Just a Phone Call Away: Loss and Memory in Otsuchi

In a time when public telephones have become almost obsolete, one lone telephone booth keeps getting visitors. It stands in the town of Otsuchi, on a windy hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean. To the unwatchful eye it looks abandoned, but every so often a stranger will walk up the hill, shut themselves into the booth, and spend a few minutes talking on the telephone. Sometimes they just stand there, without saying a word. Other times they howl out or cry quietly into the receiver. But nobody on the other side answers. The phone is disconnected, and the line leads nowhere. To passerby, it’s little more than a baffling mystery, but to locals, the booth is known as the Phone of the Wind.

In 2010, a 70-year old gardener named Itaru Sasaki lost his cousin. Feeling helpless after this loss, Sasaki bought an old-fashioned phone booth and set it up in his garden. Outfitted with glass windowpanes, the booth housed a black rotary phone and not much else. The phone was disconnected- there were no wires, no working phone line, not even a dial tone. But Sasaki didn’t need to talk to a real person. He needed to talk to his cousin. “Because my thoughts could not be relayed over a regular phone line,” says Sasaki in an NHK documentary, “I wanted them to be carried on the wind.” Even though the line went nowhere, Sasaki could still feel connected with his cousin just by speaking to him through the phone. With just an old wooden booth and a broken phone, Sasaki had built a place where he could talk to his cousin and come to terms with the grief of his passing in private. Sasaki named his phone booth kaze no denwa, or the Phone of the Wind.

A year later, a 9.1 magnitude earthquake and tsunami ravaged the coast of Tohuku, Japan. The devastating aquatic earthquake set off 30-foot waves that destroyed towns and claimed countless lives. From all the areas affected by the accident, the town of Otsuchi has some of the highest numbers of missing people. The aftermath of the disaster left friends and family of victims behind, unsure how to cope with the sudden loss. As news of the Sasaki’s Phone of the Wind spread, those same mourners began to visit his telephone booth to make calls of their own.

To date, people from all over Japan have made small pilgrimages to the Phone of the Wind, even bringing their children and grandchildren with them. Some talk on the phone about their daily lives as they would in any normal telephone call. Children share test scores and what games they’re playing. Some even dial numbers. Some are only able to talk for a few seconds, before stopping abruptly. Still, they continue to come back, just for the feeling of talking with their loved ones again. Over the years the Phone of the Wind has become a safe haven and a kind of shrine for mourners. The idea of a pilgrimage is not far off- many people travel for hours to Otsuchi to pay their respects. No matter how routine it may seem, calling your deceased grandfather or missing best friend like you used to is a way to keep them alive in your memory. Staying in touch, even with no response, lets them know they are still part of your family even as they leave this world.

The Phone of the Wind has been the subject of an [NHK documentary](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ke-H5EEqvRs) and [an episode of This American Life](https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/597/one-last-thing-before-i-go). It still stands today, overlooking a town which is still recovering from the wounds of the tsunami. But much like the construction sites and repair crews, the telephone booth has become an essential part of the town’s reconstruction. While cranes and tractors may rebuild lost homes, the Phone of the Wind helps rebuild lost people. It stands on that little hill in Itaru Sasaki’s garden as a reminder that even in the face of loss and tragedy, the ones we love never really leave us.

