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Living through the tsunami: Vulnerability and generosity on a volatile earth

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Abstract

How might geographers respond 'generously' to a disaster on the scale of the Indian Ocean tsunami? Critical geographers and other left intellectuals have chosen to stress the way pre-existing social forces conditioned human vulnerability, and have implied that ordinary people 'here' were implicated in the suffering of others 'there' through their positioning in chains of causality. Critics have also sought to expose the bias, unjustness and inappropriateness of post-tsunami patterns of donation and programs of aid and recovery. A supplement to this mode of critique is offered in the form of a view of disasters and human vulnerability that hinges on the idea of the self as 'radically passive': that is, as inherently receptive to both the stimuli that cause suffering, and to the demands of others who are suffering. All forms of thought – including geography and disaster studies should themselves be seen as 'vulnerable' and responsive to the impact to disasters. The idea that every 'self' bears the trace of past disasters – and past gifts of others – forms the basis of a vision of bodies and communities as always already 'fractured' by disaster – in ways which resist being 'brought to light'. This offers a way of integrating human and physical geographies through a shared acknowledgement of what is unknowable and absent. It is also suggestive that gratitude might be an appropriate response to a sense of indebtedness to others – for who we are, as much as for what we have done.

Keywords: Tsunami; Disaster; Generosity; Vulnerability; Earth processes; Difference

1. Offering solace

'Warming oneself in the sun', Levinas (1969) once noted, is one of those small pleasures that make life dear to us (p. 112). To feel the warmth of the sun is to be exposed to a force other than ourselves, an energy we soak up and are enlivened by. It is through such 'nourishments', Levinas suggests, that we become who we are, even before we *do* things, before one is a self. To warm oneself in the sun is to receive a gift, the overflowing of energy from a 'superabundant star' that expects nothing in return, as another philosopher once put it (Nietzsche, 1961, p. 39). And as Nick Land adds, drawing on similar sources: 'our bodies have sucked upon the sun long before we open our eyes' (1992, p. 30) . This is how we get a life, how we come to a love of life that is something more than simply loving ourselves or wanting to look after our own interests.

Perhaps this is why some of us go to such great lengths to secure a small patch of sunshine in which to sit back and do not a lot. Which is precisely what so many people were doing on the shores of the Indian Ocean around Christmas 2004 when the great waves generated by the Sumatra–Andaman earthquake rolled in.

They had found their place in the sun. Or rather, as is so often the case for those of us from cooler latitudes, they had claimed a place in someone else's sun. For while some reclined, others had work to do: the work of hosting, of making their visitors feel comfortable, relaxed, replete. As Bataille (1988) proposes, it is not only plentiful sunshine – 'the flux and the fleeting play of light' – which makes for a pleasant stay, it is also a warm welcome – 'the passage of warmth or light from one being to another' (p. 94). Warmth, given and taken in pleasant and some not-so-pleasant ways,

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as we know. The industry that organises this movement of pleasure-seeking bodies and the care they receive along the way is now said to be the most lucrative on the planet. Like other sectors of a globalised economy, international tourism is premised on a set of carefully modulated transactions, hard currency in exchange for soft treatment. It's an economy that operates, at least according to its own premises, in an orderly, symmetrical, and mutually beneficial way – a conditioned and careful hospitality.

Shaky video images narrated in quivering voices record the moment on the morning of December 26 when this economy burst apart. The fabric of shared assumptions about what could be offered and what could be requested, where and when it should be supplied, and what its value should be unravelled abruptly. What was expected of a host and what was expected of a guest ceased to be apparent. And yet, in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, perhaps even in its midst, as one set of relationships disintegrated, there were glimpses of another kind of being-with-others. A kind of 'throwntogetherness' amongst all the tearing apart, to borrow a term from Massey (2005, chapter 13).

Many tourists, if they were lucky enough to be unscathed, joined the emergency relief effort. They may not have known exactly what to do, or even dressed appropriately while they were trying to do it, but they held out helping hands (Rigg et al., 2005). Some volunteered at hospitals and in morgues. Others handed over money, clothes and medicines at the hotels where they were staying (The Hindu, 2005). Or took up collections on return home, like the British tourist in Sri Lanka, carried several miles inland by surging waters, who set about fundraising for the people of the village where he finally came to ground (The Observer, 2005).

At the same time, people in the affected regions reached out to each other, across many kinds of barriers. Journalist Varma (2005), who travelled through the state of Tamil Nadu in the days and weeks following the tsunami, posted a story on his weblog about a wedding in the Muslim village of Parangipettai, a ceremony which was postponed after the waves struck nearby Hindu villages. Mobilising under the Jamaat – their local organisation, villagers set out to help their neighbours.

> They took all the veg biryani that had been prepared for the wedding feast, and went and fed it to the affected people. From that day until the day we met them, a week after the tsunami, they fed breakfast and lunch to the affected people, making either lemon rice or veg biryani. They mobilised their funds superbly, and were well networked through mobile phones. If any village ran short of food, one phone call was all it would take to bring a volunteer rushing over with more food… Interestingly, even after the government set up its own operation, a few days late, the local people still requested the Jamaat to keep feeding them, and the Jamaat agreed (unpag).

In Malaysia, Nah and Bunnell (2005) report, news of the devastation across the strait triggered a new rapport in the previously fraught relationship between Malaysian nationals and displaced people from Aceh province. Many Malaysians approached Acehnese refugees to offer consolation over the tsunami, and to discuss their more general predicament, while local Islamic groups worked with refugee community leaders to organise disaster relief. More generally, evidence and anecdote suggests that throughout the afflicted region, before organised relief arrived and sometimes well after the official relief effort was underway, it was neighbours and untrained local volunteers who provided vital assistance. As an Indian respondent reported in a review of the effectiveness of aid directly after the tsunami "All kinds of cooked food reached us and it was in excess", (cited in Thomas and Ramalingam, 2005, p. 46).

Then there were the donations from the rest of the world, which UN emergency co-ordinators confirm were unprecedented in scale. Enough money was pledged by members of the public and by governments to cover the relief effort. More than enough, in some cases. Without even launching an appeal, the medical aid organization *Medecins Sans Frontieres* received so much money in the days following the tsunami that it had to stop accepting donations. When donors were asked if their offerings could be diverted to other humanitarian crises, over 99% agreed. From a total of around $110 million received, this enabled some $85 million to go to other sites of need, including Niger, Darfur and the Kashmir earthquake (Batha, 2005).

But perhaps the most remarkable stories are those of the hospitality extended by local people to their seasonal visitors. Returning travellers reported that amidst the collapse of the tourist infrastructure they were well looked after, or were treated even better than paying guests (BBC News, 2005). Many had been driven great distances by local people so they could reach airports to make their way home. And there were stories of locals who helped their visitors in the search to locate families and friends, even before they sought out their own loved ones. Warmth and light, it might be said, no longer traded but given freely between bodies.

As time passes and the relief and recovery effort comes under increasing scrutiny these earlier stories seem to belong to a more innocent age. But are they any less precious for that? My interest here is in the question of how to respond – as a social scientist – to the generosity elicited by the tsunami. How to respond in a way that does some sort of justice to these gifts and to the suffering which sparked them, in a way that respects 'the disastrousness of disaster' and the generosity of the gift (see Guyer, 2006, p. 90). If this calls, in the current context, for a 'geography of generosity' – an approach we might assume involves tracking, mapping and analysing causal chains of event and response, I like to think it also invites something else. Something we might simply call a 'generous geography'.

Every discipline, I suspect, has an element of responsiveness, a desire to answer calls or address needs, nestled some-