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Chernobyl's 25th Anniversary: Why You Should Care

By **Sarita Gupta**

My friend Drew just returned from a tour of Chernobyl, the world's worst nuclear disaster site. Most of us won't be able to recall where we were on April 26, 1986 but for 300,000 people, it must have felt like the apocalypse. And indeed, the world as they knew it ended as they were evacuated from their homes in the Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, many never to return. The nuclear explosions at Chernobyl turned the city of Pripyat into an instant ghost town.

We have all thought more about Chernobyl and the specter of nuclear holocaust in the last month as we've watched the Japanese struggle to contain the Fukushima Plant hit by the earthquake and tsunami of April 6th. But before starting to boycott your favorite sushi restaurant, it behooves all of us to know exactly what radiation is and what levels are harmful.

Drew wrote a [blog](#) about his tour in which he answers those questions as well as compares Chernobyl to Fukushima. His description of the Exclusion Zone surrounding the mutilated nuclear plant is stark and sobering in the realization that this fate also awaits northern Japan. He goes on to visit Pripyat, whose roughly 48,000 residents were given two hours to pack up and leave their homes forever. It makes me wonder: what if a similar disaster struck the nuclear reactor that sits 40 miles away from my home? What would I grab and what would I mourn the most for leaving it behind?

Drew is brave: he ate lunch in the cafeteria used by Chernobyl workers (surprisingly, 3,500 engineers, scientists and military officials still live and work in the exclusion zone). I would have hesitated but Drew dug into his borscht with equanimity because his Geiger counter told him the radiation was at the same low safe level as it was during his breakfast in Kiev two hours away.

I don't intend to arm myself with a Geiger counter but I can protect myself with better knowledge. The first step is to read Drew's blog. So on this anniversary date, I am resolved to learn more about the hidden but ever-present danger of nuclear power, to stop worrying about silly things like the radiation from the full body scan at the airport (a fraction of what an hour of flying emits), and to start having a voice about my planet's energy future.

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