

The Wind Phone

Music / Sound FX - Dialling Phone / Messages

INTRO: The Wind Phone. Kaze no Denwa.

For the BBC World Service.

For Heart and Soul for the BBC World Service.

Message from notebook / Voiceover:

September 4th, 2018: I'm so sorry I wasn't able to speak when I called last time. I hope you rest in peace there with your parents and your brother. I'm so sorry.

February 7th, 2019: I couldn't find the words. I don't think I'm ready yet. I think I'm going to come back again in the Springtime.

SCRIPT

High in the hills above Otsuchi on the coast of Northern Japan, where the wind blows and the pine forests grow, there sits a white glass panelled phone booth facing out to the Ocean.

Inside is an old-fashioned black telephone connected to nothing and nowhere. A phone where the living can call those who have died.

This is 'The Wind Phone' – Kaze no Denwa – a phone where the living can call those who have died.

I'm Miwako Ozawa, a translator and interpreter, and I'm coming back to Otsuchi for the first time since the aftermath of the Tsunami which shattered this area in 2011. Which devastated this area in 2011.

Sound / Mr Sasaki Gardening

SCRIPT

Itaru Sasaki is with his wife Yuko digging and planting. He built the wind phone here in his garden some years ago when his cousin died. It helps him cope with his grief.

He's telling me he wanted a place he could go where his thoughts and feelings could be carried by the wind.

At the time he had no idea that the worst Tsunami ever to hit Japan would soon come to Otsuchi.

Sound / Tsunami + Screaming

SCRIPT

On March 11th, 2011 following a huge earthquake, waves rose up over the whole coastline here – over buildings and trees. Families clutching each other were torn apart and pulled under the water.

Tsunami Sound / Itaru gardening / he speaks ...

SCRIPT

In the weeks and months that followed survivors picked through the debris looking for the bodies of their loved ones.

Itaru is telling me how grief slowly led people to his Wind Phone.

Itaru Sasaki: 'People make a story of their lives and suddenly the story cuts off – something terrible happens – that's when people feel grief. And when that happens your inspiration and your imagination are so important. I thought the idea they might be able to deliver their messages to their families would offer hope to survivors. Without hope people are imprisoned in grief and imprisoned in desperation.'

Miwako: 'We are walking down to the phone ... there's a green gate ...'

SCRIPT

More and more people began making the journey to find the phone.

Kazuyoshi Sasaki is one of them.

Kazuyoshi Sasaki 'He's describing first time he came to the phone....'

SCRIPT

The white booth is very beautiful surrounded by trees and wild grass.

Kazuyoshi opens the door and we squeeze inside.

He's a tall man who laughs a lot but now he becomes softly spoken. His wife Miwako was drowned by the Tsunami leaving him with their four children.

Kazuyoshi Sasaki 'And I saw the poetry here by the phone. It said 'Everyone has past, present and future and in the meantime, people experience and encounter goodbye. Who would you like to speak with? You can close your eyes and listen. Your feelings will be carried to your loved one.' After reading the poem I dialled my home number to speak to my wife. I knew that no one would respond to me, but I felt that my wife was there. I told her that my daughters and I were looking for her body for a long time and we almost gave up but on the last day we found her. And I told her 'I know you cannot come back, but I can come to you in the future.' It's like when you close your eyes, but you feel someone is listening with you. I was so happy. I was very happy.'

Sound of waves

Kazuyoshi Sasaki: 'And when I went outside the phone box I was crying. A big man crying in the garden. And Mr and Mrs Sasaki saw me, and they invited me for tea. That consoled me. That healed my heart.'

Sound Gardening / Chopping Wood

SCRIPT

Itaru and Yuko are always a calm presence in their garden – planting and chopping wood.

They've built a treehouse with a zip wire here too for the local children who lost their parents in the Tsunami.

Itaru Sasaki 'I didn't put any signs or posters saying where the phone is because it's important that visitors find out for themselves. When they finally find it, they are already full of emotions and then they go inside the booth and pick up the receiver and express themselves. It's a process of directing your feelings towards the phone. That's very important.'

Miwako 'There's a gentleman there who has come to visit the phone. He's dressed in white. It's very beautiful from a distance. I realise more men come to the phone than women. That's because for many Japanese men it's very difficult to express their emotions. They need a private space where they can be faced with themselves.'

SCRIPT

I approach the man dressed in white. He's friendly but I can see he's been crying.

His name is Kenji Ishizaki. He's come here to call his son Nouyuki who drowned in the Tsunami, and his wife Toshiko who died a year later.

Ishizaki 'This is a driver's licence with a photo of my son. My son died March 11th and my wife died May 11th. So, I always come to the phone on the 11th of each month. And this is the only photo I have with all of us together.'

SCRIPT

We step inside the Wind Phone.

Ishizaki 'So first I pick up the phone. When I'm finished, I write a message in the notebook next to the phone. Back in 2011 I took my two sons to Tokyo to work with me and I asked my eldest son to stay in Otsuchi. I heard the news that the Tsunami had come to Otsuchi and I had a bad thought the worst thing might happen to my son. I tried to come back but there was a shortage of petrol all over Japan. I was so worried about my son and started looking for him. Then I found out he had died. My mind was completely blank. I couldn't stand. I just fell to the ground.'

Kenji Ishizaki / Phone call

SCRIPT

Hello, Nobuyuki,

It's Dad,

What are you doing now?

Are you with Mum?

It has been 8 years since the Tsunami,

4 years since she has gone,

I'm just managing to keep working, to keep going.

I'll come back again when Spring comes.

Thank you so much, Nobuyuki,

If all of us were still here together, your mum, me and you then things would be better.

Hang in there; I'll do my best to keep on going.

Please look after your mum.

I'll be back again.

Sound / Evening Chatter by the fire

SCRIPT

It's evening and Itaru and Yuko light the fire and cook oysters. I have a strong feeling I want to stay here in their company.

Yuko takes me into her kitchen. We talk while she makes miso soup.

Yuko Sasaki 'Women often have a group of friends they can share their sorrows and feelings with. A lot of men tend to bear with it. They just hold it together. So, a lot of men might not have anyone to share their feelings with. That's why they come here. It's a safe place where they can be open. And that's why I put a sign on the phone which says 'Welcome – we've been waiting for you.' I hope that makes them feel we're here for them.

SCRIPT

The next day is warm and still. The daffodils are starting to bud.

Suddenly we hear a Tsunami drill coming up the hill reminding people of the possibility of another tsunami.

Sound / Tsunami Drill

SCRIPT

Kazuyoshi takes me to the phone booth one last time before I have to go.

He tells me about a dream he had about his wife Miwako.

Kazuyoshi 'One of my children had a baby who was born on February 15th. One day before that on Valentine's day I had a dream about my wife (sound of dialling phone). Miwako. She was so pretty in the dream. Like beauty and the beast. I'm the one who asked her out. I still remember how pretty she was when she was young. And on Valentines day she appeared in my dream. So pretty. Wow. I thought you were dead. But she was smiling. And I got confused. Was this real or not. I gave her a kiss on her cheek. Somehow, I felt human touch. Then I felt so relieved. She's alive. The Tsunami is just a dream. Then I woke up and looked at the white ceiling and I realised I was in temporary housing and I knew I was just dreaming. The Tsunami was real, and my wife was gone.

Message from notebook / Voiceover: March 2018: I miss you so much. I'm sorry I couldn't help you. I hope you're happy. I love you so much.

Miwako 'Coming back here after 8 years obviously the reconstruction is going on but the sea is so calm and peaceful, and I somehow felt something. I can't put it into words. It's like some people are watching. I think it's because I've been listening to their stories, so I feel as if they're still there.'

Evening chatter and celebration

Outro: The Wind Phone was narrated by Miwako Ozawa. With readings from me Eiji Mihara. The producer was Sarah Cuddon. It was a Falling Tree production for Heart and Soul for the BBC World Service.

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