

Sri Lanka: A Story of Hope

by Karen Ayas



Karen Ayas

On December 26, 2004 the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean were hit hard by the terrible Boxing Day tsunami, called the greatest natural disaster in modern history. Tens of thousands of people were killed in a dozen countries throughout Southeast Asia. Along Sri Lanka's 1,300 kilometer coastline, more than 40,000 died and a half million were left homeless.

Two and one-half months later, at six in the morning, I found myself in a darkened meeting room at the Galadari Hotel in Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo with 208 leaders of Unilever's Asian Foods (UFA) businesses, brought to this island country for a week with two briefs. The first: to assist in the relief efforts in two small southern coastal communities. To that end, they would spend two days working on clean-up and rebuilding projects. The second was to continue the so called "Journey to Greatness" – an ambitious leadership development and community-building program that aspires to bringing greatness into every aspect of an organization and its leaders ("Journey to Greatness," *Reflections* Vol. 5, No. 10) – in a two-day program following their work in communities.

While slogging in the unbearable heat and humidity, clearing rubble out of houses, building new community centers, school buildings, volleyball and badminton courts, kitchens, toilets, and shops, the leaders began to connect with local people. When the leaders started working, most residents were bystanders, watching without any spark in their eyes and without the energy to lend a helping hand to their own recovery. As the UFA leaders witnessed the unimaginable physical devastation, they heard horrific personal stories of lost loved ones and lost livelihoods. But as they consoled the families that had been ravished by the tsunami and sang songs and danced with the children in the communities where they had worked, they came to realize how powerful the human spirit is. As one UFA leader put it: "We became aware of our resilience. Even facing the highest level of adversity, we can bounce back and re-build ourselves."

A year earlier in India, work with twenty-some different communities had led the UFA leaders to realize the importance of "mission" and to appreciate the power of belonging to a community. This in turn led them to invest in building their own leadership community and redefining their mission. Sri Lanka was about bringing this mission to life; it meant reconnecting to one another and affirming that as leaders they were both business beings and human beings.

"We came to Sri Lanka because I decided never to close my eyes to misery in this world," explained Tex Gunning, then president of Unilever Foods Asia. "People get lost, organizations get lost, and leaders get lost: we need to be reminded of the power of the spirit within us and rekindle the spirit in others to find our way."

Coming face to face with destruction

Just after dawn on the morning of March 7, 2005, the UFA leaders boarded nine busses to travel to the southern coast of Sri Lanka, where the devastation from the tsunami had been the greatest. As we milled about waiting for the busses to arrive, I wondered like many others what we would encounter the next few days. Although I had worked on the design of the journey, I was full of apprehension. What would people feel as we came face to face with the survivors of such a disaster?

Heading south through Colombo along the Galle Road, evidence of Sri Lanka's rich heritage was all around. To untrained eyes there was little evidence yet of widespread destruction. Crossing the bridge at Kosgoda signaled the passage from the western to the southern region of the country, where ever-increasing signs of the tsunami's destruction came into view: more and more wood shacks surrounded by



piles of lumber and bricks, and soon a large tent city constructed to shelter survivors in Balapitiya. At "the train site," just south of the little tourist town of Ambalangoda, we debarked at the railroad crossing where the tsunami derailed the Colombo–Galle train and more than 1,500 passengers. There the UFA leaders began to witness firsthand the horror of so many lost lives, and the complete destruction of a village and its small fishing boats. As one leader described it, "The place was pregnant with disaster and it was racing towards us in all its ferocity. The community had lost its will to survive, let alone live. What was the contribution we were going to make? These thoughts screamed through our brains."

Half of the group worked for the next few days in the vicinity of Galle, some forty-five minutes down the road from the train site, while the rest continued on for four hours to Hambantota, a dusty little village some 240 kilometers southeast of Colombo, on the border between Sri Lanka's wet and dry zones. Both groups worked in shops, and schools, and residences to help families and villages to rebuild their lives, not just with bricks and mortar, but through rekindling the community's spirit.

Hambantota

More than 4,500 people in the Hambantota district were killed by the giant tidal wave, 1,000 or more of them residents of the village. The surge was so powerful that some houses more than one kilometer away from the shore were pulverized. At the school where one of the UFA teams worked, eighty children, four teachers, and the principal were killed, their bodies collected in the bare yard in front of the school and buried in a mass grave. The destruction was so massive that the Pakistani Army was invited in to bulldoze huge portions of the town. In the process, more corpses were found in the lagoon behind one of the neighbourhood work sites; those bodies were shovelled into another mass grave.

**Working and
organizing are one
and the same, and
are creative and
social, framed by
conversations.**

Other UFA teams worked on demolishing unsafe houses, restoring salvageable structures, and clearing the ubiquitous mounds of debris. The work was daunting enough physically. For many, the emotional work of understanding the depth of the families' losses and engaging them in the process of rebuilding their lives was even more difficult.

One UFA leader spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the tragedy related by the nineteen family members living in the small house he was assigned to:

On the twenty-sixth of December they were going about their lives, some watching a cricket match on television others going about their morning work. Then suddenly they heard a very strong hissing sound, a very unusual sound that they had never heard before. And then the electricity was cut off and the telephone lines went dead.... Before they could understand what was happening, a huge wave, as high as the roof almost, came into the house. The mothers ran to get hold of the children. The husbands ran out to protect the property. They lost their nine-year-old boy, Apeh, who had gone out to play. It all happened in one minute and fifty-two seconds. The house they had built themselves was completely wiped out. The only thing remaining was the clock on the wall which had stopped at nine-twenty a.m., showing the time the wave had struck the house.

Hearing stories like this paralyzed many of the UFA leaders at first. Some seriously questioned how much solace and support they could really offer, and then slowly they began to realize that simply listening, being there, could be enough. "I felt bad thinking I had no way of helping these families," said one. "Later I realized that many of them wanted to pour out their hearts. They just wanted a person to listen to their experiences, the trials they went through during those terrible minutes and how they were coming out of the shock."

At the end of the day, the UFA leaders sat with each other around a fire pit. They shared stories of their experiences, speaking with raw emotion and genuine caring about the village people they worked with. Many had been profoundly touched by their encounters, as one UFA leader described:

In Hambantota we worked with a family where the wife was a teacher and the husband had salt fields and a factory. The wave had destroyed their house and their factory. Luckily the family members escaped with minor injuries. While the wife seemed OK, the man looked dazed, lost, and totally out. When we started the conversation he declared that he had lost his memory and everything that he had worked for over the past 20 years. He did not know what to do. We kept talking and I started asking him simple questions related to his business, the factory, the market. Then he saw a few of his inventory log books from under the rubble wheeled away. He picked them up from under a huge load of debris and started sharing the records from 1990. He started to describe how the packing line worked, how his packages were of consistent and good quality. His experience and pride started to show. Feeling something was progressing right I carried on with the conversation. It seemed that the salt fields could be recovered with some work. And he suggested that banks could offer him a loan to rebuild his factory based on his past track record. Here he was getting plugged-in again!

Had UFA's work here really made such a difference? Many felt that it had. "I felt that I had helped to inject some life, hope, and a little bit of happiness into the lives of the family

we were working with,” said one of the team summing up his work in Hambantota. “I would even go as far as saying that I almost felt like I had become part of that family.” The belief that they had made a meaningful contribution to so many people’s lives had taken root. Some thirty-six hours after their arrival in Hambantota, they saw tangible evidence of the difference they made at the brief closing ceremony at St. Mary’s College. They realized they had experienced and learned so much here, but how would it fit into their Journey to Greatness?

Serving a higher purpose

From Galle and Hambantota, the groups moved inland, into the hill country. They spent the next two days at a camp in Ella, making sense of their experiences working alongside the amazing people of Sri Lanka, drawing out the lessons about great leadership and exploring how to bring heart and soul to everything they do in their own businesses. Through dialogue, meditation, reading, solitary excursions into nature, and facilitated learning they asked: Do we want to be great leaders? Do we understand what it means to be a great leader? And they grappled with existential questions. Who are we: as individuals, as leaders, as a community? In their last day in Ella, they homed in on one last question: How do we become a great business? How will we bring mission to life? One facilitator’s remarks as he prepared to depart were encouraging:

“What I have seen here the past two days took my words away. This is the sort of thing that should be happening in all organizations. A great business is nothing but a set of great human beings. It is the unification of the personal with the corporate mission that gives birth to a real human world. Work no more becomes separate from one’s personal life; it only becomes another medium by which the personal mission is accomplished.

Consider the nobility of this proposition: If every business evolves itself from being a predator to one that is committed to uplift humanity, our orientation shifts from marketing products to rendering services – tangible or intangible – and changing people’s lives. A company that embraces the need to genuinely uplift humanity will nurture this spirit in its own organization. It would allow people’s sense of conscience and spirituality to grow, further reforming and aligning the business to the welfare of human beings.

So, the whole world is waiting for you to do what you have to do.

In the dialogue that followed, Tex underscored the socio-economic role businesses must have, and the importance of serving a meaningful purpose:



How do you evaluate how great a business is? Business results like turnover, profit, and return on investment are all external evaluations of a company. But they alone don't determine greatness. I believe spirit is the key. It determines the way the company interacts with the local community, the customers, and the consumers.

As leaders, we need a whole new level of consciousness about the functioning of organizations, deeply recognizing that it is a living and therefore continuously changing organism, adjusting itself to its new circumstances and to the human players that make it up. You cannot force human beings to adjust themselves to the tyranny of organizational logics in a sustainable manner; you can only let the organization adjust itself to the universal needs of all human beings. They want to live meaningful lives; they want to live in service and care for others; they want the freedom and space to be creative; they want to grow and they want to be part of an organization that helps them to contribute to something that is far bigger than they could ever on their own. When you have a purpose that's higher than yourself you'll find cooperation where you never imagined.

We must therefore somehow become socially and economically coherent. Of course as businesses we need to make money to sustain what we're doing. But we have to have a social meaning that resonates with people like you who volunteer to work here, and with the people we serve. The business needs to be grounded in deep human values and you need to have integrity in your actions.

There were plenty who embraced this approach. "I feel very grateful that I work in an organization that understands the value of caring for the society it operates in," acclaimed one of the UFA leaders. "I now understand that there is work and life in Unilever beyond the pay-check. I believe that Unilever can make this world a better place."

"Neither I nor my team members find any contradiction in our Journey to Greatness and our ambition to build a large and profitable business," said Ashok, head of the foods business in Vietnam. "We shall grow the business, however, with sensitivity, compassion, and with a genuine desire to serve the community around us."

Service learning

In large-group sharing and smaller country sessions, the UFA leaders explored what makes a great business and the path to get there. The shared experiences in the previous retreats, serving communities in India or working alongside villagers in China – and their own initiatives since – pointed to one path: service learning, growing the people and company through community service and learning from that service.

"We have to think about community service," Tex concluded in one of the discussions, "because this is an interconnected world. And we have to see ourselves as one world."

As they discussed how they could bring such "greatness" into their own environment, the majority of teams developed the determination to engage in some form of community service, here in Sri Lanka or in their own countries. Said one, "The bonding here was unbelievable. We will continue with the community work as we firmly believe that even a little act can make such a huge difference." Added another, "My team unanimously agreed to channel

some funds to relief work for the Hambantota housing project. The entire office plans to go down to Hambantota and get involved with the project and the community on the 8th and 9th April.”

As for how to ensure similar results in all community service efforts, everyone had plenty to say. “If people are really committed to do community service, don’t worry about a thing, it will come,” said one UFA leader. “Don’t take a kind of typical business approach to tackle these kinds of things. I personally would never force people into doing it, because you have to have a heart in doing this kind of thing.”

Bringing mission to life

Service. Care. Commitment. Laudable intentions requiring great strength to translate to action. “We know, more or less,” Tex challenged the UFA leaders, “what it is to be a great business, but how do you do it? How do you keep yourself honest on that agenda?” He started to answer his own questions:



Defining our business in the social-economic sense means that we truly say we are going to take care of the nutritional needs of families. But when we start to talk about positioning, the charter brands, the purpose brands, etcetera, there is still a lot of confusion, and I truly believe that we haven’t cracked that nut.

All the country teams took this question seriously – make sure everyone understands, absorbs, and internalizes the mission – and agreed to start taking some action for bringing their mission to life. “We talked about how we can engage, have communities, and be true to the overall mission,” shares one leader from Australia, “and we actually looked at what we need to boost our personal journeys. We will work together as a group to keep ourselves energized and to remind ourselves and each other of how we felt here.” The Pakistani team discussed how they could start a collective effort – first just with the fifteen of them who came to Sri Lanka – to do something back home as they did here for tsunami victims. “We cannot just try to push it onto everyone. We’ll start doing something and then take it from there and make it a bigger project,” said Rizwan, their leader.

“Community service is only one part of the Journey,” another leader reminded the group. “Perhaps the more important part of the Journey is becoming a better leaders, better human beings, and also better teams. So you have a *business with a human face*. The process doesn’t take away the skills, the acumen. But it does bring up the Conscience thing: Am I asking consumers to pay for too much packaging? How can I make products available to low income people?”

Putting Spirit into practice

But the real question that all wrestled with is “How?” How would they put into practice what they came to know on their Journey? How could they be their spiritual selves back on the job?

The spirit displayed by the UFA teams as they worked with the Sri Lankans made many wonder why they couldn't do this with their own teams. As one of them summed it up:

In my group there were people from Unilever from different countries, races, and work levels. People I had never met before. Yet we got together as a team quickly and went about completing our work with amazing speed and focus. No one ordered anyone.



Suggestions were given and accepted on the quality of the suggestion alone, and it did not matter whom it came from. No one stopped to see if someone was doing less work. Those who finished immediately went over to help someone who was struggling. I asked myself, why we don't see the same behavior at work? And why do I behave differently at work?

As they continued to reflect and share, there was also commitment to plenty of action at the personal level. "I resolved to build happy, meaningful, and

rich relationships with people whose lives I touch and am responsible for. And through these interdependencies I will enrich my contribution to everything I do each day," affirmed yet another.

Those who made similar vows in past Journeys held the mirror up while they renewed their commitments. "In reflecting about where to next, while the experience was different, I have realized my takeaways and actions are exactly the same as after the Indian outbreak a year ago," said one veteran. "What is frustrating is that if I honestly look back I have not done as much as I would have liked. While I think I have become a better husband, father, and leader to some degree, there is still a lot of work to do."

Under the Prayer Tree

Late on the final afternoon of the Sri Lankan journey, the group sat one last time under the Prayer Tree as clouds rolled in and thunder growled in the distance. It had rained not long before, and the huge tree released an occasional sprinkle from its canopy.

"When we started talking about greatness two years ago," Tex reminded the group, "many said that that is for the gods or the Nelson Mandelas of this world, but not for people like us. We have seen yet again that greatness has hardly anything to do with the role that you have in business but has everything to do with who you truly are." He continued:

At a very deep level, we are wise. We know that, but we forget that we know. We're so much caught up with what's going on around us, it's like we're living outside of

Anura's Reflection

I was on the beach in Bentota with my wife and my child. When the first wave came, I thought it was a freak wave. I went to see what was happening. I took my son along. Two minutes later the second wave was coming, and I was in a jeep trying to race back to my wife. It took two or three minutes to get back to where my wife was. It seemed like forever. We talk of tragedies, we see them on TV, we read novels, but only when you go through something like this do you know how fragile everything around you is.

Within minutes, six of my colleagues called me. I never thought that people cared that much for me. That night and the following morning, people were calling and asking what are we going to do now? At first we thought only a hundred people had died . . . then five hundred . . . and on Monday morning at eight o'clock when we met at work the number was one thousand. One thousand people had died. We had to do something about it. We said, let the company do whatever, but we'll put in our day's wage; by midday we said, let's put two day's wages. We bought lunch packets, cooked rice, and found a plane. There was no plan. Everyone knew what to do. They just had it in their hearts. That evening we wrote to the government and many others and we received incredible support. But the first light was lit by people not knowing who was going to support them. We all know how to talk about problems, we all know how to theorize, how to analyze, how to argue. However, this was all about knowing what your heart tells you to do and doing it.

We learned that there was a camp in Ampar on the East coast . . . six thousand people in one camp without a single tent, under polythene sheets . . . six hundred pregnant women and not a single toilet.... Something had to be done, so together with two other companies we decided to go out there to build tents. Suddenly the government told us they had twenty thousand tents they didn't know what to do with. All we had to do was bring the tents there and show a couple of people how to build them. Six hundred tents built in one day. Toilets, same story again. We said, let's do what we can. Sixty toilets came in two days; pits were dug by the tsunami-affected people. They only needed the spark and a little ray of hope and they were ready to get up and do it. Three days later, one of our guys said, how about a nursery? And we found enough ladies in that camp who knew how to look after small children.

We told the government we are committing one hundred million rupees, that's big money for a small company like ours. But that led to a wave of donations from other people. Our company gave us plenty of room; for weeks no one asked about the targets. All they asked was, what you are doing about the tsunami, is there anything we can do to help?

So just listen to your hearts and do what is right. You don't get transformed by experience . . . but by the ability to experience. You need to live it through, to feel it in your hearts. You know, you can be so detached, so factual, typical Unilever executive and you can go through, walk through all that without being moved. But you guys are moved and you're very special people. First couple of days when you were here out in the field . . . I heard that story after story. It doesn't matter how many people you helped or how many houses or schools. What matters are the stories of the tailor, the story of that family, those eight children . . . these are the things that matter and you've done that.

Yesterday we all asked a question, who am I? You asked me the same question. I don't have an answer as I don't think there will ever be words. The only thing I can say is, if we take the first step and the second step, then we walk, and then we sprint, but at the end, we fly!

At the end, we fly.

Thank you for bringing hope to Unilever Sri Lanka and to Sri Lanka. It will never be forgotten.

ourselves. We're living in other people's minds; we're interacting in ways that are not very wise most of the time. To come to grips with who you are, who you want to be, is a long journey. And you will see that the older you get, and the wiser you get, the easier it becomes. And even then you make mistakes.

I'm not asking you to become a spiritual guru tomorrow, and I will never be one. What I'm saying is you have to pull people into your lives if you want to learn, if you want to grow. You can't do it on your own. I can't do it on my own. And there is no recipe.

But it is a gift to you. Grab it if you want. This is your Journey. And this is our Journey to become who we really are.

After a few minutes of silence, as everyone retraced the five-day journey silently with a partner, Tex invited everyone to share whatever they felt still remained to be said.

“These last few days we have been talking about spirituality, searching for the soul and trying to touch souls,” observed one of the leaders. It is only when we find our own soul, or get back in touch with our own soul, that we can look at other souls. What was the most difficult exercise we did here? For me it was the silent communication that we had under that tree. Two people sitting in front of each other, not talking but looking into each other’s eyes, trying to look into the soul of the other without speaking. . . . When I was trying to look into the soul of my friend here, there was embarrassment, there was nervous laughter. We would move our eyes away. Did any of us keep eye contact for five minutes? I doubt it very much. And if we didn’t, that tells us where we are as far as the soul is concerned.”

“I learned more here about the value of caring in practice than I could have from any book or lecture,” said another. “I learned about the fundamental value of being human and of reaching out again and again. Not only did I reach out to my Sri Lankan friends but to my colleagues. We opened up and shared many things beyond work and we really bonded.”

“Leadership is all about helping others, caring for others, creating space for them to learn and grow, and providing them the fertilizer so that they can grow even further,” reflected one of the leaders, “but the only way that you can do that well is by knowing yourself well.” Another put it this way: “To discover greatness you have to embrace humanity and encounter humbleness. As we become more ourselves we are treading on the path to greatness.”

The reflections the leaders shared were laced with thoughts of community, humanity, love, kindness, compassion. “I have more courage now and I see that when I go back home, I just need that consciousness. It’s not the scale of what I do that matters, it’s my intent.” said one. “The journey made me realize that I had more to give,” another added. “And the more you give the happier you are in life. Amazing grace is what I feel at this moment.”

The group’s experiences here – and in China and India on previous journeys – did not change who they fundamentally are, but profoundly enhanced them, sometimes in ineffable ways. Reconnecting with their inner selves and giving of themselves to one another invigorated their thoughts, opened their hearts, let their spirits fly, and confirmed their humanity.

As their final sharing continued, they heard many heartfelt and stirring reflections – but none more touching than the words of Anura, the HR director of Unilever Sri Lanka on that fateful day (see sidebar).

They gave him a tearful standing ovation. “At the end we fly . . .” There was nothing else to say.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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