

What the World Needs Is a Tsunami of Conscience

Contributed by Cristovam Buarque
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I arrived at the Colombo airport at two in the morning on Sri Lankan Independence Day. At ten a.m. I had a meeting with the Vice-Minister of Foreign Relations and began by apologizing for spoiling his holiday. He responded that since the 26th of December there has been no Saturdays, Sundays, or holidays in the country.

That was my first earthquake of conscience: a country mobilized to recover from a tragedy that, in a few minutes, left 32 thousand people dead and a thousand children as orphans, destroyed 80 thousand houses, 156 schools, and 68 hospitals. All that on a small island with few inhabitants.

The discovery of international and family solidarity was a shock. Perhaps because it was the Christmas season, the West experienced a sense of brotherhood with the victims. The American soldiers, hated for their arrogant interventionism and excessive power, were suddenly transformed into charitable missionaries of peace.

They stopped dropping bombs and began distributing water. And they were recognized for this. But there was, above all, a sense of solidarity in Asian families who made sure, on the day following the tragedy, that almost all the thousand orphans were relocated in new homes, placed in the house of some relative. All the schools are already in the recovery phase; the houses are being rebuilt.

But the sadness is palpable. The Brazilian Ambassador in New Delhi, José Vicente Pimentel, who represents us in India and Sri Lanka, once told me that he had never seen such a cheerful people. But the Sri Lankan people are now saddened.

This can be seen in the street, in the hotel, in the ministries. I perceived it on a visit to the great writer Arthur Clarke, who, out of all the places in the world where he could live, chose Colombo.

Conversing with him, in his simple house full of portraits of the Earth seen from space, I felt optimistic. But upon speaking with his assistant, I learned that he too was sad; he had lost his happiness.

Instead of happiness, the people feel afraid. The tsunami succeeded in making the fisherman fear the sea. Frightened, they stay at home, scared of what they are unable to understand.

To see and feel the full range of this tragedy, it is necessary to leave Colombo. A helicopter carried me to the eastern littoral, which neighbors India in the extreme south of the island. Only ten minutes into the hour-long trip, we began to see the destruction.

And it was then that we had the second shock of conscience: the dimension of the event. All along the trajectory, we flew over the signs left by the movements of the sea on that Sunday morning, the day after Christmas. Other natural disasters simply cannot compare with the dimensions of the 2004 Christmas tsunami.

When I was a child, I saw my house suffer several floods provoked by the River Capiberibe. We stayed in the street watching the water rise, waiting for it to stop. We placed clothing and books on top of the tallest furniture, carrying other things to the second floor of the neighboring house until the water entered our home; then we sought shelter with a relative or friend.

I lived in Honduras when Hurricane Fifi passed; the neighbors woke us at dawn, directing us to leave the house. We waited on the corner, observing the tongue of water from the miniscule River Comayagua, where bare-breasted women usually washed clothes, acquire the strength of a giant with a deafening noise that rocked the structure of the next bridge.

We saw the river carry off part of the street, leaving in its place a hole that was there for months, impeding my Volkswagen from reaching the garage. I was there a few years later and saw only half of the house where I had lived, since the front part had been carried away by the river during Hurricane Mitch.

I was in Managua a little after the 1972 earthquake, when only the Hotel Intercontinental and the Central Bank remained standing. But nothing compares, in extent and surprise, to the 2004 Christmas tsunami.

Arthur Clarke showed me a NASA simulation of the planet seen from space, indicating the movement of the sea beginning at the exact point of the earthquake and ending at the various coasts hit by the water.

The Earth seen from space, with the sea advancing, provoked a tsunami of conscience: the discovery of how small we are when confronted by the force of nature.

For centuries humans arrogantly considered themselves the owners of the Planet Earth and a simple movement of its rocks destroyed a part of our population in diverse countries of the world.

Anyone speaking with those who lived through the event in Sri Lanka will immediately experience a tsunami of conscience over its unexpectedness.

When I asked people how they had found out what had happened, everyone mentioned how incredulously the relative or friend had given the news.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa told me that he learned of the tsunami from his driver. A woman, whose house fell to pieces and whose brother disappeared, told me that she felt a sudden blow to her back and then found herself hanging from a tree. Soon afterwards there was no house, no brother.

The President of the Republic, who was in Holland, learned of the disaster while watching television. A UNICEF employee found out from her son living in Canada.

All of them were taken by surprise, and at first no one gave the matter the importance it deserved. And we—who believe that we know everything, who think everything can be foreseen, who are preparing to destroy any asteroid that comes in our direction— cannot predict where the next seismic shock will strike.

At the same time, it shakes our conscience to know that science will evolve to predict such occurrences, but at a cost so high that only the rich populations will be forewarned. Even so, it will be impossible to do anything to avoid the impending tragedy. Except for the animals.

One of the strongest shocks of conscience was the knowledge that not a single animal cadaver was left behind because the animals fled before the waves arrived. No one can explain the fact but everyone confirms it. Except for some domestic animals that had already lost their instinct, the dogs fled; the elephants left.

The Brazilian consul in Colombo, Jennifer Moragoda, said that a friend of hers went every morning to a small lake beside her house to throw canary-seed to the birds.

On Sunday, December 26, 2004, not a single bird was waiting for her there. She noticed the difference but deduced nothing. Some shackled elephants broke their chains and took off running; others, engaged in carrying tourists, fled their habitual roads, frightening their passengers but saving their lives.

The tsunami makes us question if there is more intelligence in the mind creating equipment to predict earthquakes or in the instinct independently informing animals of the tragedy arriving from afar.

The role that mere chance plays in these matters is as impressive as their unexpectedness. While flying over the littoral, one is surprised that, among the devastation and emptiness of destroyed houses, one or two homes remain untouched.

No one can explain how someone survived while conversing with someone who disappeared. Or the luck of someone who woke up planning to go to the beach, the precise spot of the greatest waves, and at the last moment—whether with or without a motive—decided to stay home and, turning on the television, discovered him or herself to be a survivor.

The sense of powerlessness is another shock to the conscience. We can do almost nothing to avoid tragedies. They happen all around us without asking our permission.

What is even more surprising is the knowledge that this unexpected event came out of beauty.

Anyone who was born in the Brazilian Northeast has every right to believe its beaches are the most beautiful ones in the world; but anyone looking at the horizon from any part of Sri Lanka recognizes that another sea can be equally, but never more, beautiful.

Going to Tangalle, in the extreme south, at times we saw an ocean that was so clear and limpid that the boats appeared suspended in the air. One can see the ocean floor. And that beauty suddenly became deadly.

I saw the marks of the height reached by the waves on the Matara beaches: halfway up the trunk of a tall palm tree, the top of a house 300 kilometers from the sea.

And it is frightening to know that that beauty committed the violence of receding some kilometers out to sea, attracting people surprised by the view of the uncovered ocean floor, only to immediately return as a giant wave.

In spite of this, I heard from the Vice-Minister of Foreign Relations, Wiswa Warnapala, that a Buddhist book tells of a tsunami that occurred two thousand years ago as punishment for a king's crime.

The king's brother fell in love with his sister-in-law, the queen, and used a monk to carry her a love note. The note fell at the king's feet; he thought that the monk had been the author and condemned him to a common punishment of the epoch: boiling in oil.

When this had happened, the sea rose up and destroyed the kingdom. Before returning to its usual level, it demanded that the king sacrifice his own daughter, sending her out to sea on a boat. She survived and became the queen. The king and his elephant were swallowed up by a sinkhole caused by the tsunami.

That story, told in a wall painting of a Buddhist temple in Colombo, is a warning for today. With our industrial voracity, we are cooking the planet, superheating it. The result is perfectly foreseeable: a much more catastrophic tsunami.

Everyone knows that we are headed for the melting of the polar ice cap, and that this will cause general flooding in the coastal cities and upset the climate, which will disrupt agriculture and the urban systems. We are sad and shocked about the effects of a tsunami, while at the same time with our own hands we are creating another, much worse one.

After two thousand people were killed on the 11th of September, the world changed to protect itself from terrorists; when, on the 26th of December, 200 thousand persons died, the world felt united. But none of us is doing anything to impede the greatest of all tragedies: the loss of the ecological balance.

What is lacking is a tsunami of conscience to awaken us to the risks caused by human stupidity, which sees production growth as a sign of development although it is destroying the planet.

Perhaps all this will come to pass simply because we are losing that animal capacity to even foresee the outcome of what we are doing.

Or perhaps we believe ourselves capable of foresight, but, due to the gluttony of consumption, we continue our ways, like a sick person who is dying from overeating.

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