



[Ben W. Heineman Jr.](#) - Ben Heineman Jr. has held top positions in government, law and business. He is the author of *High Performance with High Integrity* (Harvard Business Press, 2008).



[Cristine Russell](#) - Cristine Russell is an award-winning science, health and environment writer. She is a senior fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and the president of the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing.

## Japan: Future Risk, Present Devastation

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By [Ben W. Heineman Jr. & Cristine Russell](#)

*Amid anxieties over the prospect of nuclear disaster, we should pause and mourn the thousands of dead in Japan*



The world has properly focused on the uncertain fate of the crippled nuclear reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant in northeast Japan. With this fast-moving story still unfolding, we have all struggled to understand the current and future risk of radiation

release to the environment, as well as possible short and long-term impact on human health, both to workers, local residents, and perhaps those beyond local borders. Like the word "cancer," the association of the words "nuclear" and "meltdown" strikes an emotional chord in people around the globe. But we don't yet know, and may not know for weeks to come, the true magnitude of the technical problems or the degree of human exposure to radiation.

But what we do know now is that thousands of people have died as a result of the earthquake and tsunami, with officials saying that the death toll could be in the "tens of thousands" (a number that would dwarf the 6,000 who died in the 1995 Kobe earthquake). Just yesterday came the news that more than 1,000 bodies washed ashore. Towns have been erased; hundreds of thousands are homeless; food and water are in short supply; at least a million and a half households are without electricity. Families have been ripped apart; children or parents have disappeared; the comfort of neighborhood and community swept away. All in a matter of minutes.

This is an unimaginable tragedy. But the tyranny of numbers makes it hard for us even to begin to understand on a human level what has happened. Thousands dead in Japan; 50 million killed in World War II in Europe; 3,000 dead on 9/11; even 400 dead in a plane crash: It's difficult to connect with the reality that each of these people, just like us, had a family and hopes and dreams and problems and challenges--and a life.

We need someone to tell the stories of the dead. Yet this is not possible now in a fast-moving news cycle where the focus is more on the technological, social, political, and economic implications for the future. In time, writers will help us understand some of the people who were taken away by a towering wall of water.

But for now, even as we worry about the fate of Japan's nuclear plants, the best we can do is to stop for a moment and imagine. Not just to memorialize faceless dead, to mourn individuals who lived a culture and an ocean away, yet with whom we share a common humanity--to stop for a moment and to imagine who they were as people.

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