Views from the Rock

The schoolchildren who died in Japan's tsunami

CANNON SHOTS
R.J. MARX

When schools or public institutions put together a safety manual, most of the time — usually all the time — they remain on the shelf. That's fine, as long as the shelf is still standing when the Big One hits.

When an earthquake struck Japan on March 11, 2011, the staff and students of Okawa Elementary School should have been prepared. The school, on the Japanese Pacific Coast about 200 miles north of Tokyo, followed a manual that should have told students and staff what to do. The plan should have told them to evacuate to neighboring high ground, not to a field standing at sea level.

The event was one of many catastrophic moments in a day that saw homes and cities destroyed, cars swept into the sea and the catastrophic failure of the nuclear power plant in Fukushima. Roughly 18,500 people perished in the tsunami, but only 75 children died while at school. Seventy-four of them died at Okawa Elementary School.

"Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan's Disaster Zone," focuses on the lives of those who survived and those who did not.

Author Richard Lloyd Parry traces the path of parents as they painstaking dig through remains, day after day for months and sometimes even years searching for any remnant of their child. The author follows a long and tangled web of bureaucracy designed to deflect public responsibility. And it considers the human toll in a deeply spiritual land where ghosts inhabit the landscape as surely as the living.

'O-tsunami'

The shaking began at 2:46 p.m.

In Tokyo, where the author lived, the vibrations lasted for six minutes. "The chinking of the blinds, the buzzing of the glass, and the deep rocking motion generated an atmosphere of dreamlike unreality," Parry writes.

In Okawa, the "shaking was so strong I couldn't stand up," one mother recalled. "Even outside, crouching down, we were almost all falling over."

Electric lines swayed — "It was as if the whole world was collapsing."

Then came the tsunami warnings. While power was out, trucks drove throughout the region blasting tsunami alerts. An "O-tsunami," translated as "super tsunami," was headed toward Onagawa, a fishing port to the south.

The concrete elementary school was immediately in front of a 700-foot hill. Two hundred people, locals and children, sheltered in the school, cut off and awaiting rescue.

For most, rescue never came.

Two days later, the school was "cocooned in a spiky, angular mesh of interlocking fragments, large and small" — tree trunks, the joists of houses, boats, beds, bicycles, sheds and refrigerators.

Buildings nearby "had ceased to exist."

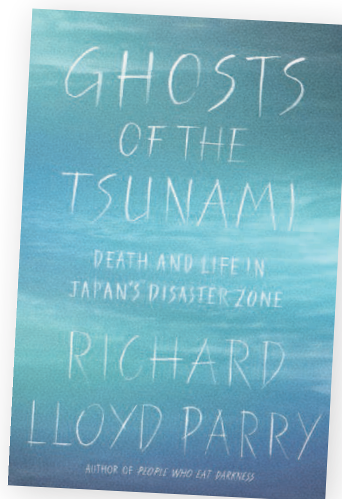
"Everything had disappeared," recalled a survivor. "It was as if an atomic bomb had fallen."

At the school, it was a scene of tragedy. The road and the houses were "washed from the earth."

"What stays in my memory," a local resident told Parry, "is pine trees and the legs and arms of children sticking out from under the mud and the rubbish."

Of the elementary school's 108 children, 78 were there at the moment of the tsunami. Seventy-four of those died; 10 of 11 teachers perished.

"Ghosts of the Tsunami" traces the devastation inflicted by the tsunami — its human toll foremost — the search for survivors and painstaking and thankless task of identifying victims.



FARRAR STRAUSS GIROUX

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Richard Lloyd Parry, author of "Ghosts of the Tsunami."

"No one was just looking for his own friends or grandchildren," wrote a survivor. "We were pulling everyone out, whoever they were. Every man was weeping as he worked."

The question survivors of the family wondered: What had been going on at the school in the period between the earthquake and the wave? Why didn't students and staff run to the hill nearby? Why did they have to die?

Court case

In a country where such lawsuits are uncommon, 19 families brought their case to the Sendai District Court. In an 87-page final judgment, the court surveyed in detail the actions taken by the teachers and found no fault in their behavior immediately after the quake. But when tsunami warnings blared, "the teachers could have foreseen the coming of a huge tsunami to Okawa Elementary School," the court wrote.

During the subsequent trial, inadequacies in the school's evacuation plan were uncovered.

The place of evacuation chosen was inappropriate and administrators unprepared. Despite the screams of older children who knew the risks of the tsunami, teachers kept children on flat land rather than releasing them to a nearby unobstructed hill. Only those few children who fled to higher ground survived. Those who didn't were slaughtered in the wave.

"Teachers at the school were psychologically unable to accept that they were facing imminent danger," the court found.

It concluded that the deaths arose because the evacuation of the playground was delayed. Children and teachers eventually fled toward the tsunami, not away from it.

The Okawa parents won a $13.4 million settlement. It was a gratifying moment for the families but a hollow victory.

"All their children were still dead," writes Parry.

Facing disaster

If Japan is "the safest place you could hope to be" after an earthquake, according to Parry, what could happen here?

Fifty-four percent of those who perished as a result of the Japanese tsunami of 2011 were age 65 and older, "and the older you were, the worse your chances," Parry writes.

How can we take safety measures that address the needs of children in classrooms, but the elderly, the physically challenged and the thousands of coastal visitors?

"Ghosts of the Tsunami" is an important read for those of us considering not only the need for tsunami protections, but to meet the human — psychic and spiritual — needs in a disaster's aftermath.

"Over the months, I'd become accustomed to hearing the stories of survivors," relates Taio Kaneta, a Buddhist priest, in the book's concluding pages. "But all of a sudden, I found myself listening to the voices of the dead."

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Okawa Elementary School, one year after the March 11 tsunami. Officials preserved the shell of the school in 2017 as a remembrance.

EVE MARX/FOR CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Basil gets a fresh look thanks to Trish Dickerson.

Basil gets a haircut

VIEW FROM THE PORCH
EVE MARX

Our old dog, Basil, who is not our oldest dog (that would be Rinaldo), was in desperate need of professional grooming. I'd been doing him myself (bad idea) for awhile, as he was too much of a basket case for the first groomer I tried when we moved here. A few years ago we relocated from the east coast where Basil was well attended to by Lynda, who worked at a boutique grooming shop in Bedford Hills, New York, called Pawfection.

Lynda was savvy to all of Basil's quirks, quirks he has because he was born crippled. His two front legs are hopelessly twisted, and his left foot is almost on backwards.

He's about 13 years old now and he can handle short walks; he can do stairs, but he doesn't like them. The main thing is he's in some degree of pain at all times, which makes grooming him a nightmare. He can tolerate clipper work only on his torso, which means the rest of him has to be laboriously hand-scissored. I don't hold it against his first groomer on the coast at all for subtly rejecting him as a client. She and I remain good friends and I know she admires Basil's brave attitude, as well as my devotion.

So imagine my joy discovering The Sandy Dog, a mobile groomer out of Seaside. Trish is professionally trained to groom dogs and worked for a national pet services corporation before going out on her own last year.

Because Basil is nervous, I asked permission to stay with him while Trish did her work. Basil takes forever to groom, so we had plenty of time to gab while she combed him out, de-matted the areas he's reluctant for me to touch, bathing him, blow drying him, applying the clippers for a one-half-inch "'puppy cut." I was amazed she was able to get him completely finished, deftly hand scissoring his feet and twisted legs, making his ears and face at my request look, as much as possible, like a teddy bear.

"My husband's nickname for him is 'Cubby,'" I said.

Basil is named for my father, who by day was a lawyer, but was also a partner in a record company. He was a composer who played piano; he also owned a couple of movie theaters, but that's another story. The dog Basil is quite musical. He's a jazz fan who howls enthusiastically along to my husband's saxophone. His favorite song is "Sugar" by Stanley Turrentine.

Basil's been groomed by The Sandy Dog twice, and I'm optimistic the day is coming when Trish will pull up with her trailer and I can just bring Basil out. He trusts her more each time. I'm aware even when they're not born crippled, Lhasa Apso's are not the easiest grooming clients. They're small but they can be snippy. Basil has the face of an angel, but let's face it, a bite is a bite.

The Sandy Dog (503-440-9279) is owned and operated by Trish Dickerson, a Seaside native. Trish is fun to talk to and she's a really good groomer. She loves dogs and her work and she is very patient. And she comes to your house. Seriously, what could be better?

York's saga an underreported chapter of Lewis & Clark story

GUEST COLUMN
ERICK BENGEL

York is not a household name, except perhaps to Pacific Northwest history buffs.

He was the black slave who accompanied his master, William Clark, on the 28-month trek to explore the Louisiana Territory and find a direct water route across the American landmass.

We know of him in fragments, through the writings of Clark and others, but we have nothing of York's first-person account. (He, like several Corps of Discovery members, was illiterate.) What did the Lewis and Clark Expedition look like to him? We cannot know for sure, but we can put forth an educated guess.

That's the focus of a one-man show written and performed by Gideon For-mukwai, a local author and storyteller originally from Cameroon, a French-speaking country in Central Africa. For-mukwai recently premiered his dramatized interpretation of the overland journey — as seen through York's eyes — at Manzanita's Hoffman Center for the Arts.

By telling York's underreported story, what he calls a "well-kept American secret," For-mukwai hopes the show will inspire viewers to spotlight the "unsung heroes" in our midst — the people whose work, done diligently and with quiet dignity, makes our society possible, but whose contributions are often ignored.

York is a fascinating figure, and not just because he was the only African-American on the trip. He was allowed to hunt with a firearm and savor a certain measure of freedom across the Continental Divide and back, even while technically enslaved. He was a man at the center of sweeping historical events, yet denied his due glory and largely consigned to a footnote. (In this, of course, York is far from unique.)

We know York had a wife and was newly married when he set off with Lewis and Clark. We know he helped the expedition engage peacefully with native tribes. When the time came to decide whether the Corps would winter on the Columbia River's north or south side, York's opinion was noted (along with that of their Shoshone guide, Sacajawea).

We also know that, when the troop returned from the Columbia-Pacific, York was not given the honors, acreage and double pay awarded to his Corps comrades. Instead, he remained Clark's property, his name — a one-word identifier like that of "a dog or a pony" — ranked near the bottom of the team members, For-mukwai said.

Clark later told the writer Washington Irving (in a disputed account) that he eventually freed York about a decade after they returned. York allegedly went into business for himself, failed at it, then tried to reunite with Clark before dying of cholera. There is no evidence that he ever found his wife.

Between the lines of this secondhand sketch, a private drama is playing out in the soul of someone whose inner character is lost to us. So we are left with questions. What did pride, self-respect and heroism mean to York, who could only experience them in a state of bondage?

The data is sparse; we are forced to read into the narrative gaps. But we can certainly surmise what York felt.

When his master did not free him after the expedition, York apparently became self-destructive. Clark would allow York to leave for a few days, and the slave would be gone much longer, For-mukwai said. Clark wrote to his brother that he punished York for his behavior.

The York who came home is "not the same York who went on the expedition," For-mukwai observed. Some scholars believe that, after York spent more than two years feeling liberated, the idea of remaining subjugated was simply intolerable.

The history of westward expansion is shot through with casual inhumanity, darkening even the celebrated Lewis and Clark story. Between the adventurous highlights — in the undocumented silence where we can infer the screams — lies pain unvoiced and persecution unatoned.

For-mukwai said we should find a way to acknowledge what each of us brings to the world, including and especially the people low in the social strata. For though institutional slavery is over, there are modern-day Yorks, living somewhere between freedom and captivity, waiting for their stories to be told.

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