

One world: Of earthquakes and interdependence

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March 18, 2011

As Americans were complaining about [all the snow this winter](#), arguing about the [value of NPR and PBS](#), and learning that we suffer from an [“enlargement of self,”](#) the Japanese were dying by the thousands as solid ground gave way and the sea roiled and raged, consuming whole cities.

The raw, elemental power of nature can shake us from our preoccupations like nothing else. (Though a few million of us will obsess about Division 1 basketball over the next few weeks—the men’s game, of course, never the women’s—elevating it to an importance that borders on the obscene).

The indiscriminate destruction caused by earthquakes and tsunamis messes with our sense of [cosmic justice](#). It shatters our romantic views of nature and of divinity—the silliness we often succumb to when we credit God with a beautiful sunset or a striking cloud formation. It silences, thankfully, if only for awhile, the bad theology of Everything Happens for a Reason. (That the Japanese are the only people to have suffered a nuclear attack and are now at grave risk for prolonged radiation contamination is a particularly cruel irony that ought to leave us in stunned silence).

This kind of “natural” devastation also reminds us of how little control we really have in this life, despite our considerable efforts to manage, contain, and forestall the unforeseeable. We know this in personal, intimate ways—a loved one stricken with cancer, say—but we seem so willing to buy into the lie that as a collective—a nation-state, say—we can preempt disaster with our cleverness and moral resolve (and a few billion dollars).

A decade of rhetoric about “homeland security” has trained us to think that we can make our country safe from outside attack, that, indeed, we must value and pursue security above all else. Politicians routinely campaign on such ideas, counting on an edgy, fearful electorate to latch on to any promise to keep us from harm—no matter how dubious or contrived.

But life is fragile, peace is always precarious, and the earth itself no respecter of persons or property. One gigantic wave and whole populations are decimated; one seismic shift and [time itself is altered](#).

If there’s a lesson in this most recent tragedy (and it’s generally a bad idea to go looking for one), it’s that humans exist in a complex, interdependent web of relations with each other and with a planet that is sometimes inhospitable to our habitation of it. It was as instructive as it was terrifying to anticipate and track the waves that washed up on the California coast as the tsunami made its inevitable way westward. What happened in Japan didn’t stay in Japan.

Because corporations have written the dominant narrative of our time—that we exist to consume their products and that this is made possible by the easy flow of capital, goods, services, and labor across increasingly permeable borders, we might think that it is free market capitalism which binds us together, making us “one world.” But in fact the earthquake and tsunami have revealed our common humanity and common destiny, reminding us that we have always been linked to our neighbors near and far, and that consumerism won’t save us but acknowledging our mutual dependence and shared vulnerability just might.

Originally posted at [Intersections](#).