AMID DESTRUCTION, LIFE LESSONS

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

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

At our office on the fourteenth floor of a shiny, glass-walled tower, my colleagues and I expressed horror at the unfolding story and discussed what each of us could do. Some pledged to donate money, clothing, or food to the Red Cross or to fundraising drives. My colleague Saleemah went a step further—as an activist and a member of the National Committee for UNIFEM,[1] Singapore, she collected feminine supplies to distribute to affected women.

But just contributing material goods did not seem enough for me. Singapore, where I lived at the time, has long been fortunate due to its geographic location. Situated just outside the Ring of Fire,[2] buffered from environmental occurrences by Sumatra on the west, and located far enough south to avoid the worst of both the southwest and northeast monsoons, it had become a trading entrepôt in the nineteenth century and one of Asia's modern-day economic stars. Yet just 583 miles north in Thailand and 659 miles northwest in Indonesia there lay destruction and death. There had to be something more I could do.

So when Cindy posed the question, I jumped at the chance. We could have gone to any number of affected areas—Banda Aceh in Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka—but Phuket was the nearest, only one and a half hours away by plane.

Buoyed largely by our enthusiasm and naïveté, we rushed headlong into our adventure. Cindy brought up the idea on Thursday, and by 7:45 a.m. the next day, we were strapped into our seats in a plane headed for Phuket. Unusual for that time of the year, when swarms of tourists often head for the fabled beaches of Thailand, the number of airline crew (six) outnumbered the passengers (five,

including the two of us). In under twenty-four hours, we had obtained the blessing of our boss, who understandably viewed our plan as harebrained but nonetheless consented to let us take time off from work; stuffed our backpacks with as much food and medical supplies as two petite girls could possibly carry; obtained tetanus and typhoid shots; and fended off questions from concerned family members and friends.

As the plane took off from the long runway of Changi Airport, and the glittering high-rises of Singapore began to fade from my view, I braced myself for the worst. I had heard that there was no water available either to drink or to use for showers, that there were no beds, and that we would be wading through flooded streets. There were professional groups rounding up volunteers, but we did not want to go with any particular organization—we wanted to go immediately and effect the most change we could. In the midst of our frantic planning, it occurred to me to call the Phuket Aid Center to see if they needed volunteers. Would we, women in our twenties, be of help or hindrance? The center confirmed that volunteers were welcome.

But what was I getting myself into?

We soon arrived in Phuket to find that the city itself was not physically affected. The sun was beating down hard as townsfolk went about their daily activities, on motorcycles and cars, shopping and working, shouting and laughing. Not only was there plenty of water and food available, but the ground was also dry. Cindy and I found accommodation at a cheap hotel that had beds, air conditioning, and televisions in each room.

The Dead

Conditions outside Phuket, however, weren't as good. Upon reporting to the Phuket Aid Center early that same afternoon, we were directed to join a group of volunteers heading to Khao Lak. A coastal town seventy miles north of Phuket, Khao Lak in Phang Nga District was one of the areas worst hit by the tsunami. As we neared the center of town, I began seeing pockets of white-wrapped figures lined up on the ground. What were they, I wondered?

The bus finally pulled to a stop by several makeshift tents. There were all sorts of people milling about—medical teams from foreign countries; volunteers of all shapes, sizes, colors, and ages; local Thais; people who seemed to know what they were doing and others who looked lost. As the volunteers poured out of the bus, there was no turning away now from the odor that permeated the air—the smell of the dead.

A few of us volunteers were herded to sort out a mountain of clothing donations. I had no idea where they originated from or how they would be distributed. But there were plastic bags to be removed, clothes to be separated according to gender, age, and size, and footwear to be put aside. We were soon

joined by some locals, who picked at the clothing with us—except with the intention of keeping the items for themselves.

Next we were instructed to cross a two-lane road. On the other side were rows of bundles tightly wrapped in white; they were roughly the size and shape of humans. On the bus, I could turn my head away, but there was no avoiding them now. These were the bodies of the tsunami victims wrapped in white cloth—physical representations of the reality of the disaster, lined up by the street. We watched silently as several local men swiftly put the corpses into body bags. Cindy boldly stepped out from the pack of gawking volunteers and joined them. I looked at her with a mixture of admiration and fear. The locals, however, thought differently; the bilingual Thai volunteer standing next to me whispered that the men were chattering among themselves wondering if she would start crying. She did not.

Soon the mishmash of volunteers joined in, lifting various parts of the lifeless bodies and placing them whole into body bags, then zipping up the bags, and transporting them twenty feet away under a tent. Since the bodies had been lying in the ninety-degree heat and humidity for so long—six days since the tsunami—the decomposition was horrific. Eyes had popped, mouths were swollen and open wide, flesh had stretched from gases, bellies were taut and rounded like balloons, and skin had turned black and ash-like. Blood, ordinarily thick and bright red, came gushing out in a thin, dull reddish-brown stream from one of the bodies that we moved.

I had seen photos of the dead in the media and on the corkboards across the street. Those pictures were of the deceased with features intact and skin color in their original tone. What we saw in the flesh now was beyond recognition. It was hard to tell who the dead once were—Thai or foreign, male or female, young or old. Seeing the bodies of little children and thinking of the whole lives they could have had ahead of them saddened us above all.

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

I was not prepared to see or to handle corpses. The only dead people I had seen before were my grandmother and father, but that did not lessen the shock of seeing the rows and rows of dead bodies. There was also no escaping the rotting stench of putrefaction. It was everywhere in the affected areas. We were given masks to cover our mouths and noses, and rubber gloves and boots to protect our

hands and feet. However, they were of the ordinary household variety and would not protect us from very much. Any infections or diseases we could contract from handling the bodies were solely our responsibility to bear.

After tiring ourselves from bagging and moving the bodies, we had some free time before the bus came to bring us back to Phuket. A few volunteers surveyed the area on foot. Cars had been swept atop two-story buildings, rubble was strewn everywhere for at least three hundred meters inland, and giant trees were uprooted. It was said that there were bodies still trapped under the rubble of buildings toppled by the waves, which were believed to have reached thirty meters in height. On the beach, empty Coke cans, hair brushes, and dolls once belonging to little girls lay mixed among seaweed and sand.

Search and Rescue

The next day was no less gut-wrenching or difficult. Ko Racha Yai, a small, idyllic island south of Phuket, was the place where twenty-three-year-old British citizen Charlotte Jones had gone missing on Sunday. No effort had been made to find her—the only person unaccounted for on the island—by the Thai or the British authorities. Because of the suddenness and severity of the disaster, the authorities had their hands full with thousands of people who were missing in Khao Lak, Phi Phi, and the surrounding areas; 141 British citizens alone were reported to have died in Thailand.

Charlotte's mother, who had flown in from the United Kingdom to search for her daughter, eventually reached out to a British news team who, in turn, found a group of volunteers, including myself, at the Phuket Aid Center willing to take on a mission the authorities could not. It took about two hours to reach the island by truck and boat, which at thirteen miles south of Phuket, was mostly inhabited by Muslim farmers and fishermen.

Charlotte had been traveling across Asia with her best friend Becky when she went missing. After spending a month in India, they were planning to travel to Indochina and Australasia next. But the tsunami struck on the day they were due to catch a 10:00 a.m. boat leaving Racha Yai. Having received no warning of impending disaster, the young women were thrown into separate directions and fates. Becky survived, but Charlotte did not.

At Siam Bay on Racha Yai, where Charlotte was last seen, the volunteers were split into two teams. The land volunteers went in pairs to scour the area on foot. Using whatever we could—our senses and objects on the ground like tree branches and sticks—we lifted shrubs and fallen coconut leaves, crossed shallow rivers, and poked and sniffed at mud to see if we could detect the stench of death. We crossed as much as we could of the two-mile island, including the hills that framed the white, sandy bay. The water volunteers went underwater to check if her body was caught in the reefs and searched in a boat for her floating body. We

even had a helicopter circle the area. Jesper, a former Danish search-and-rescue military specialist turned security professional, directed our efforts.

The chances of finding Charlotte alive were slim, but Mrs. Jones wanted proof that her daughter had died. After two days of searching by a team of twenty or so volunteers that yielded nothing, she began to accept that her daughter, a spunky blonde with dreadlocks and piercings, might not be found. Some volunteers speculated that Charlotte was swept out to sea, while others guessed that her body lay on one of the hills overlooking the bay, a gentle hill that we volunteers had searched.

Before she left Thailand, Mrs. Jones held a spiritual ceremony for her daughter that was performed by Buddhist monks. She was later quoted by the BBC to have said, "I had an image in my mind.… Charlotte was walking down a path and waving goodbye."[3]

Following previous days' efforts at Khao Lak and searching for Charlotte at Racha Yai, my last day as a volunteer in Phuket was frustrating and disappointing. By January 3, search and rescue efforts seemed to be disorganized and winding down. The Thai military had issued a warning that all volunteers must refrain from going to the areas affected by the tsunami for fear of exposure to disease and deteriorating conditions, but the information flow was in a crisis of its own. A volunteer coordinator continued to send volunteers in slippers and street clothes to gather information from families and friends of the missing who were on site to inquire about their loved ones. They came despite a rumored outbreak of cholera that had supposedly left one Indonesian volunteer dead.

After six hours of waiting in vain to be called for help, I left the Aid Center for the town of Patong with a few fellow volunteers. Famous for its nightlife and beach, Patong, like Khao Lak, suffered from devastation. The tsunami's great waves had ravaged the first few blocks of stores and restaurants closest to the beach. However, further inland, in the areas not damaged by the waves, it was life as usual. Human and automobile traffic was heavy, and stores continued to hawk everything from clothes to DVDs.

I had very mixed feelings about leaving after our planned five-day stay. I wanted to do more to help, but my life and job in Singapore inevitably called me back.

Reflections on that December

Back in Singapore, I found photos of Charlotte Jones on the Internet. It was strange, if not surreal, to put a face to someone who had been an abstraction. She had been someone's daughter, sister, classmate, and friend. She was last photographed on Christmas Day fire-dancing, and now she was dead. Our search mission was filmed and aired on Sky News in the United Kingdom. Unknown to me, a friend of my sister caught the program, hosted by correspondent Alex

Crawford, on television. Mrs. Jones had called the volunteers "angels" for helping her when no one else would.

It would be impossible not to have been changed by what I had seen and done in those few short days in Thailand. I even have a physical reminder of my time there—a scar on the sole of my foot where I had cut myself on a broken piece of metal pipe when I was walking on the beach after searching for Charlotte's body. At the Vachira Phuket Hospital, where my wound was treated, there were long lists of the dead, missing, and injured displayed on corkboards near the entrance; images that, like Charlotte, stay with me.

During my first couple of nights in Phuket, I had difficulty falling asleep. My first night was especially tough; my imagination was running wild as I recounted the handling of dead bodies. Thais believe in the afterlife, and I had imagined that there were spirits roaming and whispering in my dark hotel room. Even with Cindy in the next bed, I was afraid.

My time spent in Thailand that December taught me about life and also about death. Before going, I had not given much thought to death, but having handled numerous nameless corpses, I became more comfortable with the reality that I, too, will die someday. Seeing the impact of the disaster on so many survivors and bereaved families helped me to understand the transience of life and how little control we have over our own lives. My body could have been any of those lying out in the sun, unrecognizable and unmoving. With the possibility that anything can happen at any time, I determined that I should just live, and try to so without regrets.

I learned that there is nothing to fear about death and that the most important thing in life is love. I learned that any of us can accomplish a great deal—the only question is whether or not we want to. I did not go expecting to handle dead bodies or to search for one, though I should have expected to had I been better prepared. Being in the midst of utter devastation reminded me of the people I loved, my family and friends near and far, and the fact that I needed to spend more time with them in person rather than holed up in the office working. My friends and family told me they were proud of me. Still, I truly think that there are no heroics in what I had, or had not, done. I merely did what I was able to do.

What I found heartwarming and hopeful was the way people came together for a cause. Many of the volunteers were foreigners who had taken time off from their jobs or vacations to help. I had long philosophical discussions with a fifty-something year old Frenchman who was living in Mexico and a former British rock star on vacation in Thailand. I laughed at the antics of a Belgian who was living in Thailand and spoke fluent Thai. I hung out with a pair of French sisters, one who was living in Bangkok and the other who was visiting from France; both came to Phuket to volunteer. There were volunteers from America, Iran, Germany, and Hong Kong, as well as local Thais. We were an eclectic group of people who came together for a cause, for just a fleeting moment in time, never

to see each other again. I had tried to keep in touch with some of them, but over time those connections were lost.

I was fortunate to return to a life of comfort in Singapore, but there remain countless lives lost and destroyed.

On the first anniversary of the tsunami, the Jones family returned to Ko Racha Yai to hold a memorial service for Charlotte. At Siam Bay, shortly after the disaster, her friends erected a wooden post carved with the ancient Egyptian all-seeing eye of Horus. The same symbol was tattooed on Charlotte's lower back and, incidentally, proved instrumental in helping a search team identify her body when it was found floating at sea eight days after the tsunami struck. Her family has said that they will keep going back to Thailand, where they have set up a fund in Charlotte's name, Char's Fund, to help children in southern Thailand attend secondary school.

I have not been back to Phuket, and I do not know if I will. Part of me does not want to relive the memory of what I had seen and done, and the other part of me fears that much has been forgotten. Like the wound on the sole of my foot, the experience has left an indelible mark on me—one perhaps not immediately apparent, but one that will forever be a part of who I am.