The South East Asian tsunami is an unusual disaster. Krakatau, in 1883, was the last time that a tsunami was this devastating, and it was caused by a volcanic eruption, not an earthquake. Since then there have been at least a dozen earthquakes or floods with over 100,000 deaths, but the modern world has never seen a natural disaster remotely like that of Dec. 26, 2004. While previously even the largest quakes and floods have been in a single country, this is international, with casualties occurring in twelve countries spread around the Indian Ocean. The grief has penetrated beyond the disaster zone, to Europe for instance, which lost thousands of vacationers, and around the world wherever there are immigrant Asian communities – and there are many who have fled the long-standing ethnic and religious violence which divides Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Indonesia, the three nations hardest hit. Viewed from the air shortly after the event, the flattened towns of North West Sumatra, with every inhabitant and all but one of the dogs, was a sight that made a grown man cry. There's a lot of footage on the Web of debris and pointing to the protruding arm of a corpse, all the while talking live with the newscaster in the Boston studio. Untill recently, this kind of satellite communication would have been in a small window on the screen, and the video jerky. While the news media probed, gathered, analyzed and interpreted, a different purpose and structure of information emerged on the collaborative blog ChiensSansFrontieres. Snip: Said he's been burying people all day. Just drag them off the beach and digging holes with his hands. Go... This is grassroots media, raw, spontaneous, and brought together in the common tongue of English. Web sites and blogs sprang up, their practical focus on immediate human need, to help locate missing persons and organize support and relief. Spurred by the immediacy and engagement of the new media, donations grew at a record rate, shaming governments into upping their outsourced pledged.

So by its nature, and in the way that it was experienced and understood, and in the reactions to it, the South East Asian tsunami was a significantly novel disaster, its cultural impact beyond simplistic measures of relative importance such as the number killed or financial damage. This is not to downgrade the trauma, loss and suffering of its victims, nor to belittle the efforts of donors and volunteers; it is a recognition that on top of all that is a wider resonance, and the potential for a great change in the world. New meanings, new priorities and politics, as with 9/11. But the issue is not friction between peoples, it’s between people and the planet. Set against the reality of climate change, the tsunami brings environmental fatality and dilemma into focus. There is nothing man-made about the disaster; but there is no doubt that the damage has been exacerbated by overdevelopment in many of the most affected areas, and by the flimsiness of so many buildings. On parts of the Indian coast, building regulations prohibit permanent structures within a certain distance of the shore, to preserve a somewhat natural coastline, but that hasn’t stopped people living there, and being killed, in shanties. On the Sri Lankan coast, a man whose home was destroyed on December 26th spoke of how it had been built progressively further inland twice before, as each previous location was overcame by encroaching waters. The tsunami disaster is a warning to the rest of the world on the effects of climate change: rising seas, massive catastrophe. The situation faced in the poor Indian Ocean countries is no different in kind than the one faced in the wealthy West: where do you make a stand; where can you afford to build substantial buildings to resist floods, and walls and dykes to hold back rising sea levels; where do you leave people to their own devices; and where do you let nature take its course? The rich have more options. Thinking beyond national boundaries, there is an alternative policy, which is to address climate change head-on by taming energy-extravagant consumerism. It’s the only way to achieve the almost immediate 60 percent worldwide reduction in emissions that is required to stabilize greenhouse gas levels. Given the half-hearted efforts of an international community dominated by the gas-guzzling US, typified by spotty implementation of the Kyoto Protocol, the prospects aren’t good. As US vice-president Dick Cheney said of his energy plan in 2001, to the despair of environmentalists, “Conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy”. While it’s possible to be optimistic about relief efforts in South East Asia, rebuilding will take decades, and doing it to a standard that will withstand future damage from rising high tides and tsunamis is impossible in poor, polarized countries. The Armenian city of Spitak was destroyed by an earthquake in 1988; shortly after towns are rebuilt with proper infrastructure in Asia suffered de-industrialization and appalling social and economic difficulties. Shit happens; they are still rehousing earthquake survivors. Just suppose, against all odds, that the civil wars cease, that international debts are cancelled and pledges fulfilled, that aid money doesn’t vanish into corrupt pockets, that the devastated coastal towns are rebuilt with proper infrastructure and solid buildings, that the millions of homeless are rehoused, and homes are found for tens of thousands of orphans. How long will all that take to achieve? Not before another disaster elsewhere comes along and steals the public’s heart and purse. Realistically, aid is needed now for the immediate trauma in South East Asia. Later, when the tsunami has slipped from the media and the funding drops off, established NGOs, whether
they are overarching corporate concerns like The Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria or small outfits such as FreePlay Foundation (supported by Building Letters), will soldier on. Strategic planning for humanitarian aid involves positioning choices within a time-frame to deal with 1: sudden catastrophe, 2: rebuilding, 3: chronic conditions, and 4: prevention. For instance, The Global Fund has diverted funds originally committed to fighting disease (choice 3) in countries hit by the tsunami, towards immediate relief (choice 1). Under the threat of ecological meltdown, there is an urgent need to reduce future humanitarian disaster by prevention (choice 4), with a political push against climate change. An environmental movement not just to preserve the wilderness from development, but to preserve a habitable planet.

Preventing runaway climate change requires draconian legislation (on a par with recent curtailments of civil liberties) that will drastically alter the way we live, and might require a drop in economic output and individual incomes, with taxes, regulations and subsidies designed to prevent unnecessary travel, while promoting local products and in-country holidays.

The trend in holidays is towards far-flung destinations, which is why there were so many Scandinavian tourists in the disaster area. Plane travel is booming, with the world’s airlines carrying a record 1.8 billion passengers in 2004. Nonetheless, they lost £3bn doing so. But there’s too much momentum, too many subsidies and vested interests designed to prevent unnecessary travel, while promoting local products and in-country holidays.

The final chapter is titled "The World as Polder", praising the Dutch achievement and holding it up as an example. One-fifth of the land mass of the Netherlands is below sea level – reclaimed lands called "polders", the result of smart engineering and solidarity. Jonathon Porritt, chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, sees a similar attitude in the extraordinary response of the rich world to those countries shattered by the South East Asian tsunami "... precisely the kind of empathy and engagement on which our ability to avoid ecological collapse will surely depend".

That’s inspirational, but wishful thinking. There are many who will make an occasional contribution, and only ever a few who are prepared to make a major commitment. Thank goodness for them all, but it’s not enough. Individual initiatives, or free market strategies such as carbon taxes, won’t slow climate change. Fuel rationing will.

Unless being somehow physically involved, a disaster doesn’t mean that much, I guess. Of course I will be touched and shocked by news reports, images and stories. But still, the distance doesn’t feel very far away. It’s an overwhelming impression. The pure scale of it, its intensity, its per person emissions are lower than for smaller planes. However, any saving will be completely outweighed by added emissions from the overall increase in air traffic. In his recent book "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive", Jared Diamond offers some explanations for collapses and near-collapses: a failure to anticipate future consequences; an inability to read trends or see beyond creeping normalcy, with things getting a little bit worse all the time but no one really noticing: the disproportionate power of detached elites, particularly when they condone or promote bad behavior on the part of those who manage or use natural resources; the lack of a sense of intergenerational justice towards future generations; and, when substantial change is required to a society’s core values, the ease of a dodgy denial. The final chapter is titled "The World as Polder", praising the Dutch achievement and holding it up as an example. One-fifth of the land mass of the Netherlands is below sea level – reclaimed lands called "polders", the result of smart engineering and solidarity. Jonathon Porritt, chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, sees a similar attitude in the extraordinary response of the rich world to those countries shattered by the South East Asian tsunami "... precisely the kind of empathy and engagement on which our ability to avoid ecological collapse will surely depend".

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