

The Anchorman

by stephen hastings-king

1. The anchorman is more nervous during this break than usual and does not engage the guest in the banter that typically makes the dead air of advertisements feel less cavernous. He fidgets with his prop paper, relic of a by-gone era now an aspect of the visual rhetoric of television newscasts. Then he looks at the paper again. Across the center of the page is a single line of type: "Do not look here." He looks up again. He feels himself struggling with something. I'm going to get that intern fired, he says to himself. Between the desk and the camera, other interns are changing the letters on the large modified Scrabble trays that hold the sentences that viewers will see for the next segment so their attentions will not wander. The focus is being moved from the previous "Tsunami: A Very Bad Thing," to "Tsunami: Unimaginable Quantities of Mud."

A red light goes on behind the cameras.

A voice from off set says: Rolling.

The anchorman struggles to not look at the paper but at the camera and through it at the viewers everywhere and at the teleprompter just below the camera and not move his eyes like he's reading:

Welcome back to our ongoing coverage of what we mean when we say "Tsunami: A Very Bad Thing." We've covered what a tsunami is as a bad thing and the ways a tsunami moves through the ocean to bring bad things to other places and the ways it moves across land to bring bad things to the same place. We have accompanied the very dramatic footage you have been seeing with in-depth discussions of what we mean when we say "giant volume of water" and "moving very fast" in order to help you the viewers understand what we mean when we say "Tsunami: A Very Bad Thing."

We are now joined by the author of the book Nature, Usually Full of Good Things But Sometimes Not So Much, who will help us understand a little better what we mean by the phrase

“unimaginable quantities of mud” and its relation to the statement:
“Tsunami: A Very Bad Thing,”

Turning so as to indicate engagement with the guest: Now when you say unimaginable quantities of mud what do you mean?

Good evening. When I say unimaginable quantities of mud I mean immense amounts, that is to say amounts that are beyond comprehension.

But an *unimaginable* quantity....can you help our viewers get their minds around that?

Yes. Imagine the largest amount of mud you can.

As a kind of intellectual experiment.

Exactly.

The anchorman closes his eyes.

This is like being back in school. I miss school sometimes.

Viewers see footage shot from overhead of burning buildings floating atop a fast-moving viscous field of airplanes, container ships and colonies of floating automobiles.

The anchorman has been imagining. He opens his eyes.

The Guest says: More than that.

More?

Yes.

Wow.

The anchorman is silent for a moment. O the humanity.

But now I can imagine it.

What?

When you explain “an unimaginable quantity of mud” by saying “imagine the largest quantity of mud you can”---and I do---and then you say “more than that” the unimaginable quantity isn't unimaginable any more because I can imagine it.

Well, it's really just a manner of speaking....

I'm a pretty creative guy with a vivid imagination. Ask my wife. So when you say unimaginable and then tell me to imagine something and then say more than that I just get confused, and I think our viewers do as well, because then I can imagine it right after you told me I couldn't.

It's a metaphor that indicates amounts that exceed frames of reference most Americans have.

The anchorman begins to speak louder: I don't think there's anything wrong with the American frame of reference. Most Americans can imagine giant amounts pretty well. And most Americans have a pretty clear mud concept. So I don't think we lag behind other places in terms of either amount concepts or mud concepts or ways they fit together. I mean, I've not seen the studies so I cannot be sure. Maybe India or China is catching up in terms of mud concepts and magnitude concepts and how they can fit together.

I'm not really sure that this is the direction....

But people launch themselves from all over the planet on rafts into the ocean despite the dangers of tsunamis to get to the United States, mister, in order to enjoy the benefits of our freedoms and the ways we think about very large quantities.

2. Later, the letters in the modified Scrabble trays have been changed to form the sentence: “Radiation Leak: A Bad Thing.”

The anchorman is asking a different guest: What do we mean when we say “radiation leak”?

Viewers see a plume of smoke rising from a blurry gray sphere that is associated with a nuclear power plant.

Well, a radiation leak is what happens when some of the radiation that would normally be contained by the containment system reaches a level of non-containment that is considered unacceptable to the extent that it lacks the containment necessary to be considered contained. Then, rather than being in one place, the radiation goes to many places. And that is a bad thing.

How bad?

Very bad.

