

## The immediate lived experience of the 2004 tsunami disaster by Swedish tourists

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### Abstract

**Title.** The immediate lived experience of the 2004 tsunami disaster by Swedish tourists.

**Aim.** This paper is a report of a study of the immediate lived experiences of victims and relatives of the 2004 tsunami disaster.

**Background.** Disasters serve to remind us of our frailty and vulnerability and raise existential questions. From the perspective of caring sciences, suffering is regarded as a natural source for change in patients' understanding of the world and the meaningfulness of their lives.

**Method.** A phenomenological hermeneutic study was conducted, using in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of 19 informants in 2006–2007. Ricoeur's theory of interpretation served as a guiding principle for interpreting the interview texts.

**Findings.** The immediate lived experiences of the tsunami survivors and their relatives revealed a comprehensive picture, described as different acts of the drama. These acts were: 'experiencing the very core of existence', 'a changed understanding of life' and 'the power of communion'. Confronting our frailty and vulnerability makes us more authentic to ourselves, to our relatives and to life itself. The first step towards progression involves an act where the suffering is seen and validated by another person. Reshaping the suffering together with the family adds a valuable dimension to life. Availability and presence by the family opened up for communion.

**Conclusion.** The immediate lived experiences of the tsunami disaster from an existential and ontological perspective constitute an important aspect of understanding the whole phenomenon. Concepts such as communion, understanding life and progression of suffering can help us construct an image of this previously unresearched dimension.

**Keywords:** caring science, disaster, hermeneutics, interviews, nursing, Ricoeur, tsunami

### Introduction

On 26 December 2004, deep below the Indian Ocean, the built-up pressure of 200 years was released when the

subduction zone between the Indian tectonic plate and the Burma plate shifted. The result was an earthquake, which measured 9.3 on the Richter scale and was the second strongest earthquake ever recorded. A gigantic wall of water

swept across the Indian Ocean, changing people's lives in an event of such natural ferocity that those who lived through it will remember it for the rest of their lives.

The event was characterized by suddenness and lack of time to prepare. A great number of tourists were in the area, many were hurt and 543 Swedish tourists died, of whom 140 were children under 18 years of age. Sixty Swedish children lost one of their parents (Johannesson *et al.* 2004). During the succeeding months a number of papers were published on the topic, and these mainly dealt with the medical, psychological, social and economic consequences of the disaster (Chatterjee 2005). Experiences on an ontological and existential level could not be evaluated immediately after the tsunami.

## Background

Previous studies in the context of tsunami disasters have mainly focused on analysing the experience from a psychological or psychiatric perspective, where the occurrence of posttraumatic stress disorder or mental health have been central issues (Ghodse & Galea 2006, Wickrama & Kaspar 2007). Positive outcomes are also mentioned by Linley and Joseph (2004) and, in Sweden, two quantitative surveys of survivors of the tsunami have been published (Michelsen *et al.* 2007). The results point to an apparent paradox: people report slightly worse mental health but at the same time take less sick leave and less medicine consumption than the general population. Since disasters are complex in their nature, Benight and McFairlane (2007) suggest the use of new analytic and innovative designs to understand the experience and recovery after tragedy.

Disasters serve to remind us of our frailty and vulnerability. People involved in major disasters may have to face death and destruction on a scale they have never contemplated before. According to Eriksson (1992), suffering is compatible to health, if the suffering is experienced as bearable. Suffering is not viewed as the opposite to health, but rather they are two sides of human life. Suffering is understood, ontologically, as a drama with three acts: confirmation of suffering, being in suffering and becoming in suffering (Lindholm & Eriksson 1993). In the caring/nursing perspective suffering is considered a natural source of change in patients' understanding of the world and the meaningfulness of their lives (Isovaara *et al.* 2006). The phenomenon focused on in this paper is progression of suffering and understanding of life (Rehnsfeldt 1999, Arman 2003, Rehnsfeldt & Eriksson 2004). According to Råholm (2001), personal suffering has a spiritual effect and touches a person's innermost being.

## The study

### Aim

The aim of the study was to describe the immediate lived experiences of victims and relatives of the 2004 tsunami disaster.

### Design

A longitudinal phenomenological hermeneutic design was adopted, using individual interviews and group interviews with a convenience sample of Swedish persons and their significant others having experienced the tsunami disaster in South-east Asia. The rationale for using a longitudinal design was to follow a phenomenon over time and also to enter into a hermeneutic dialogue with the informants where each dialogue can deepen the phenomenon in a hermeneutic spiral. In this paper we report on data from the first interview.

### Participants

Conversational interviews were conducted with nine single individuals and group interviews (three groups with respective four, four and two informants) with a total of 19 people (see Table 1). In total, 60 interviews had been conducted by the end of the project period in September 2007. Data collection started in September 2006, i.e. 20 months after the disaster. The interviews lasted 1–2 hours and were conducted on six occasions every 8th week.

The informants were recruited in collaboration with the Swedish Red Cross, and came from support groups formed by the Swedish Red Cross. An information letter about the study was distributed to the support groups. The 19 informants agreed voluntarily to participate. Some preferred to participate in a group, some wanted to be individually interviewed and two people were interviewed together.

### Data collection

The interviews began 21 months after the catastrophe and after the informants had completed their participation in the support groups. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus for the interviews was the significance of the catastrophe for the family both retrospectively but primarily prospectively during the project time of 1 year. The design aims to present data with a base-line article based on the first interview in the series, followed by other interviews that describe different aspects in the longitudinal perspective.

Table 1 Study sample

Gender	Age	Circumstance	Location
Man	69	Lost 2 grandchildren	Not present
Woman	67	Lost 2 grandchildren	Not present
Woman	57	Lost a daughter, a son-in law and 2 grandchildren	Not present
Man	33	Lost no one	Sri Lanka
Woman	47	Lost no one	Thailand
Woman	50	Lost no one	I Kaukak
Woman	24	Lost no one	PhiPhi
Man		Lost 1 child	Kaulak
Woman		Lost 1 child	Kaulak
Woman	32	Lost no one	SriLanka
Woman		Lost 1 child	Not present
Woman	51	Lost no one	Present
Woman	28	Lost no one	Present
Woman	49	Lost a brother-in-law and 2 nephews/nieces	Not present
Man	47	Lost a daughter and his own mother	Present
Man	43	Lost no one	Present
Man	51	Lost no one	Present
Woman	64	Lost a sister, a brother-in-law and two nephews/nieces	Not present
Woman	56	Lost a sister, niece and a grandniece	Not present

### Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the appropriate ethics committee. Participants received a letter about the study and were told that they could withdraw at any time. Aspects of beneficence and nonmaleficence were considered and the project team arranged with the Swedish Red Cross that psychiatric help would be available if necessary.

### Data analysis

Interpreting a text means entering the hermeneutical circle (Ricoeur 1976, 1981). Our task was to elucidate essential meanings as they were lived in human experience, and therefore we were influenced by the traditions of hermeneutics, phenomenology and phenomenological hermeneutics. Ricoeur's (1976, 1981, 1993) theory of interpretation served as a guiding principle for interpreting the interview texts (Lindseth & Norberg 2004). The advantage of this method of working, according to Lindseth and Norberg (2004), is that there is a dialectic movement between understanding and explanation. The method consists of three steps:

- Naive reading – the text is read several times in order to grasp its meaning as a whole.
- Structural analyses. Here thematic structural analysis, i.e. way of seeking to identify and formulate themes. The structural analysis is an interpretation of the text to understand its meaning and how it can help us understand phenomena.
- Comprehensive understanding. Here the main themes, themes and sub-themes are summarized and reflected on in relation to the research question and the context of this study.

The interviews were analysed together, i.e. no distinction was made between group interviews and individuals.

### Findings

The analysis presented here is based on the first interview only. Of the 19 informants, 13 were women (aged 24–67 years) and six were men (aged 33–51 years). Ten of these people had lost one or more relatives and nine had not lost anyone. Seven of the informants were at home in Sweden at the time of the tsunami, but had relatives in the disaster area and 12 informants were caught by the wave.

### Naive understanding

The naive understanding of the text is formulated in phenomenological language. Thus, the naive understanding guides the structural analysis.

The meaning of the catastrophe is deeply existential and can be described as a drama in four acts. The *first act* is being on a planned vacation together with one's family and/or relatives. It is a time of joy, warmth, fellowship and love. A picture of absolute paradise appears.

In the *second act* a surprising and unexpected struggle between life and death takes place. The safe life conditions radically change in a moment and life suddenly seems unpredictable and inconceivable. The previous life is undermined and the vulnerability in the face of the seriousness of the course of events seems inexplicable. A fear of not having control over life becomes dominant. Relatives experience a sense of powerlessness and a tremendous struggle (relatives both in Sweden and in the disaster area) to find surviving relatives starts. The paradox is that informants feel alive and in motion through the proximity to death.

The *third act* is the 'war zone'. The paradise turns into total chaos, where the rumbling roar like a vacuum cleaner sucks away all human beings. At the same time the search and saving of lives enables avoiding dissolution of one's self.

At home, relatives experience insecurity, chaos and confusion in the face of the news of the seismic wave. The intensive search for relatives keeps panic in check and grief at distance. Relatives at home live in their own universe.

The *fourth act* signifies the creation of meaning in the current chaos. The experience is one of having touched a primal experience, i.e. momentarily loss of one's foothold gives purpose to the continuous quest. Not until the informants realize the course of events can they assume responsibility for themselves and others. Not having fulfilled one's obligation as a fellow human being and having climbed over others in the search for relatives is a burden to the informants. Relatives experience both hope and hopelessness while waiting for news from those close to them.

### Structural analysis

Nine chronological themes were extracted in the structural analysis, as shown in Table 2.

#### 1. *Being in paradise*

Informants described their situation in terms of paradise. Safety and a spirit of community between relatives and friends characterized this paradise. This meant delighting together when enjoying the surrounding nature and experiencing fellowship. In this spirit of community the family union was also strengthened. The surrounding paradise was described in terms of colourful coral reefs, beautiful sunsets, opportunities to surf and picturesque thatched-roof bungalows for rent. On the morning of the tsunami, many people were already by the sea or had gone to restaurants. The nearness to each other was accentuated by being far from home and the daily environment. The external context nourished the sense of security and closeness (see Table 2A,B,C).

#### 2. *Experiencing the course of events as inconceivable*

The lived experience of paradise was suddenly and surprisingly turned into a total chaos. This chaos invaded the whole existence of each person. This turmoil and total chaos can be described as an unexpected threat to the informants' lives. In the midst of this utter confusion, many questions were unanswered. Participants drifted into the seriousness of the moment without finding answers to what was happening. In the lived chaos there was only immediacy. People were awoken in the morning by screams and felt deep discomfort. No explanations were at hand and the thought of an earthquake at sea was unfamiliar. The survivors were caught between the needs of the moment and the external threat, which rose from the sea in the shape of a giant grey wall. Like

a vacuum cleaner, this giant wall of water devoured everyone and everything in its way. What could not be understood had to give way to the struggle to survive (see Table 2D,E).

#### 3. *The struggle between existence and destruction*

Life became a struggle between life and death. The nearness of death overwhelmed the survivors. A brutal and naked struggle between existence and destruction was taking place. The sea covered everyone in its power and rage. This force slowly pulled down the survivors and life was threatened by this uncontrollable course of events. The realities of life were seen in the light of approaching death. A mysterious feeling of a giant light and calmness was experienced, in glaring contrast to the chaotic reality and the struggle in the water. At the end of this fight between life and death was intense worry about the welfare of relatives and friends (see Table 2F,G).

#### 4. *The meaning of ministering*

The shock and adrenaline secretion hid for many people the fact that they themselves were badly injured. Therefore they managed to move around and also to help others. Groups of survivors stayed together in various places in the mountains, helping each other, giving out water, taking care of children without families (together with the Thai people) helping injured victims to get to hospitals and taking care of dying people. Some of them had met earlier during the disaster and had helped each other or found each other by hearing their native language spoken. They tried to stop wounds bleeding by using anything that was available. Many people were injured, bloody and half naked and people helped each other.

The fundamental conditions for ministering are being faithful to oneself and being conscious of the brutal reality lived through. The undertaking to help injured fellow beings arose spontaneously. Pain and hunger had to give way to the strong driving force to save lives, take care of wounded people, organize rescue groups and place dead people side-by-side at the shore in preparation for a proper funeral later. All were working furiously to help each other. At the hospital, survivors administered antibiotics to each other on every alternate hour. A baby with affected breathing and a severely swollen head was taken care of by one of the survivors (see Table 2H).

#### 5. *Experiencing unbearable suffering*

The unbearable suffering was described as detachment. This detachment occurred in relation to others and to those close to oneself. Survivors felt guilt about not having found relatives, having done enough, having climbed over other people and even children, to escape their own death. Afterwards these experiences caused a sense of alienation from oneself and the meaning of being human.

**Table 2** The lived experiences of tsunami disaster as event, identified, presented with examples of original meaning units

Theme	Examples of original text
1. Being in paradise	A. We were 14 people there on Christmas Eve. We had taken boats out to the small islands surrounding Krabi. That day we rented a big motor boat with a crew and went out to an island which is a big reeve from which you can jump in the water and snorkel. B. We celebrated Christmas eve there and it was fantastically beautiful. You kind of felt really safe. C. We were there and it was lovely. We were going to celebrate my husband's 50th birthday.
2. Experiencing the course of events as inconceivable	D. Something woke me...I felt discomfort. It was an unpleasant feeling. Couldn't put my finger on what it was: I heard people screaming. What's happening? I don't know. E. An earthquake felt distant. You didn't have that perspective. We met another family of four where the mom screamed that there had been an earthquake. Then there was a huge wave. Run! Of course, you realized that this was something strange but we didn't really understand what she said.
3. The struggle between existence and destruction	F. Then I saw how a giant wall was coming towards us. I was under the water for a very long time. I was angry and frustrated. I couldn't accept he thought that it would end like this. It is still hard... G. You went through everything. It hurt so horribly all the time. Then a reversed suction came and I slid backwards and bumped into a tree... everything became...everything was completely calm and light.
4. The meaning of ministering	H. All cuts and so...but I felt no pain, felt no tiredness, no hunger or anything at all. You just had to survive...then there were all these injured people to look after. Another woman went around and functioned as an ear and I was a hand. We laid the dead bodies in a row so that they would have funeral.
5. Experiencing the darkness of understanding of life	F...I feel that if things had been more of a mess and gotten worse I would have climbed over other people. I stood looking at a man and girl who I think was his daughter and who were below us clinging to a tree and we couldn't help them, and were some 10-20 people up there. I was as if paralyzed. Couldn't do anything. At that point I was just focused on finding my daughter. H. One woman brought me a baby...the child was icy white, breathed strangely and had a very swollen head...I've been looking for this baby in many repeated dreams...
6. Searching is a way to cope with a dissolved inner life	I. I continued looking for my daughter. It is pretty frustrating to go around different morgues, you felt the smell immediately when you entered the city. Trucks brought caskets or dead bodies. I stayed there for another 4 or 5 days...I couldn't really get myself together...felt that I wasn't really able to cope with it. My daughter is one of the people who are still missing.
7. Find meaning in the midst of meaninglessness	J. Then I see our youngest daughter sitting on a car roof together with two or three Thai people - we hollered at each other... K. There was a friendly person offering me soda...I was so thirsty... I got a ride with a moped up to a crossroads, which was a gathering place for those who had survived. There was a Thai person with a bag with some pills in it. This person stopped a car risking his own life and we were able to get a ride with this car.
8. The shackles of powerlessness and grief also chain survivors once home	G. It felt really safe to be with this person. Then she said that we had to get on board the boat and that the boat was pretty far out. The others helped me on board the boat and I could lay down there and then they took everyone who had died on the island and put them in the same boat. K. In the bus to Bangkok...there was an old man who couldn't walk, we had an elderly lady, we kind of had our group, and we stayed together. L. I threw myself on the floor and wanted to rip the skin of my body. I called my husband and he crashed into a bus. I knew my daughter was dead. I felt it. It 's a little better now, it felt heavy as if I wanted to drop my arms. That they wouldn't be attached to me. Anxiety. Feeling heavy, cemented. Powerless.
9. Healing communion gives rest in solitude	M. You let in what you can handle and you can shut down when you have to...where sorrow and knowing just open up like a hole and then you close it when it gets too heavy. In the beginning it was surreal...you lived in a universe of your own, with your own way of measuring time...people went to work and things happened and the papers wrote about them but it wasn't really part of our reality...a very cube-like experience. L. I went out walking very often...lots of fast-paced walks during which I processed my thoughts to keep the panic in check. N. We were many siblings who helped each other and this has worked really well, so we have said to each other that it is pretty strange that something good came out of this horrible experience. That we're so close. M. I lay down on the couch and all my thoughts disappeared...for two hours I didn't think a single thought...nothing I controlled... was deep rest. I began keeping a journal...look at my notes again...I'm glad I began writing down my emotions.

Tourists sitting on the roofs of bungalows said that dead relatives were spotted in a shrubbery or by the seaside. Their sorrow and powerlessness was sensed in the moment, but they had no chance to do anything. Looking for one's own family members was predominant. The thought of what happened to the baby with severe head injuries haunted one informant in recurrent nightmares and it was hard to talk about it.

The presence of God is questioned in situations like these, but no guilt is laid upon him. Parents experienced themselves as deficient in their parenthood. An example of this was parents leaving Thailand without having found their daughter. The obligation to take care of one's children was experienced as failure (see Table 2F,H).

#### *6. Searching is a way to handle a dissolved inner life*

When the flood wave aggressively gripped all living people by all its force, family members and relatives were emotionally shattered. In a very brutal way, bonds between family members and relatives were broken up by nature. Many survivors have born witness of the silence that settled after the wave had withdrawn, leaving behind dead people and animals, devastated nature and a dissolved inner life in all those who did not know the fate of their family members. All strength was concentrated on finding them.

In searching for relatives, one's own suffering and worry can be held at distance and prevented from making it self-known. It is a struggle between hope and despair. There was intense concern about what had happened to the missing relatives. Hospitals and mortuaries were visited and thousands of photographs nailed to the walls were inspected.

The hope of finding a family member alive made the searching and lingering in the area worthwhile. When the searching had no results the situation could not be handled, and in the plane home the previously hidden despair was experienced to its full extent. Passengers experienced the bumpy flight as an omen for a crash. Panic grew during the long flight, but later ebbed away (see Table 2I).

#### *7. Finding meaning in the midst of meaninglessness*

Meaning is found in all helpfulness and in the goodness one meets. In addition, having a clear and specific task to perform and a distinct goal in a total inferno, e.g. to find family members and seek protection in the jungle, gave meaning. The trees by the seaside and the roofs on the houses were metaphors for safety. High-up in the trees, people also had a perspective from above of scenes of brutal circumstances, meaninglessness and death without being able to step in and act. Being responsible meant assisting family members and fellow human beings, giving others hope or staying alive by

floating on a car roof or a heap of brushwood. This was carried out until the force of the next wave swept everything away many miles out to sea. Local inhabitants risked their own lives by stopping their cars to take tourists to hospitals. Unknown people took survivors onboard boats to take them to safety. It was a great comfort to be close to a calm and confident stranger who was capable of direction and organization in the chaos. Death was omnipresent both as an abstract thought and concretely. All the injured were placed in boats under panic-like conditions. Dead bodies were put in the same boats. Conversations with other survivors during the boat trip were brief but meaningful. Surrounded in silence by the old and young who had perished, people tried to create a common sense of meaning in a meaningless situation. Life and death had encountered one another (see Table 2J,G,K).

#### *8. The shackles of powerlessness and grief also chain survivors once home*

Enormous activity was initiated at home in Sweden when information about the catastrophe in Southeast Asia was made public. Phone calls were made to the foreign office, to travel agencies, to the mobile phones of the survivors and to different embassies. Television was the main source of information. People had to find a way to deal with the overwhelming news with which they were confronted. Contact persons and family members went to the disaster area. Photographs and other material were sent to relatives at disaster site. The intensive effort to try to get in touch with family members in Thailand, contacting the Swedish Embassy, waiting for telephone calls from the victims and so on kept grief at distance. Relatives at home described their emotional experience as 'being inside a cube' and being closed off. Normal everyday life was looked upon from the perspective of this 'inner room'. People were situated in two different worlds or circumstances, and the external world affected the internal fragile closed off world or room.

Getting to know about the loss of a relative was especially gave bodily sensations. The grief was situated in the body. One informant wanted to rip the skin from her own body while lying on the floor screaming. Another contacted their partner, who crashed their car and was then admitted to hospital. Other bodily sensations described were heavy arms, feeling like cement and losing all strength and many informants also mentioned amnesia. Another informant could not open their eyes and lay awake during the first succeeding nights: being awake meant being in control.

The grief between husband and wife was described as cogwheels gripping into each other. One of the partners is strengthened by seeing the other person's strength and driving force. Grief was seldom talked about with

colleagues at work. The sorrow had no words but was disguised as metaphors of sorrow. The realisation of what had happened was taken in portion-by-portion, as much as was bearable for the moment. Contrary to these experiences of grief as personal, it was especially important in the beginning to meet others who had been in the area and/or lost a family member. People searched for a model to guide them in how to respond, and group sessions were arranged by the Swedish Red Cross were important to the informants (Table 2L,M).

### *9. Healing communion gives rest in solitude*

During the immediate period after the tsunami, communion and affinity with family and relatives provided strength in sorrow and uncertainty for all the afflicted. Former broken relationships with relatives were re-established, and the common grief and loss united people. When the survivors returned back to Sweden, relatives at home became very protective because one falls apart in solitude. The shielding armour, which had prevented feelings from surfacing in people's minds, was cracked. Solitude was also described as a space to rest, where all the thoughts vanish and a great calm appeared (see Table 2L,N,M).

## **Comprehensive understanding**

### *Shaping the new perception of the drama*

In this section, we describe our new understanding in the form of a re-interpretation or comprehensive understanding of the original naïve understanding. A more comprehensive picture emerges of the acts of the drama. These acts are now called: (1) Experiencing the very core of existence, (2) A changed understanding of life and (3) The power of communion.

### *The first act: experiencing the very core of existence*

The themes (2) 'Experiencing the course of events as inconceivable', (3) 'The struggle between existence and destruction' and (5) 'Experiencing the darkness of understanding life' are now interpreted as 'experiencing the very core of existence' – the *first act* of this new drama. The first act of the new drama can be described in terms of chaos, unanswered questions, seriousness, the struggle to survive, life and death situation, detachment, guilt and alienation. Interwoven throughout these themes (narratives) is a sense of angst and groundlessness. In losing one's way, both internal and external points of reference are simultaneously lost as the narratives one's self tells itself about one's situation no longer make sense.

Encountering threatening, uncharitable, incomprehensible and meaningless events in life are characterized as the

darkness in understanding of life and unbearable suffering by Rehnfeldt (1999) and Rehnfeldt and Eriksson (2004). The informants described this as 'an emerging light, being paralysed, not settling with possibly dying'.

Severe disaster may trigger experiences of meaninglessness and hopelessness that can result in survivors undergoing existential 'shut down', rendering them unable to experience positive changes. Keeping a journal about the events, seeking solitude, developing the ability to place oneself 'outside' daily life and dividing the horrendous reality into small portions and swiftly closing this 'valve' are types of survival strategy for the survivors and their relatives during the immediate period after the disaster.

Morse (2001) states that a person who is enduring a stressful experience needs distant respect from others. This makes the enduring a private state in which the person's experiences are concealed. In times of catastrophe or in situations where people experience unendurable suffering, they are also touched on an ontological level.

### *The second act: a changed understanding of life*

The *second act*, called 'a changed understanding of life', is formed by the following themes: (6) 'Searching is way to handle a dissolved inner life', (4) 'The meaning of ministering' and (7) 'Finding meaning in the midst of meaninglessness' and is interpreted as a changed understanding of life. Searching for family members and relatives, being there for one's fellow human beings, assuming responsibility and keeping hope alive are clear examples of how the informants were trying to distance themselves from the tragedy and hopelessness of the situation. This became a survival strategy for many survivors.

In this arena, survivors' otherwise hidden expressions of life such as interdependence, compassion and faith are brought into the open. The true meaning of life is highlighted when it is a matter of saving lives, comforting and helping strangers, as well as quietly mourning the frailness and unpredictability of life. For them, this is a way of finding the strength to exist at all. It is in this act of sacrifice that the informants were brought closer to each other and they revealed their true selves to their fellow human beings. Through proximity to death, people feel alive and in motion. Death is the antithesis that gives life deeper meaning (Råholm 2003). The survivors and their relatives at home felt helpless and powerless before forces larger than themselves. They became preoccupied and humbled by events and consequences beyond their control, and frightened by their own seeming smallness and insignificance. Their losses were irretrievable, and bereavement penetrated the core of their being. Losing others, and significant others in particular, is

experienced as a threat to one's own life and produces an experience of living alone in a world in which the doors to understanding life are closed. It felt important to the informants to serve and attend to their family members and injured strangers. During these brief encounters – on a car roof in the water, up in a palm tree, floating on a mattress in the waves – a common learning experience took place which altered survivors' understanding of life.

#### *The third act: the power of communion*

The themes (1) 'To be in paradise', (8) 'The shackles of powerlessness and grief also chain people at home' and (9) 'Healing communion that heals and rest in solitude' form the *third act of the drama*, which is called the power of communion. According to Marcel (1965), communion is always a miracle. Being in communion with the other is a liberating experience; it brings contact with the sacred dimension as communion is founded in transcendence. Availability and presence opened up for communion when the survivors and relatives in this study listened together to the stories and thus, through uncovering the wounds and 'crying out', experienced joy. Experiencing joy was a way of changing perspective. The important prerequisite for communion is a shared affective state rather than a shared cognitive interpretation of the situation (Stern 1985). Reshaping the suffering together with family or in solitude adds a valuable dimension to life. The human quest for relationships is an existential expression of an ontological necessity, where people are dependent on each other, and this ontological communion gives a kind of strength to overcome difficult experiences by being together and supporting each other (Rehnsfeldt & Eriksson 2004). After suffering, spirituality frames life. The survivors, together with individuals who lost their children or grandchildren, had come really close to their own humanity, or 'their innermost room'. Their expressed as well as unexpressed suffering can be understood as a strong wish to continue their lives, although life has taken a different and deeper meaning their life values have also changed.

Informants and their relatives were expressing their vulnerability when talking about grief. They showed their vulnerability to the suffering that loss through death had brought to their lives. Grieving is inherently a process of finding meaning in suffering, including disconnection from larger entities and the agonies that accompany such loss of wholeness. One way to understand families' suffering, which is sometimes more experienced than concretely expressed, is to find the way to interdependence through family communion, which can be shown to the world outside the family as compassion. Openness, presence and availability create trust. When the relationship is trusting, there is room to uncover

the wounds. Sharing suffering and joy means being in caring communion. Consolation gives a feeling of meaning and homecoming, together with the sacred dimension in life (spirituality).

## Discussion

The study was started 21 months after the event and is based on narratives told from memory. To start the study after such a long time was reasonable because of the general aims and was made possible as a result of our co-operation with the Red Cross. Different perspectives may be applied to the data, and we have carried out this from an ontological/existential caring science perspective. The sample consists of people who had participated in support groups for tsunami survivors and who had a great deal of contact with others. It would have been useful to have more variation in the sample, e.g. people without support, people in rural areas or older and younger people. Ontology is defined as the 'study of being'. It addresses the basic questions of existence with regard to meaning, purpose and value. In our day-to-day lives, we take such matters for granted and pay them little or no attention – they are seen as 'morbid' or 'too intense'. At times of crises or disaster, however, these questions can take on major significance as we try to make sense of the chaos and turmoil we encounter. Chaos therefore, reintroduces the ontological dimension; it strips away our ability to keep such issues at arm's length. A number of existentialist concepts can help us piece together a picture of this missing dimension (Thompson 1995). The main concepts for this study are progression of suffering and understanding of life. Having experienced the tsunami disaster as a survivor or as a relative of a survivor, the suffering never ends; however, suffering is a life-long experience, which, once experienced, never ends. It is possible to understand life in a more profound spiritual or ontological way and in this way the experience alleviated suffering. A central argument emerging from the study is therefore that a greater understanding of ontology, i.e. confronting our frailty and vulnerability, makes us more authentic to ourselves, to our relatives and to life itself. The first step towards progression involves an act in which the suffering is seen and validated by another person. Availability and presence by family members opened up survivors for communion.

It is reasonable to claim that the tsunami disaster had a unique character. This catastrophe encompassed the consequences of internationalization, the ability to alleviate suffering, and continuing life accompanied by individual and collective grief (Berg Johannesson *et al.* 2004). Along

### What is already known about this topic

- Much is known about disasters from a psychological or psychiatric perspective, in which post-traumatic stress disorder or mental health has been in focus.
- Positive outcomes are also mentioned as a consequence of exposure to disaster.
- An apparent paradox exists, in that survivors of disasters report slightly worse mental health but take less sick leave and use less medicine than the general population.

### What this paper adds

- It is important for nurses to understand the experiences of tsunami survivors.
- A caring/nursing perspective and concepts such as understanding of life and progression of suffering can help us construct an image of this missing dimension – of the experiences of the tsunami victims.
- Listening to the narratives of disaster survivors can help nurses to develop interventions for future disasters.

with an intense fear of death and destruction comes an extreme sense of helplessness and the realization 'that one's own will and wishes become irrelevant to the course of events' (Struve 1999, p. 4). Coming to a new and acceptable meaning necessitates dwelling with suffering rather than denying, distancing or controlling it (Johnston 2007). According to Isovaara *et al.* (2006), interdependency seems to be the spiritual core of the family unit, and the sense of belonging to a family community is the context wherein the meaning of life may be made visible and concrete.

### Conclusion

The immediate lived experiences of the tsunami disaster from an existential and ontological perspective are important in understanding the whole phenomenon. This dimension is relatively unexplored in the increasing literature on the topic of disaster work. The findings of this study show that disaster victims and their relatives need existential care around questions of life and death. These stories are transformative for both survivors and healthcare personnel, and it is important to teach/prepare nursing students and nurses about the existential needs of disaster survivors. Further research is also needed to deepen our view of how we take care of these patients having gone through life-changing traumas.

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### Author contributions

M-BR was responsible for the study conception and design, performed the data analysis and was responsible for the drafting of the manuscript. MA & AR performed the data collection, made critical revisions to the paper for important intellectual content, obtained funding and supervised the study.

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