Corpses of all sizes were deteriorating before our eyes.

Outside, a tall, stately woman wearing a summer suit approached me with a photo of a wedding ring on a bloated hand. Could I try to help her match it

up with her husband?

I headed back into the morgue to find out. The leader of the Israeli forensic team, dressed head-to-toe in protective gear, turned me down resolutely: "No, too much going on." I'd been in the morgue at least half a dozen times that day. The numbers of corpses, forensic specialists and equipment had increased considerably.

I cast my eyes once again around the morgue piled high with corpses. It was surreal, as if those of us inside had landed on another planet.

I snapped out of this reverie. I was drenched with dread of giving the bad news. When I told the wife we couldn't go in, she implored me to beg on her behalf. She removed her own wedding ring and gave it to me along with the photo of blackened fingers. She was certain the ring on one of them was her husband's. I reluctantly agreed to plead her case. Her status as a wife or a widow wavered in a delicate balance.

This time the team member didn't even look at me. Beneath her surgical mask she blurted, "Can't you see how busy we are, how packed this place is?" I just stood there, stricken by both the thought of reporting her refusal to the aggrieved wife and the inexpressible stench that hung aggressively in the cruel heat. I thought I might pass out and join

the corpses on the floor. To my pleasant surprise, the team leader grabbed the photo of the ringed finger from me and jotted down my mobile number. "I'll see what I can do," she said curtly.

Outside, I sat down amidst the chaos and waited for the waves of nausea to subside. I was about to approach the wife when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was the forensic specialist. Her elaborate mask was off, revealing a young woman with deep brown eyes and dark curly hair. "Is there an inscription on the inside of this ring?" she asked. The wife, who had joined us, softly recited their wedding date and initials. It was as if time had stopped. The young Israeli unfolded her gloved fist and placed the dead husband's matching wedding ring in the new widow's outstretched palm. Slowly, the wife closed her hand and clutched the ring to her chest. The specialist apologized that the ring had to be cut off before disappearing back into the morgue.

"Now what do I do?" asked the widow, shivering from shock. I asked one of the volunteers to try to find a sheet or a blanket and some bottled water. The volunteer offered to get the number of the embassy so the wife could begin the ordeal of claiming the body. "Is anyone here with you?" I asked. "Is there someone you want to call? Do you need a ride?" She was immobilized. Another volunteer

said he'd take over, and after giving them both my mobile number, I left to return to the long line of survivors waiting for assistance.

The area around the morgue was crowded not only with corpses on the ground and on the back of pickup trucks, but also with a bustling array of survivors, mourners, journalists, administrators and bureaucrats, volunteers, police, medical personnel, interpreters, and chanting monks. I stood and listened for a moment to the many different languages being spoken and thought about my friends, Ginger and Dukata, who had come to offer translation services. Rabbi Kantor called to check in. "Just another day in paradise," I reported, echoing the dark humor of my photographer friend Craig. If the day was anything, it was another day in a particular kind of hell, where death devoured life, without any kind of embellishment.

Toward the back of the temple grounds two Thai brothers in their late teens were wailing like wounded animals, chests heaving as they embraced. Someone asked me to help. The teenage boys had just identified their sister, who lay nearby, exposed. I asked one of the English-speaking volunteers to find a way to cover the young, broken body. Perhaps this would be a small comfort and possibly a way to protect the corpse. I was concerned. There

were stray dogs in the area.

The volunteer returned empty-handed. All of the body bags and sheets had been used; the new shipment of caskets, body bags, sheets and blankets hadn't yet arrived. Or perhaps all supplies had already been used up. I had no idea.

I handed the boys wads of fresh tissue, which they used to muffle the gut wrenching sounds of fresh grief. One of the brothers then wept into my lap, crying in different keys, as his shoulders shook and heart broke.

The three of us sat together until their sobs subsided. How would they break the horrifying news to their parents? I offered to make the phone call, but they chose to have a neighbor go to their family home in the northern part of the country and inform them in person. The next thing I knew, the two brothers and two friends had carried off their sister's black and blue body, presumably to a pickup truck and then on to a crematorium. But in fact, what happened next was a mystery.

My mobile began ringing again. A nurse was imploring, "*Bproht glap bpai tee rohng pa-yaa-baan dâai yàang ruat reo*." (Please come back to the hospital quickly.) She offered no explanation. I jumped into a taxi and provided the name of the hospital. The driver meandered through streets

filled with flowering trees, outdoor restaurants, bars, and shops, where customers and consumers carried on their lives, oblivious to the chaos and carnage nearby.

At the hospital, I was taken to a Muslim man who stood staring off into space. A few women dressed in chadors—relatives, I assumed—stood nearby, looking aghast. He muttered things I couldn't understand in Thai, or Malay. A nurse took his blood pressure while another massaged his hands, back, legs and feet hoping to relax his frozen muscles. I took a leap, hoping he was a man of faith. I pointed to his heart and said, "*Allah ny jai*" (Allah is in your heart). In that moment, our eyes caught each others momentarily which gave me a flicker of confidence that his faith might be a useful anchor.

A pregnant woman waddled past us, a hand on one hip, as her energetic son cartwheeled down the hall. After what felt like an hour, the young man awoke from his trance. His despairing relatives rejoiced his cognitive return like a hero. His doctor decided to admit him to the hospital for dehydration, emotional shock and physical exhaustion.

Some nurses and I sat down at a nearby table and quickly ate some noodles and vegetables that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Like most of the hospital staff, they had been working contin-

ously with very little sleep for nearly one week.

One of them, Pak, began talking about her missing relatives and friends. Others chimed in about their confirmed losses and on those whose fates were still unknown. I marveled at their devotion, at their ability to suspend their own fears and distress in order to help others deal with theirs. I wondered whether I could have done the same in this drastic situation.

I offered to meet the medical staff to discuss their particular stresses and strains. About ten of us gathered in an office set up with chairs in a circle. Each staff member introduced him or herself and said the names of family and friends who had died or were missing, as well as anything else they wanted to add. (This kind of disclosure was highly unusual for Thais and Malays, who normally keep their difficulties private.)

I searched inside for some kind of response. "Let's be silent," I suggested. We sat for a few minutes, and then dispersed. I wondered if this time together provided any relief to those who attended—or if it further wounded the plight of grief and the torture of uncertainty.

From time to time, I visited the young Muslim man in his private hospital room, his bed constantly flanked by relatives. He'd been sleeping on and off for a few days and barely eating. We ran into each

other the afternoon of his discharge. He looked well rested and actually happy. Before we embraced, he pointed to his heart and said, "*Allah ny jai*."

Clearly many spiritual traditions were represented among the living. Around the morgue the common language was prayer. People prayed for miracles and mercy while gazing toward the heavens; others sat with their eyes closed, heads lowered, and hands folded. Still others genuflected and crossed themselves. The saddest thing to see were people with their faces in their hands, shaking and sobbing.

Survivors and family members continued to comb through incalculable numbers of photographs of the deceased and to fill out lengthy missing-person reports. There were computer banks both at the hospital and outside the morgue. Internet databases were also filled with images of documents retrieved from dead bodies—credit and bank cards, passports, and driver's licenses—in addition to large bags of these items on a table close to the morgue's entryway. Everywhere one looked, there were reminders of lives lost to the sea.

A special kind of camaraderie emerged. Survivors shared suggestions on how to hasten body identification and retrieval. "Start with numbered photographs of jewelry: fingers with wedding

rings, wrists with bracelets, ears pierced with earrings, and necks with necklaces. Then switch to pictures of moles, scars, and tattoos. Still no results? Get help from the Israeli forensic team. They know what they're doing."

> Let your mind be like a bridge which is steady,
> and not like the water that rises and falls underneath it.
>
> – Ajahn Chah

The temporary headquarters of the Israeli forensic team, located at the Krabi Maritime Hotel, where many of us—volunteers, officials, journalists, survivors—were also staying, had quickly become a hub. The Israeli forensic specialists, now dubbed "the never sleeps," were no strangers to instant tragedy. Having worked in the aftermath of so many suicide bombings and missile attacks, they were able to identify corpses much faster than the twenty or so other international forensic teams, whose members seem underprepared and overwhelmed. Bodies were still being collected; cadaver management procedures had not yet been established. The enormity of the disaster was also an international nightmare. It included locally the deaths of 2,248 foreign nationals from 37 different countries.

Swedish survivors were hit particularly hard,

both physically and psychologically, by what appeared to be their government's neglect. Fully 527 Swedes perished, 140 of them children. Sixteen people had not been recovered.

Many frustrated Swedes accused their government of responding slowly, and behaving arrogantly towards those engaged in the agonized search for loved ones, frantically scouring beaches, body collection centers, photographs, and hospitals. No one seemed available to take down details of the dead or missing. Rumor had it that the Swedish Embassy in Bangkok held an extravagant Year's Eve party, but no one really knew whether or not this was true.

The foreign embassies seemed to have a collective bureaucratic mission to encourage survivors to leave the country and discourage relatives and friends from coming. Dressed in crisp, fresh clothes, officials were often gathered in groups in the hotel dining room, filling out reports, going in and out of meetings. Responses to frantic calls from family members never varied. "Don't come here. We'll be in touch with you. Everything is under control."

Yet it was patently obvious that nothing was under control. In fact, those who flew in to search for survivors experienced excruciating challenges. Not only did they have to endure the anguish of

ambiguity, they had to navigate being strangers in a foreign country in crisis. Expenses for last-minute airfares, hotels, taxis, meals, drivers and interpreters inhibited many people from coming to search for missing relatives and friends. Most people did not have the luxury of expense accounts and government-sponsored services that embassy staff and other bureaucrats had at their fingertips. Such officials were perceived to be more concerned with procedural correctness than with the needs of their citizens, missing, injured, dead or alive.

The mission of the living was to find the dead and transform grief into action. They hoped to have either a proper cremation performed in Thailand or to board a plane with a coffin or coffins, depending on how many loved ones they lost. Those who could do neither were faced not only with the desolation of loss but also the trauma of what some perceived as a mission failed. Those still searching offered congratulations and pats on the back to relatives and friends who had made positive identifications. But the longing and even envy to do the same was palpable.

A jet-lagged Euro-Asian father arrived alone after a 24-hour flight, searching for his missing year-old daughter. When we met, he was focused on what

he called "an efficient strategy." He pondered what to do first: sift through bodies or look at pictures? Fill out missing person forms or enlist the help of a DNA technician? But reality outpaced practicality. Incapacitated by grief, he broke down and begged to no one, "Please don't let me go home without my daughter."

In between trips to the morgue, I whizzed by the oversized televisions in the hotel lobby. Announcers were blaring non-stop pleas for donations from charitable organizations. (I did not actually see such organizations on the ground distributing relief donations they promised. But that does not mean they weren't there.) International financial aid was pouring in to the point where Thai officials were taking bids for rebuilding schools, roads, hospitals, and homes. The scale of the generous public response was unprecedented. Thai citizens had donated mammoth amounts of clothing, blankets, food, toys, and toiletries. The piles of unsorted items were so immense that bulldozers were required to haul them to places where they could be sorted and then distributed.

I passed a group of journalists and embassy officials in the hotel bar, where they often hung out. Someone offered me a Coke, which I gratefully accepted. It was a perfect time for a jolt of cold

caffeine. One journalist asked, "Are there other psychologists around?" "I assume so," I replied; but I hadn't met any. Even if I had met up with other psychologists, we did not have the luxury of discussing credentials.

"There are plenty of psychologists around," one official pronounced with great authority. "They are here to support stressed-out embassy staff and forensic teams." I decided not to pursue the conversation. I hoped he wasn't actually disregarding the psychological state of everyone else.

It was time to head back to the morgue/wat. I walked toward the area and, as usual, it was teeming with activity. Once again, it was difficult to discern any unifying structure as to what was happening. Dozens of volunteers, in addition to handing out bottled water and face masks, answered a constant stream of questions, trying to direct people to the appropriate officials and resources. Handwritten signs in various languages were difficult to decipher. As always, the stench of death hung in the air.

A Thai official approached me. He'd noticed me going in and out of the morgue. "Have you been vaccinated for typhoid?" he asked. An outbreak of the disease was not out of the question. Yes, I had been vaccinated. Then I looked around thinking

about who wasn't. I could feel my anxiety rising but cut it off. There was so much to attend to in the present without letting my mind imagine frightening scenarios about an unknowable future.

At the outdoor computer bank set up close to the morgue, people were bent over screens, scrutinizing photos of corpses. From afar, it looked like a study hall filled with students cramming for an exam. Every day volunteers were there to offer support to people trying to identify those they loved and lost. Each person sifted through thousands of blackened and bloated images one by one. The seekers both feared they wouldn't find their loved ones—and feared they would.

I checked in with a Thai father searching for his son, a young monk. The father was optimistic about finding his son's body. He explained that "a small monk with a shaved head, dressed in robes, is easy to spot." I could not help but doubt his optimism. The killer waves did not tidily lay out those in robes, nor did their ferocious claws leave the bodies of the young and tenderhearted unscathed or easily recognizable. My heart ached for this father.

A Scandinavian man accompanied by his son told me that his wife and daughter were missing. They'd gone off shopping about an hour before the

tsunami hit. (Designer knockoffs attracted many tourists.) The family had come to Thailand to celebrate the completion of the father's treatment for prostate cancer and the mother's treatment for breast cancer. A holiday in the tropics fit the bill.

The optimistic energy of the father and son was, by now, familiar. They were going to beat the odds and find the corpses. This bleak mission was still off their radar. I wondered if I could best help them by trying to minimize their hopes. After all, there were thousands missing, presumably swallowed by the sea.

I decided that the most compassionate thing to do was to sincerely support their efforts and keep quiet about all the obstacles that lie ahead. If I were in their place, I would not give up either. They had already established contact with the Israeli forensic team members, who were unfailingly kind and patient with everyone who needed their expertise.

The father-and-son team, along with a Thai driver and interpreter, went to every hospital and body collection site in the area. Initially, their enthusiasm had remained unwavering. Each evening they checked in with me, I could hear in their voices and feel their hopes fading. But I still kept quiet about the odds of finding mother and daughter. Late one night in the empty halls of the hotel, I heard running feet behind me. I turned around to

see the father and son, ebullient. "We've got 'em back!" they shouted. Both bodies had been identified by forensics in the same morgue. "It's a miracle," said the son. "We're all going home."

If I hadn't known the context, I would have thought they were sharing some joyous news, like the birth of a baby or an engagement. The juxtaposition of their delight seemed disconnected from the reality of their double losses. In front of the door of their hotel room, I told them to sleep well and that we'd see each other in the morning.

On my way to my morning breakfast rounds, I received a message from the father whose voice now sounded weak and drained. He wanted to know if he should bring back his wife and daughter's belongings, their clothing, makeup, and books, or leave them behind. I returned his call immediately. The hotel operator informed me that the father and son had already checked out.

The word around the morgue was that dead Westerners were being refrigerated and receiving priority identifications. Asians, meanwhile, were being buried in mass graves to be dug up later for DNA or dental identification. The anonymity of mass graves took me back to images of the Holocaust. Would each life be accounted for, or would

they be erased? Sudden death by bullets, poison gas, or killer waves is an agonizing end that the living try to dignify by caring for the mortal remains.

This two-tiered system was devastating news for the Euro-Asian father in search of his daughter. In all probability, she was already buried in a mass grave. Engulfed with sorrow, he left alone, a broken man. I arranged a ride for him back to the airport, having never learned his or his daughter's names.

The situation before me seemed overwhelming, irreconcilable. At such moments, I remembered Ajahn Anan and Ajahn Ganha, who I knew were offering prayers of *metta* (lovingkindness) for the tormented survivors. Thinking about my teachers reminded me that it is only by surrendering to suffering that we can ever hope to make peace with it. If there was ever a moment to surrender, it was now. I also knew that the process of surrender of every magnitude had its own trajectory. There were many things we could do to hasten or delay it, but ultimately, letting go happens of its own accord.

An invitation from Rabbi Kantor arrived by phone inviting me to take a break and come to Shabbat dinner with the Israeli forensic team. Homemade kosher food, prepared by Nechama, his wife, had been flown in from Bangkok. The spiritual and physical nourishment being offered felt

like finding cold water in a scorched desert.

About a dozen of us showed up at the windowless conference room in the hotel to a table set with the traditional Shabbat foods, including roasted eggplant salad, hummus, freshly baked challah and an assortment of desserts. While *kiddush* (blessing over the wine) was recited over a cup overflowing with grape juice, we simultaneously proclaimed the customary, "*L'chaim!*" (To life!)

Ignoring the carnage long enough to enjoy a communal meal was challenging. The Israelis spoke to each other as I sat quietly. I had no energy or interest to engage. It was late. Once again, exhaustion overcame me, so I returned to my room and rested.

It seemed like my head had just hit the pillow when I was awakened by a call from a woman concerned for her brother. "He might be suicidal," she whispered. I agreed to meet him to assess the situation, but he had fallen asleep, with the help of a sleeping pill. His honeymoon and his future had just been severed by the confirmed death of his East Asian wife. The bride's parents would be arriving later in the day. The only way they were able to afford the trip was to allow a journalist and camera crew to document their journey, door to door, and in between. In exchange, all their expenses would be covered. I learned that news crews from around

the world had made these sorts of arrangements with victims' families who were unable, for whatever reasons, to make the journey on their own.

At breakfast the next morning, I made my daily rounds to each table in the hotel dining room, receiving updates from people I was in the process of helping or introducing myself to those who might need my assistance. When I met the groom-in-mourning, his sister and in-laws each held a set of wedding pictures, eager to share them with me. There were photos of the young bride in a floor-length white gown with a puffy, tiered skirt and the groom in a pure white tuxedo. There they stood, arm-in-arm, radiating love and happiness. Other photographs showed the newlyweds staring into each other's eyes or feeding each other wedding cake. There were group shots of the newlyweds and their families, united in joy and the expectation of a happy and long life together, without a glimmer that the near future would so swiftly turn into a mind-blowing tragedy.

A week later, the groom had become a widower; the bride, a corpse. Her body had been positively identified. Neither the groom nor the bride's mother was prepared to see it yet. I was asked and agreed to accompany her father. After donning

masks and surgical gloves, we were led to one of eight large refrigerated containers that had recently arrived to temporarily house the dead. The noise of the refrigerator motors and fans was deafening.

"What's the number?" yelled a volunteer. The father called it out twice over the din. When the container door slid open, swirling clouds of cold air smacked into the tropical heat. It was an unearthly few moments as two men leaped in to rummage through the numbered bagged bodies. The door slid open again, releasing more cold air into the tropical heat. I could hardly see through the mist. "*Chuay noi dai mai*?" (Can you help us?). With their assistance, I climbed in and joined them in rearranging heavy bagged bodies until we retrieved the one with the dead bride inside. We removed her from the refrigerator and unloaded her onto the ground.

The father knelt down, unzipped the plastic bag and stared at his frozen daughter wearing a two-piece bathing suit, her fingers and toenails painted bright red. In the morgue, I had become accustomed to seeing nail polish on finger nails and toes of rotting corpses, the bizarreness of blazing colors amidst the darkness of death began to seem normal by this point. As the Dad knelt beside her his tears dripped onto her cold, rigid corpse. Then, together, the grieving father and I zipped up the bag and hauled the

body back into the refrigerated container.

There were scores of journalists taking photographs of corpses ready for refrigeration. I recognized a young reporter, probably in her late twenties, whom I had met in Phuket a few days earlier. She was standing alone, her long hair blowing in the wind generated by the refrigerator fans. We approached each other and hugged. "How are you?" I asked. "I gotta get out of here," she replied. "I can't take this anymore," as she quickly departed.

The following day, the family and I, along with the journalist and camera crew, returned to collect the bride's body. Once again, her father and I climbed in and hauled it out of the refrigerator, which now contained even more corpses. The body bag was opened for the last time. The mother yelled her daughter's name, "Yuki, Yuki, Yuki," louder and louder, as if expecting her to wake up and walk away from the nightmare and the truth of tragedy. Placing lotuses on her daughter's decayed face, the mother dabbed her handkerchief all over the blackened body while humming a lullaby.

We set the body in a white gilded coffin and loaded it onto the back of a rickety pickup truck. We were driven to a crematorium at a nearby monastery. The monastery itself was rundown. The grass was overgrown and the buildings dilapidated.

Several sweaty monks unloaded the coffin, and we all waited until the abbot signaled to the father that the crematorium was ready. Some money exchanged hands. The abbot and one other monk began to chant. Their voices sounded strained from fatigue. Who knows how many cremations they had already officiated at and how many more were scheduled.

The parents and widowed groom appeared surprisingly composed. We stood there silently in the unforgiving sun. Just as the white gilded coffin was being raised and inserted into the crematorium, a cameraman who had been filming their trip broke down sobbing uncontrollably while his body shook. As he began to totter, everyone present ran to catch him before he fell down along with his camera equipment. After he settled down and was standing firmly on his feet, the coffin was loaded into the flames. When we heard the first loud boom, we turned our backs and walked away. It was a mind-numbing experience, sad beyond words in any language. We climbed back into the pick-up and were driven back to the hotel.

About 96 percent of Thais are Buddhists. Although many don't practice meditation, most have strong faith in the Buddha's teachings. Both those who

could and those who could not find the bodies of their loved ones generally believed that the departed would receive the merit of their righteous deeds performed in this life, dedicated to their memory by loved ones.

The Thai way of grieving, from what I could perceive, was composed, and reflected what is known as *jai yen* (a cool heart). Mourners appeared to see death as part of life, not as an injustice or a dreadful mistake, even if it were unexpected or swift. Their suffering was perceptible, but to my eyes, without obvious rancor. I spoke with one local Thai woman in her late twenties, who stood in front of three stacked caskets containing her young son, daughter, and husband. "*Pen tamada, pen tamachat*" (This is natural, this is nature) was her barely audible response to my condolences.

With her house and family now gone, she was staying at the nearby monastery of Ajahn Jamnian, another meditation master. There, she and more than 1,000 other displaced people received food and supplies, along with spiritual guidance and medical support. Ajahn Jamnian spent his days and nights walking up and down the beaches strewn with corpses and caskets and moving among the grief-stricken and disoriented, spreading his irrepressible compassion.

Thais have been so conditioned to keep pain private that strong displays of emotion can make them and others uncomfortable. When anyone crumbled to the floor or cried hysterically, Thai bystanders sometimes giggled from anxiety. At times, even nurses and doctors turned their heads, shifted their gaze downwards, or walked away from those in the heat of unbridled grief. I realized that the best I could do was to witness their way of coping and understand it with compassion as part of a particular cultural norm.

Expressing emotions wasn't an issue for *jai rawn* (hot heart) Westerners. Many felt angry and betrayed by the tsunami and by the experts who failed to detect it. Some family and survivors spoke critically, bitterly. "The authorities should have known! How irresponsible! Why were no warnings transmitted?" Parents blamed themselves for not being able to protect their children from death.

"I'm a bad parent; it's my fault," one mother blurted out, as if she were personally responsible for the natural disaster and her daughter's death. The myth of control over tragedy dominated their narrative. It was as if the Leonard Cohen lyrics in "The Sisters of Mercy" (1980) spoke directly to their anguish:

> Yes you who must leave everything that you cannot control / It begins with your family, but soon it comes around to your soul.

I approached two disconsolate mothers who summoned me as I was leaving the morgue. They were shivering even in the steaming heat of the midday sun. Each mother recalled premonition dreams the night before the tsunami in which they sensed their young children were in danger. "If I had only listened to my dream, my son would still be alive," each one lamented. The tsunami had dismantled their identity as parents who believed they had control over their children's lives. Time and time again, I heard questions such as "Why didn't I die first?" "Isn't what happened bad karma?" "What horrific things did I do to deserve this terrible fate?"

This difference between the two perspectives demonstrates one of the Buddha's key teachings. Our minds are habituated to relate to suffering by resisting it through blame, anger and resentment. That resistance and aversion is what the Buddha calls "the second arrow."

So much additional suffering comes from believing "things shouldn't be this way," when in fact, they *are* that way. Although tragedy and loss feel

personal, they are not. Suffering happens regardless of what we believe, what we want, or what we think is fair. Instead, there is the possibility of shifting our minds towards sensations rather than labels. For example, when there is guilt in the mind, the sensations can be wildly unpleasant; the body heats up, thoughts race in the mind. Knowing the direct experience helps us disengage from the second arrow, which fights with the truth of suffering which only intensifies it.

Our task is not to compound what is already painful with judgments and expectations. It is to lessen, and ultimately abandon, their distorting grip. No one expects their children to die before them. Yet, death is defiant and fickle. Sometimes death is natural, such as in old age. Other times, unnatural, such as in a car accident, murder, or drowning at any age or stage of life. There are incurable illnesses, and intentional deaths by suicide. Our illusions of orderliness are upended.

Yet even through excruciating grief and implacable suffering, we can develop a different relationship to loss and loosen its savage grip. Like the Yom Kippur liturgy and Buddhist practices, we are reminded that separation and loss are part of life and makes no exceptions. It's inevitable that one day we will be separated with all that is near and

dear to all of us. Embedded in the feeling of brutality lies the possibility of acceptance and letting go, not that this is effortless or anything we'd seek out.

A middle-aged, mustachioed ambassador from northern Europe had arrived in Krabi to assist his country's citizens whether dead, missing, or injured. We met outside the temporary headquarters of the Israeli forensic team, on the ground floor of the hotel where we both were staying. The headquarters quickly became a gathering place for people waiting for forensic test results as well as those wanting to fill out the elaborate "missing person report" that the Israeli forensic team required.

The ambassador took me aside to explain his personal distress, now difficult to contain. His voice cracked as plump tears formed in his eyes. The only person he had ever seen dead was his mother, who had been laid out in her favorite church dress, her grey hair neatly styled and her face made up with powder and lipstick.

I sympathized with his unbidden discovery that a dead body is putrid, not pretty, and how tough it is to take in this reality—but there was no time to help him process his distress.

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone....
Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead....
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.
The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

– W.H. Auden, "Stop all the clocks"

Fierce, blood-curdling shrieks cut through the hotel lobby. I followed the wails of a broken heart to a woman, aside her immobilized husband. Smack in the middle of people checking in and out, hauling luggage, and chatting on their mobile phones, an embassy staff member had just handed over their daughter's passport, confirming her death. In that moment, any hope of finding their daughter in a remote hospital or wandering in an amnesiac state had been destroyed.

I walked the couple to their hotel room, where the mother's howls intensified. She wailed on the bed while the father leaned over the balcony, breathing heavily. For a moment, it appeared he might jump. I pulled him away from the balcony and gently led him to a lounge chair inside, and then closed and locked the balcony door. I prepared cold wash-cloths for each of them to place on their foreheads as they continued to moan and wail. I called the

hospital from inside the bathroom and asked if anyone could deliver tranquilizers to the hotel. The nurse offered to send a doctor to deliver an injection. I pleaded: "Whatever is fastest. Hurry, please!" Their wailing grew even louder and more intense. I shouted the name of the hotel, room number and my mobile number. Once I was confident that communications were clear, we hung up. I refreshed the wash clothes for the couple's foreheads and prayed that the pills would arrive quickly.

Within about twenty minutes, a volunteer delivered a packet of pills. I handed a glass of water and a pill to each parent hoping the medicine would help take the edge off their staggering grief. The hotel phone rang. It was the official who had handed over their daughter's passport, asking for an update which I provided. She became infuriated. "Tranquilizers? You're not qualified to provide tranquilizers!" Before slamming her phone down, she added, "If there is an allergic reaction you'll be responsible."

Once the drugs took effect and the couple's grief subsided, we agreed to eat dinner in the hotel dining room. Among the three of us, we managed to snake through corridors to make our way to a large room decorated with an artificial Christmas tree covered with sparkling silver-colored tinsel. We mechanically ordered our food. While we were

waiting for our dinners to arrive, they told me about their younger daughter, who was staying with relatives. They were not yet prepared to deliver the news. The words were too difficult to say aloud.

We turned our attention to the lone singer in a slinky evening gown in front of a small band. With microphone in hand, she sang a jolly version of "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" followed by "Jingle Bells." The bizarre scene was wildly incongruous. Yet, it also managed to temporarily hold our attention.

As we picked at our food, the couple took turns asking me about my life. I told them about my husband, a translator and lover of Chinese poetry, particularly Tu Fu, a Tang Dynasty poet. They perked up. They both loved Tu Fu! On impulse, I called my husband, who spoke briefly to the father. Their animated conversation was a momentary interlude of normalcy as the two men became absorbed in the healing power of poetry. When the couple's abject grief began to resurface, we quickly headed back to their room where the couple collapsed on their bed, writhing in grief, screaming and moaning. I scurried to find the packet of tranquilizers and wet wash cloths to place on their foreheads. When I could feel this wave subsiding, I offered to sleep in their room. The couple declined

my offer to stay overnight.

After giving them my mobile number, two tranquilizers and reassurance that I would return early the next morning, I left.

Too wound up to rest, I headed to the lobby. There was Rabbi Kantor who was on his way to the small village of Khao Lak where most of the Swedes had perished. His plan was to also head to Ban Nam Khan. It was there that the locals suffered the worst devastation. Approximately a quarter of its population of 4,200 were lost to the tsunami and 80 percent of homes destroyed.

Even at that late hour, Rabbi Kantor seemed tireless in his efforts to help anyone he could, offering solace, food, his phone, and toys and teddy bears to children who had lost their parents. (Rabbi Kantor later took up a collection and distributed additional toys and teddy bears throughout the impacted areas.) Before heading to Khao Lak and Ban Nam Khan, Rabbi Kantor kindly walked me to the door of my hotel room. Once the door clicked shut and securely locked, I threw off my clothes, showered vigorously and then collapsed into a deep sleep.

Early the next morning, I returned to the room of the devastated parents. Both were up, dressed, and seemed relieved to see me. They were waiting impatiently to hear about body recovery procedures.

Obviously still in the deep darkness of severe shock, they were pacing, groaning, wiping tears from their weary faces. I ordered room service—coffee and muffins—that no one touched. When the father called his younger daughter, crying out the news, I could hear her screaming in horror. I stayed in their room as long as I could and then decided to seek the embassy officials who told me that their daughter's death certificate was being processed. It was the same woman who had become enraged about the tranquilizers. That episode seemed like ancient history.

The parents eventually received a call that their daughter's death certificate was ready. The mother became hysterical, and the father started screaming "Get Dr. Ronna!" The staff member with information about body retrieval procedures never called. When we spoke later, she calmly told me, "Everything is under control."

Under control? If life were under control, the First Noble Truth—there is suffering—would be nullified. We could stop the flow of time, control nature, avoid tragedy and even command that the body not to die under any circumstances.

But this was not the case, now or ever. Our lack of control over life and death had never seemed so obvious.

By the time I got to the morgue, the couple had already left. We spoke several times before they boarded their plane, with their dead daughter in cargo. I made sure they had enough tranquilizers to make the long journey home.

After eight days, my ability to keep people's stories and needs in order began to crumble. It was time to leave. But I was summoned to another family tragedy.

Two cousins had come from New Zealand to find their cousin and his fiancée, with dental records in hand. The Israeli forensic team had positively identified the body of the fiancée but not yet that of her husband-to-be. The confirmation bolstered the cousins' confidence that their "blood relative" could also be positively identified.

I sat with the cousins, awaiting information about the forensic analysis. In the meantime, the young man's father, a Holocaust survivor, arrived after a long and grueling flight. A member of the Israeli forensic team called and asked me to stand by his side when the confirmation of his only son's death was delivered.

In a barely audible voice, with his balding head hanging, he asked to use a telephone. It was time to tell the family, thousands of miles away, praying for a miracle.

It wasn't until the afternoon of my departure that I opened the floor-to-ceiling curtains of my hotel room. Sunlight flooded in, revealing a vast, unobstructed ocean view worthy of a *National Geographic* spread.

I took no pleasure in the natural beauty or the luxurious room. The sea and my surroundings felt meaningless because, in fact, they are meaningless. It is an illusion to create an artificial separation between beauty and ugliness, kindness and cruelty, good and bad, right and wrong. They are part of each other, just as birth and death are inextricably linked. Beauty is a potential beast. An ocean of compassion is also a sea of sorrow. I could see life, rife with paradox, with no lasting resolution or fulfillment. In that moment, I was also confident that apparent differences can be reconciled and ultimate peace can be found.

While packing my clothes, cosmetics, and notebook, I recalled what Tan Achalo had said. The Buddha had instructed monks to sew their robes from scraps of cloth found in charnel grounds.

Not for a second did I think of taking the Buddha's advice. I'd had enough of the stench of death. My skirts and blouses were saturated with it. I threw most of my clothing away. If I had had another pair of sandals with me, I would gladly

have tossed those as well. I didn't need to be reminded of the time spent tiptoeing around puddles of bodily fluids and stepping over skulls and skeletons.

An American news team took me to the airport, which was once again teeming with tourists from around the globe. I recognized several volunteers, but none of us greeted or even acknowledged each other. I took that as a wordless agreement to put the past behind us. Besides, maybe today, death would take a day off. That fantasy quickly dissolved as I headed across the tarmac toward the stairs of the aircraft. Stacks of coffins, interspersed with luggage, rolled up the conveyor belt into cargo, tagged for the route to their final destination.

From Bangkok, I went to visit Ajahn Anan at Wat Marp Jan, located on the side of a mountain about two hours south of the city. I wandered around and entered a large room. The floor was covered with women's bodies engaged in the ordinary act of sleeping: some on their backs, others in fetal positions or on their sides. It took a moment to readjust my perceptions. I listened to their gentle snores and appreciated that their heads, limbs, and internal organs were intact and not splattered all over the floor.

Once again, I became acutely aware of life's

fleeting nature. Awakening from a rest and resuming one's life, cannot be assumed. These beings would eventually die and decay, just as I will. When denial of death overcomes us, the sacredness of each moment gets lost. It's so easy to forget that birth and death are part of the natural scheme of things, intrinsic to our groundlessness in an eternally shifting universe.

On a quiet afternoon in the forest, I was invited to spend some time with Ajahn Anan, where he graciously offered these reflections:

As long as we're living in this world, things are uncertain. It doesn't matter what country we come from. Everyone wants happiness and a long life, but the world doesn't accord with our wishes and desires. Every life has suffering, and everyone has his or her own individual karma. When we start to think about the details of our karma, suffering arises. This is not the correct view of things. If there is birth, we have to receive the karma of death. Being conscious of death is a good thing. It may arouse a sense of urgency to be more heedful and to lead a more mindful life. When we look for happiness, we have to look for the unconditioned. If there is no birth, then there is no death. This is the nature of nibbāna.

Postscript

Several weeks before the disaster, I'd met up with my friend Quandow, an elegant, aristocratic Thai woman in her late fifties. We were delighted to be in each other's company again, having forged a strong connection while on retreat. She'd been living in Europe, married to a doctor. Before we parted, Quandow elicited a promise: "Call me before leaving Thailand."

Shortly before heading home, I fulfilled that promise. One of Quandow's daughters, Aon, answered the phone. We briefly exchanged formalities in Thai. Then I asked, *"Quandow, u ti nai?"* (Is Quandow there?) She calmly replied "*Khun Mae die leow*" (My mother died.) I was certain I had misunderstood, that she must be referring to her ailing grandmother. But no. Aon repeated slowly, "Khun Mae die leow"—it was her mother, Quandow, who'd been was killed in the tsunami, along with her older daughter and son-in-law. Only the son-in-law's body had been identified. The sea had presumably swallowed everyone else. The sole survivor was the couple's five-year-old daughter, now in Aon's custody. What could I say to Aon other than, "I'm sorry?" I knew all too well that at

times like this, there was so little to say that could really make a difference.

While serving as a tsunami psychologist, I had thought often of my older brother, Jeffrey z"l, who died suddenly of an embolism at the age of 44, and how that shock and crushing loss changed my family and me forever. But in the emotional wake of the tsunami, it hadn't occurred to me that I might have personally known anyone who had been killed. My emotions, like those of other mourners, were in chaos.

It was time to fly home from Bangkok to Berkeley. At 43,000 feet above the sea that had claimed thousands of lives in Thailand and nearly 230,000 lives in fourteen other countries, tears flowed as I wept onto my husband's shoulder for my friend, her family, for all the tsunami victims and survivors, for everyone I have ever loved and lost, and for the entire human condition.

It felt good to return to the sweet familiarity of our home, routines, and communities. I was exhausted and in need of comfort and structure. The exhaustion wasn't just because of my role as a tsunami psychologist. The extreme heat, the cultural and language stresses of living among so few Westerners, for

months at a time, had accumulated and taken their toll.

As a result, I took great pleasure in speaking English and reestablishing my daily patterns at home, in the pool and at the gym, and eventually at work with clients. I relished the magic of the mundane, enjoying my favorite foods including toasted bagels and lox, tuna melts, egg salad on rye. Uncomplicated activities like these were manageable, within my control, and provided everyday life with a rhythm of normalcy. We were particularly happy to return to our spiritual homes and teachers.

But as much as I enjoyed these readjustments, my return was overcast by a pervasive sense of loneliness and isolation. Perhaps only veterans of war and survivors of disasters can understand what I mean. Shared trauma binds even complete strangers. There was no time to take a detached stance by pretending the aftermath of the tsunami was anything but brutal and grotesque. With few exceptions, everyone had been pushed to the limits of what was bearable, and out of that emerged a genuine sense of compassion and connection. I saw this time and time again as mourners reached out to console each other, saying things like "I know just how you feel; I know how much it hurts."

Friends andj teachers stopped by to welcome us

back, and they often asked about the tsunami. I would show them a photograph from the *Bangkok Post* of monks walking on the beach with their alms bowls, surrounded by carnage and caskets. The accompanying article explained that the monks took their usual daily route, even though it meant walking by rotting, insect-ridden corpses. As the monks explained, death cannot be avoided by taking another route.

Our guests were not just horrified by the image. but they also questioned its authenticity. "This must be photoshopped. This could not be real," one guest proclaimed. Although I assured him and others that I'd witnessed the same scene, they remained incredulous, suspicious and even suggested I was exaggerating.

I had invitations to give a few talks. When I began to describe what I had done and what I'd seen, hands would go up defensively. "Please stop! "It's too depressing." It was as if the listeners' pleas and outstretched arms, palms forward, were an attempt to shield them against the truth, as if it were in their power to shut it out.

I was also invited to speak to a group of professionals. Some had worked in the aftermath of the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, the 1991 Oakland Hills firestorm, or both. Twenty-five lives were lost

and more than 3,400 homes were destroyed. My house was one of the homes that had burned to the ground, along with everything I'd believed I owned.

One professional posed a common question: "How did you take care of yourself during the aftermath of the tsunami?"

"It was my meditation practice of bearing with suffering that helped the most," I explained. "If I had thought too much about myself, I probably wouldn't have been able to do what I did." A senior professional broke in to address the group: "To avoid burnout and PTSD, a self-care plan needs to be in place. Take frequent breaks; stay hydrated; if there are volunteers offering hand or shoulder massages, try to get one."

I understood these recommendations. Who can blame anyone for wanting to believe that they could exert some semblance of control during or after a disaster? But disasters—natural and human-made—reveal the limitations of those capacities and the illusion of control. Even if we can take care of ourselves and others in a crisis, it doesn't change how alone and out of control we really are, continuously exposed to danger and death. It also doesn't change the fact that we could be among the dead, injured or survivors searching for family and friends, rather than professional caretakers.

Soon after I returned, I was invited to write a short article about my experience for a Buddhist publication. Photographs of the carnage were offered to the editors, who declined to use them. Instead, they illustrated the article with a contemporary painting that included a hand written text referring to Pocahontas. It struck me as a non sequitur.

Graphic images of death are indeed difficult to look at, but they also can provide a rare opportunity to see what's real. They help awaken us from the delusion that death is distant, that we have time. The editors' decision to not use the photographs reminded me of a line from T. S. Eliot, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality."

I have learned the most from the people in my life who can bear reality. One friend, Tinamarie, stands out as such a person. Having spent more than half her life dealing with long-term illness, she is all too familiar with pain and suffering and their intrinsic accompaniment in all our lives. As Tinamarie puts it, "Suffering has deepened my empathy for others while the happiness I have experienced gets me through my own pain." Tinamarie embodies how wisdom and suffering are interconnected. They are inseparable, born of one another.

Even after the intense exposure I experienced during the aftermath of the tsunami, I continue to

chip away at my own illusions. Now that I am 73 and my husband is 96, the pace of hospital and hospice visits, funerals, and memorial events for friends and relatives is speeding up. But, as difficult and painful as they are, such death-related activities also make me acutely aware of—and sensitive to—*the privilege of transition*. Having time to say goodbye, the presence of a deathbed and of a body that one's family can bury or cremate with dignity, cannot be taken for granted.

In 2006, two years after the tsunami, I began helping to care for my Thai friend Patriya's only child and my godson, Todd. Just ten and a half, he was being treated at Seattle Children's Hospital for thalassemia, a blood disorder. Patriya, her husband Gear, and I took turns caring for Todd day and night in the hospital's PICU (pediatric intensive care unit) where he had received a double bone marrow transplant. He lay tethered to a thicket of tubes and noisy, beeping medical machines, 24/7. We devoted ourselves to his comfort, as did the doctors, nurses, volunteer clowns, magicians and guitar players who visited him. Songs by John Denver were Todd's favorite.

When the double transplants failed, it was my turn to rail against reality, just like some of the parents who had lost their children to the tsunami,

"Why did Todd have to suffer like this and then die an early death?"

But then I remembered the privilege of transition. That insight helped awaken me to the great honor that lay ahead: the opportunity to help escort Todd through the transition from life to death. I stayed with him the night before he died, holding his hand, stroking his thin arms and bald head, whispering in his ear to remind him of all the many good deeds he had done and great beings he had met as his raspy breath slowed down.

Early the next morning, Todd took his last breath, surrounded by people who loved and took care of him. His parents and I then stayed with him for several hours, meditating together, and then washed his small body, bruised from so many IVs and catheters. We dressed him in his favorite clothing, a plaid shirt and jeans. Not until Patriya and Gear were ready did we place him into a body bag, set him on a gurney, and wheel him to the hospital morgue. How could this calm and dignified transition compare to the sudden slam of death, the recovery of an unrecognizable body—or worse, not recovering one at all?

My professional life as a psychologist has changed significantly since the tsunami. When clients come

to my office seeking solace and relief from extreme suffering, I do my best to contain our conversations and investigations within the context of life's eternal truths.

We are not in control of the deep, dark places within our psyches that plunge us into the heart of darkness. If it were a matter of willing ourselves to "get over it" and "move on" from devastating losses, illnesses, betrayals or rejections, then we would do so. Even when a sense of lightness begins to return, it's not clear where that relief comes from. Does it arise from grit or through grace? Does anyone really know?

The theologian Paul Tillich, referred to by columnist David Brooks in the *New York Times,* wrote that mourners are taken beneath the routines of life to discover that they are not who they believed themselves to be. The agony of grief smashes through what they thought was the bottom of their being, revealing an area below, before it crashes through that floor, revealing another level, then another and another. Mourners transform rather than recover, and in that process they have the opportunity to establish another way of being. Thus, coming to terms with the meaning of life in the face of death isn't about healing; it's about emerging as a different person.

Additional verses from *Un'taneh Tokef* remind us, "We are likened to a fragile vessel, withering grass, a fading flower, the dust that disperses, a blowing wind, and like the dream that flies away."

Knowing this, what are we going to do with the time we have? We may be like shattered pottery and withered grass, but there is so much more. A connection to the transcendent enables us to live a life of meaning. Life can be as holy as it can be broken. We are not control of our predicament, but we are not helpless either. We can act upon what is in our control by engaging in a wise response to whatever life brings.

According to the sages, life is always whispering its secrets: Behave with humility. Be generous. Feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Treat the poor as family. Do not speak idly. Receive all people with kindness. In short, there is a way out of suffering; we are not at its mercy.

Whether or not we put this advice into action is our choice. We can be agents of defeat or agents of transformation. The sixteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, taught that the world has created remnants of divine sparks and vessels intended to hold them. Our responsibility as human beings is to reunite the sparks with their divine source, a process called "*tikkun olam*" (repairing the world). One

way is to turn mourning into meaning—to restore a life lost to tragedy.

> …For love is as strong as death…
> Great seas cannot extinguish love
> No river can wash it away.
>
> – Song of Songs 8:6-7

I received an email from a bereft mother close to the one year anniversary of the tsunami. She described the consuming agony of knowing that her only daughter had vanished in the waves. "I'd crawl through a pile of corpses to see her one more time," she lamented. I had no doubt that she would have done so if that was possible. Born out of extreme grief, this mother has since established a scholarship fund and foundation to benefit young women, in memory of her daughter.

My friend Patriya has also embraced a sacred response to Todd's death. Among her many acts of kindness: donating school uniforms for children in Thailand whose parents cannot afford them, as well as offering countless cases of vitamins and cartons of milk to school children in need. She has also written a book, available for free distribution, about Todd's short life, in both English and Thai, that serves as an inspiration to everyone who reads it.

We are not alone or isolated. Everyone will lose someone we believe we can't live without, and our hearts will be badly broken. Their memories live on, but that knowledge alone cannot vanquish our deepest wounds. It is the spiritual path that offers an opportunity to bear these sorrows with equanimity, meaning and, ultimately, full release from suffering.

Deep insights can emerge from grief, not that anyone would intentionally choose this path. From its desolate wake, wholesome actions that reduce human misery and uplift despairing spirits can arise and have the potential to soothe broken hearts, and lighten the darkest of days.

Every year on the tsunami's anniversary, I think about survivors who may or may not be wrestling with responses and remembrances of the tsunami. I light a *yahrzeit* candle (a memorial flame lit on the anniversary of a death), and recite Kaddish (a Jewish memorial prayer that accrues merit for the deceased.) I offer a donation in their memory.

These rituals provide a container for this catastrophic event, but alone, they cannot quell a heavy heart or secure a place of refuge.

My determination to be more accountable with

my time and who I spend it with has increased significantly, before only scattered unbleached bones remain.

I work to forgive myself and others, to admit mistakes and learn from them. I do not want to keep repeating mistakes and behavior patterns that only create pain and suffering within myself and others. The price of not engaging in these processes is too high. I do not want to take unfinished business with me, before my unbleached**.**

Peter and I regularly ask each other for forgiveness, out of respect for the truth that one or both of us may not wake up the next morning or return home in the evening. Forgiveness softens the heart and helps manifest our common humanity. Who among us hasn't made significant mistakes that we regret? Probably not many.

My mind still drifts to images of the dead and memories of the living. Occasionally, I imagine reuniting with some of the people I met during those desolate days and learn about how they rebuilt a life lost to tragedy. I also wonder what we would say to each other. Maybe we would talk for hours. Or sit in sacred silence. Then I let go of these musings with the certainty that these people will always be a part of me, eternally etched into my heart.

Finally, the ancient and timeless Yom Kippur liturgy and stark rituals continue to inform my life. When reciting *Un'taneh Tokef* and the various ways we can exit this vale of tears, "Who by fire and who by water…" I consider once again, the destiny I share with my husband, my family, friends, teachers, and all beings everywhere, in *this now, already gone.*

One generation passes away, and another generation comes…

All the rivers run into the sea;

yet the sea is not full;

to the place from where the rivers flow, there they return again.

– Ecclesiastes 1:4, 7

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