

JAPAN

The phone that calls the wind

A gardener put a phone with no wires on a hill in Japan. Then more than 30,000 people came to use it.

WHERE	Otsuchi, Iwate
WHO	Itaru Sasaki, a garden designer, and the thousands who came to his garden
WHEN	2010 to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Otsuchi is a small fishing town on Japan's northeast coast, about 500 km from Tokyo. On a hill above the bay, a man named Itaru Sasaki looks after a large garden. Designing gardens is his work.

In 2010, his cousin died of cancer. Sasaki felt stuck. He missed their talks, and there were still things he wanted to say.

So he did something a little strange. He set up an old white phone booth in his garden. Inside, he placed a black rotary phone. It was connected to nothing.

> **His words couldn't travel down a normal line, he said, so he wanted them "carried on the wind."**
>
> ITARU SASAKI, TO JAPAN'S NHK

He called it *kaze no denwa*: the phone of the wind. For a few months, it was just Sasaki, the booth, and the sea.

Then the wave came

On 11 March 2011, a huge earthquake struck Japan, and a tsunami followed. Otsuchi was almost wiped out. About one in ten people in the town died or went missing.

Thousands of families lost someone with no warning. Many never found a body. Many never got to say goodbye.

Sasaki knew that feeling. He opened his garden to anyone who wanted to use the phone. He left a notebook beside it, so visitors could write as well as speak.

Calls to nowhere

People began to come. First from Otsuchi, then from all over Japan. Some drove for hours. They stepped inside, closed the door, and dialled a number they knew by heart.

One of them was Kazuyoshi Sasaki, a local councilman. His wife, Miwako, was killed by the tsunami. When Reuters reporters visited, he dialled her old mobile number.

He didn't make a speech. He told her ordinary news. He had finally moved out of temporary housing. Their youngest son was building a new home, where he could live with the grandchildren.

Before hanging up, he told her a health check showed he had lost weight. Then he promised he would take care of himself.

0	1 in 10	30k+
wires connect the phone	Otsuchi residents lost in 2011	people have visited

A booth that travelled the world

By 2017, at least 25,000 people had visited. Later counts put the number above 30,000. The notebooks filled up, one after another.

Japan's broadcaster NHK filmed people inside the booth. In 2016, the American radio show *This American Life* told the story. In 2020, a feature film, *Voices in the Wind*, was made about it.

Today, people in other countries have built wind phones of their own. One man's private way of grieving became a gift to strangers everywhere.

How it unfolded

- **2010** Sasaki's cousin dies. Late that year, he sets up the booth.
- **2011** The tsunami hits Otsuchi. He opens the garden to everyone.
- **2016** *This American Life* shares the story abroad.
- **2017** At least 25,000 visitors. Sasaki publishes a book about the phone.
- **2020** The film *Voices in the Wind* is released.
- **Now** More than 30,000 visitors, and wind phones in other countries.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Nobody in this story got their loved one back. Nothing was fixed. That is what makes it unusual.

OUR TAKE

The phone does nothing technical. It works because it gives people three things: a private place, a reason to speak out loud, and permission to say what they never got to say.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Give your feelings a place to go

Sasaki didn't wait to "get over it." He built a small ritual that let him keep talking.

Try this: Write a short letter to someone you've lost or drifted from. You don't have to send it.

2

Share what helped you

The booth began as a private tool. Its biggest impact came when he opened the gate to strangers.

Try this: Name one thing that got you through a hard time. Tell one friend about it this week.

3 Simple can beat expensive

No app, no budget, no wires. An old booth and a notebook helped tens of thousands of people.

Try this: On your next problem at work or home, ask: what is the simplest physical version of this?

4 Say the small things while you can

Callers shared everyday news: a new house, a health check. Those small updates were what they missed most.

Try this: Call someone today just to share one ordinary update. Five minutes is enough.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Some losses can't be fixed. But anyone can be given a place to be heard.

Sources

Reuters, via The Sun (Malaysia)
Japan's tsunami survivors call lost loves on the phone of the wind

Honolulu Star-Advertiser, 2017
"Wind phone" links living with dead

This American Life, Episode 597 (2016)
Act One: Really Long Distance

Unseen Japan
Wind phone in Iwate

Fact-check note: Visitor counts differ by year: at least 25,000 by 2017, and more than 30,000 in later reports. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.