

The webinar began with a short clip from Channel 4 presenter [Jon Snow's Tsunami Diary](#), which was filmed while he was reporting on the aftermath of the tsunami in Tohoku in 2011. Snow then took up the story by describing the difficulties he and his team had encountered in reaching Japan. Most flights were cancelled, and they were just able to get the last international flight into Osaka, via Shanghai, before international travel was halted. There were no internal flights, and they managed to take the last bullet train going North to Tokyo before shinkansen services were cancelled, hauling piles of equipment onto the train during its brief stay on the platform, before driving to Fukushima from Tokyo. He described that while he had experienced various earthquakes around the world before, he had never seen anything like this, which was on a scale and with a power that was beyond anything he'd ever known.

Snow said that in Tokyo itself, there was still a strange sense of normality as people were still going about their lives as usual. They then drove North, and after a few hours' drive Snow gave his first report from the middle of the road in the darkness of night (due to the time difference), lit by a street lamp, trying to tell people back in Britain, and across the world, what exactly had happened, and how it felt, even though they had no real way of calculating how terrible the carnage had been. He pointed out that even now, the figures are still extraordinarily and understandably inexact, though in excess of 15,000 people have been confirmed dead and a further 3,000 or 4,000 people remain missing.

Snow described a devastating visit to a school. While many children had died in and around the school, others had been swept away to die somewhere else, and all around there were grieving parents looking for children. He explained how he felt a sense of disconnect and breakage, and was overcome by a feeling that the disaster was something truly mammoth, as he had no yardstick against which to measure it or judge the extent of the destruction. He went on to say that in a strange way, one of the ways in which he has tried to cope with it to some extent has been by desperately trying to forget it. He said that while Japan is unforgettable and wonderful, and the people were singular in the extent to which they fought to remedy what was absolutely impossible to remedy, and to rescue what was absolutely impossible to rescue, with great acts of heroism, ultimately the disaster was on such a scale, and with such a shattering, immense power, that he didn't have time even to be frightened. There was no way of rationalising what was going on, and people's normal sensitivities were thrown out of the window.

Snow noted also how the West was obsessed with the danger of nuclear leakage from Fukushima, and that it was in order to cover that issue that the news channel had sent them out to Japan in the first place. However, once they had arrived, the nuclear problem seemed less important than the devastating consequences of the tsunami. Snow acknowledged a lack of knowledge or expertise on the issue, saying that his own experiences were centred around simply being a human being forced to be within the clutches of the disaster and managing, somehow, to report upon it. With this, he handed over to the second speaker, The Times' Asia Editor Richard Lloyd Parry, with thanks and a commendation of his book, [*Ghosts of the Tsunami*](#).

Lloyd Parry began by explaining how vividly he remembers the moment the earthquake struck. Though there are frequent small earthquakes in Japan, and he had become used to them after 16 years of living in Tokyo, it was immediately clear that the earthquake on 11th March was out of the ordinary and was the worst he or anyone he knew had experienced. Tokyo, where he was, in fact was broadly fine. Though millions of people in the city were inconvenienced by the disruption to public transport, only a handful of people were killed or injured. Even in a ceramics shop next to his office, he recalled, not a single plate had been broken. On the television, however, pictures began coming in from Northeast Japan, and it became clear that the epicentre of this earthquake was up there, not in Tokyo. All the Japanese TV stations and mainstream newspapers have a helicopter for exactly these circumstances, and they began to broadcast pictures of the tsunami live. Lloyd Parry described watching the images live, with the wave seeming almost like a brown monster coming in over the land, deep inland, eating the beach, eating the fields, eating roads, cars, houses, and people. He said that he would never forget seeing the city of Kesennuma, where large ocean-going ships were smashed against the harbour, carried on into the town, and shed burning fuel everywhere. He compared the experience to watching a science fiction film, and being struck by the realisation that this was a historic natural disaster, the kind of thing that happens once in 100 years or more. However, Lloyd Parry went on, he also realised that he had seen such scenes before. He had reported on the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, when a similar-sized earthquake set up a tsunami that affected 13

countries, and killed roughly a quarter of a million people. Having spent two weeks in Indonesia reporting on the terrible destruction there, he had come away with the impression that this was a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon – yet just 7 years later it had happened again.

With a small group of colleagues, Lloyd Parry drove up to the affected area the day after the earthquake, a normally 4-hour journey taking 24 hours with the expressways closed, and spent two weeks travelling up and down the coast, mainly in Miyagi Prefecture. They first reached the small airport south of the city of Sendai, and among all the other rubble there was a light plane in the branches of a tree, having been lifted up and deposited there by the water. That was just one of a number of bizarre and unimaginable juxtapositions they saw. Whole towns and villages had been completely washed away. Lloyd Parry said that the town of Shizugawa, in the area of Minamisanriku, was the most complete destruction he saw. As they arrived, the town and its individual buildings appeared on the satnav, yet on the ground there was nothing there; beside a little tarmac on the road; everything else had been washed away. This was the point at which he realised that a tsunami really is a singular force of destruction, perhaps less destructive only than an asteroid strike of the kind that wiped out the dinosaurs, or a nuclear bomb. More than 18,000 people died, and many are still missing, so he recognised right away that this really was a historic event at the extremes of human experience.

Lloyd Parry described how in addition to feeling horror, he felt a strange detachment from the events. He described how anyone who works in places of mass suffering – whether journalists, medical workers, aid workers, or priests – has eventually to acquire the knack of detachment, and not solely for natural disasters, but also acts of terrorism, for example, this detachment is a professional necessity. Such people cannot do their jobs if they are crushed by the spectacle of death and suffering. He said that the trick is somehow to preserve compassion and empathy, but without bearing the individual tragedies encountered as one's own. Over the years, Lloyd Parry went on, he had mastered this technique. Early in his career as a young correspondent, he had found it hard covering conflicts, and had some tough and nasty moments, but after the tsunami he was fine, and could function and do his job.

He said that the consequence of that detachment was difficult to explain. He felt disconnected from what he witnessed, and never imagined that he was doing the story justice, feeling unable to get a grip on it. Despite experiencing emotion, pity, wonder, and sadness, there remained this detachment and a feeling that he was somehow missing the point. He realised early on that the disaster was a story of such a scale and magnitude that it was difficult to do justice to it in the form of conventional newspaper journalism, and even with longer articles he never felt as if he was doing more than just 'colouring in the corner of the canvas'. He became convinced that it would lend itself to treatment in a book, and yet at the same time he knew that it was impossible to conceive of the full picture, the annihilation of hundreds of miles of coast. So what he was looking for as a writer, he explained, and also as a human being, was smaller human stories which would enable him to grasp the larger story of the catastrophe. And in the end he found those in two places.

The first was in the very strange stories, which began to emerge about six months after the disaster, of ghosts. When one covers natural disasters, Lloyd Parry went on, they always go through similar stages. There are the first stages of the crisis when people realise something terrible has happened and all the journalists, aid workers, and doctors try to discover the scale of the damage. There is then a period of assessment where people work out what's happened, and try and decide how to deal with it. Then there are the emergency provisions, where victims are provided with food, medical treatment, and other essentials. And eventually, after weeks or months, there is a stage where everyone has food and shelter, medical provision, the children are in school, and people begin to reflect on and process what has happened. This can be a very troubling and awful time, he said, like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among soldiers. It doesn't always strike on the battlefield: it is usually afterwards that the psychological suffering kicks in. So it was that in the autumn of 2011, people in northeast Japan started seeing ghosts, and having a variety of supernatural experiences. Sometimes these were nothing more than a feeling of deep unease, spooky feelings, by the sea or by the beach. Then there were a lot of urban myths, the kind of stories that no one had heard directly, but from someone who had heard from someone else, like taxi drivers transporting invisible passengers to abandoned homes and so on. But there were even more extreme stories, and the most extreme of all were stories of people who had been possessed, as they believed, by the spirits

not only of people but even of animals who had died in the tsunami, and whose personalities had been taken over by these spirits. He had interviewed at great length a man to whom this had happened, and who was regularly being exorcised by a Buddhist priest in his temple. There were a number of cases such as this.

Lloyd Parry said that while he did not personally believe in ghosts, it became clear to him that that was not the important point. What was important was that these were intensely real experiences to the people who were having them. They can be interpreted either as representing evidence of the survival of human beings after death, as some people interpret them, or as expressions of the trauma and the experience, not only by the direct victims of the disaster, but by this whole region of Japan. It wasn't only people who had lost loved ones or who had lost their homes who had these experiences, he explained: people everywhere were having them separately. That was an important moment in gauging the scale of the disaster - not just the physical destruction, which was visible, but also the psychological impact.

The second human story which Lloyd Parry came across was the story of Okawa Primary School. Okawa Primary School is a small village school on an estuary of the Kitakami river in Northeast Japan. Statistically, Japan is the safest place to experience a natural disaster, as the buildings are strong and built to last, and people are prepared for these things; and of all the places to be in Japan, the safest place to be is a school. Of the dead, most were elderly people, he said, and more than half were over 65. In fact, the people who died in the smallest numbers were young children. Only 350 children died in the entire disaster, out of 18,500, and most of those were not at school. Only 75 children died at school, and of those, 74 of them died at one school, Okawa Primary School. Clearly this was a significant aberration in the context of the whole disaster. Despite initially following correct disaster protocol, the children then stayed in the school playground for 45 minutes, despite warnings from trucks from the local government office driving past the school with loudspeakers, warning of an imminent massive tsunami. Then the wave came in and swept everyone away.

A small number of the children had already been picked up by their parents, Lloyd Parry went on, but of the 78 children who were there, 74 died, as well as 10 out of the 11 teachers. In other words, there were almost no surviving witnesses. In a disaster where 1500 people died it is impossible to speak of particular tragedies; every one of those lives lost was a tragedy. But within the whole disaster, the tragedy of this school stood out as perhaps the greatest single heartbreak, he said, with so many children having died. As well as being heart-breaking, it was also a mystery, Lloyd-Parry said. How and why had this happened, and why (as it became clear over time) was it being covered up by the local authorities? This was the story, he said, that preoccupied him most, and became one of the subjects of *Ghosts of the Tsunami*. The book is also a story about the parents of the children who died at the school. Everyone knew someone who had lost children at school, while some people had lost all of their children. Though many parents found the experience too crushing to want to discuss further, a relatively small group were passionately and angrily determined to get to the truth of what had happened, Lloyd Parry explained. They used public meetings to question and berate local officials in a way that is very rare in Japan. It ended finally in a court case, a long civil court action that went on for years.

Lloyd Parry continued by stating that the story distilled many things in his mind about the disaster. Natural disasters, he said, do not have politics: tsunamis, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions are part of nature, they have always happened and will always happen. They are beyond politics and beyond human agency. But in the story of the school, and similarly in the nuclear disaster at Fukushima, this was not just a natural disaster, it was also a man-made disaster, he said. It was about individual human experience, and the response and failure of institutions. Although a bleak story, Lloyd Parry went on, it was not a completely comfortless one: in the case of the parents from the school, there was much to sympathise with, but also a great deal to admire and to feel hopeful about. Naturally as human beings, one of the silver linings that people often take from disasters is that however terrible they are, they bring out the good and the strengths and virtues of human beings. And that is often very true, he said. There was after this disaster great courage, great solidarity, and great community spirit among the survivors. Strangers behaved selflessly towards one another, and people came together.

Lloyd Parry finished by noting, however, that this did not outweigh the other side of the coin, which people are reluctant to talk about: the physical and emotional destruction wrought by these disasters.

For everyone who is brought together by disaster, other people are driven apart. It is a grim truth, he said, but one he saw with his own eyes among these parents at the school. Some bonds were made, but other people fell apart, and fell to quarrelling. Visitors to the tsunami zone now would not be able to guess from the look of the place what had happened. Everything has been cleaned up, removed in only a couple of years with remarkable speed. All the broken houses have gone, and remaining ruins are very rare. But the damage is still there, Lloyd Parry, concluded, among the people. Many are reluctant to talk about it, but the mental and psychological damage continues and is prolonged even long after the physical ruins have been tidied up.

Question and Answer Session:

One questioner asked Jon Snow whether there were any interviews with affected people which had particularly stuck in his mind. Snow described the difficulty of conducting interviews as people were absorbed with their own emotions, and with the process of looking for loved ones and friends. However, he described one particularly memorable interview, when his team came across a boat that was four and a half miles from the sea, and were trying to work out how on earth the tsunami could have brought it so far. They interviewed the farmer upon whose land the boat was sitting, and he had no idea either how the boat could have got there. Everyone was completely perplexed by this utterly out of context 'beast' in his field: it was badly damaged and there were all the tell-tale signs of water, but was totally alone. The farmer was surprised that this one boat had made it so far, and why there were no others with it; it was an extraordinary phenomenon. Snow explained that more than anything, the destruction of a tsunami is that it transports things, and it transports them against human will. So many people died amid that transporting, and the lone boat in the field made them realise that, tragically, so many people must have been transported as far and died themselves.

There was then a question about the word 'stoicism' that was ubiquitous in reports of the disaster by Western media. The questioner expressed concern that this 'stoical' behaviour of the Japanese was actually masking psychological problems, and that Japan historically has done a very bad job at addressing psychological issues. The questioner asked Richard Lloyd Parry whether he felt that this needed to be better reported by Western media, and for his assessment of the mental health situation in Japan. Lloyd Parry said that the Japanese word people use for stoicism is *gaman* (我慢), and that the people of the Tohoku region are regarded within Japan as being especially stoical, and that when he spoke with people elsewhere in Japan, they felt that the disaster would have been worse anywhere else in the country, with less stoical people. He went on by noting that there is less formal provision of mental health care in Japan than in many Western European countries such as the UK, and in Japan people turn more to their communities than they do to medical professionals to deal with such issues. Given that the strength of communities is very strong, said Lloyd Parry, it would be hasty to conclude that people were not or are not being helped at all. They found help in different ways. One of the things that people turned to was mediums, and a lot of the people that he had spoken to were consulting with spiritual advisors. In fact, there is a long history of mediumship and shamanism in this area of Japan, and whatever one's personal thoughts, it does help for some people, he argued. He finished by saying that it was not the job of foreign journalists like him to pontificate on the trauma and anguish Japan is dealing with, because it is a complicated situation, and it is not the place of others to judge the way in which people seek help.

Lloyd Parry finished by describing the problem the community in Okawa experienced with the decision of whether to demolish the buildings of the primary school where so many children died. Though the rest of Okawa village was completely destroyed, the school building, the site of the greatest tragedy, remained standing. There is precedent in Japan of preserving ruins as a reminder or memorial of tragedy, including the famous Hiroshima peace memorial, a building in the centre of the city which has been left in ruins and has become the symbol of the Hiroshima peace movement and the anti-nuclear movement. There was a similar debate around the school building, with some bereaved parents arguing for it to be kept as a memorial to their late children, as a reminder of what tsunamis can do, and how people must be constantly on their guard against them for future generations, while others argued with equal passion and sincerity that the sight of the building was unbearable, a reminder of the place where their beloved children died. Eventually the decision was made to keep the buildings standing, along with a newly-built small museum which will stand alongside the shell of the preserved school.