

The Stories We Tell of War and Peace
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May 29, 2016

Reading. Text from “Tsunangari” Amanda Rogers, English translation from Japanese
This piece was written for a youth choral festival in Fukushima just after the nuclear disaster there in 2011.

How difficult seeing the truth is.
How lonely thinking the truth is.
How brave speaking the truth is.
And, how warm is the hand
which is held out to people crying in the sad wind
behind the lie.

How kind is the heart
which accompanies people who cling to
the homeland in their hearts.

To see, feel and think together
as if you were next to me,
no matter how far apart we are...
To cry, laugh and sing together
under this sky
no matter how far apart we are...

Please...
feel the connection of the sky,
and the connection of our hearts.

Sermon

When did you first learn of the US dropping the atomic bomb on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan? Do you remember? Were you a child or young adult when it happened? Did you have a family member in World War II at the time? Do you remember how you felt in that moment?

For those not alive when it happened, do you remember when you first learned about it? First saw the image of the mushroom cloud, the devastated city? What did you think? How did you feel? How do you feel now thinking about it? Let’s turn to our neighbors – try to reach across generations to take a few minutes to just talk about your first memories of this event.

This month, we wrap up our theme of peace and I want to invite us to reflect on the stories we tell of war, for stories shape meaning, they carry on what is important. In this way, our stories not only create meaning from the past, they shape the future.

I am not certain how old I was when I first learned of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I remember the picture of the bomb, the report that nearly 100,000 people were killed instantly, incinerated the moment the bombs hit. I remember feeling – I still feel – devastated thinking of it. Over the next few days, months, years more than another 100,000, maybe as many as another 250,000, people would die from their injuries or illness from the radiation exposure.

Heartbreak, moral shame, devastation – these are appropriate emotions to this history. And yet, when I first learned of my nation’s bombing of Japan, the heartbreak didn’t last, because very quickly I was taught it was a necessary act – that it hastened the end of the war. Maybe you were told this story too, that the Japanese would have never surrendered, that millions of lives were saved by avoiding a ground invasion. Were you told this? That the bombs were justified, necessary, even beneficial?

I don’t want to argue with this analysis, although let’s name that it is not universally accepted. For today however, let’s draw attention to the way that the explanation quickly absolves us of looking at our own actions. I remember this analysis was like a balm to the heartbreak, guilt, and shame that I felt for my nation, as an American. And why was it a balm? Because it quickly took away the deep moral shame of the history. It provided justification, necessity. Moral problem solved. I felt I could breathe again and I accepted it. And yet, now older, I realize that the analysis draws this picture of Japan, without ever requiring us to ask ourselves about what we were willing to do to in order to win.

This week the first sitting US President, Barack Obama, visited Hiroshima since the bombing nearly 71 years ago. It was an historic visit. Even though the United States and Japan have been strong allies and friends for many years now, no sitting US President has ever visited the city, nor the more than 130,000 survivors of the bombing who still live in Japan today. Many have suggested that such a visit would seem like an apology. The President did not apologize but it was still a powerful moment for him to go and stand at the memorial. It was a first step. And yet, it was interesting for he described the events of that day on August 6, 1945 as if he was speaking as a separate third party describing the history of some distant nations, some ancient time. “Death fell from the sky,” he said as if no human hand was behind it.

He went on, “The world war that reached its brutal end in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was fought among the wealthiest and most powerful of nations. Their civilizations had given the world great cities and magnificent art. Their thinkers had advanced ideas of justice and harmony and truth. And yet the war grew out of the same base instinct for domination or conquest that had caused conflicts among the simplest tribes, an old pattern amplified by new capabilities and without new constraints.”

There is truth in his words and yet he delivered them all as if these nations no longer exist, as if they were not in the room. Is there not another way to tell this story – to own our responsibility as a nation? I am not trying to be naïve – given our perpetual role in armed conflict around the globe, no one would allow our leader to apologize. But how does that silence prevent us from creating a different story for the future?

Dr. Martin Luther King famously said, we “must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.”

As we ask what it means to be a people of peace, to cultivate peace in our own lives and in our world, we must realize that peace is not a condition of perfection. And it is not a condition of there being no conflict. Rather it is building within us the capacity to engage conflict without violence. And to do this, we need to be able to own responsibility for ourselves and our actions. To fail to do this blinds us to reality, prevents wisdom from growing from mistakes and leads us to perpetuate the same actions and patterns.

One of the most powerful stories I have ever heard about Hiroshima was told by former UUA President Bill Sinkford, who now serves as Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Portland. He told this story not too long after the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the beginning of the War on Terror when many were searching for hope in the context of heartbreak and the beginnings of yet another war. Rev. Sinkford had visited Japan as part of a partnership that Unitarian Universalists have built with Shinto priests in Japan over many years. Rev. Sinkford recounted:

While I was in Japan, I took a day to visit the Hiroshima Peace Park, the memorial to the 250,000 Japanese who were killed when we dropped a weapon of mass destruction on that city.

And at a wonderful dinner at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine after our ritual Misogi cleansing, I finally found the question I needed to ask our Japanese hosts. “How could you possibly have forgiven us for our use of the atomic bomb?”

A member of the Grand Shrine Board, a retired nuclear physicist named Mr. Feruda, responded. “First, thank you for asking the question. No one has ever asked us that before.” After thinking for a moment, he said: “Despite the horrific death toll and the devastation, we actually have come to see our loss as a blessing. You see, if we had not lost that war, the military government would probably still be in power and we would still be out colonizing and appropriating resources to fuel our industrial machine. If we had not lost, the attitude of arrogance that was a part of Japanese life during those times would still be with us, the belief that because we had the might, we had the right to do as we willed. You see, if we had not lost... we would have become you.”

This is a powerful story and what I most appreciate about it the sense of responsibility – the owning of one’s own past. There is not a sense of victimhood but rather what it takes for reconciliation.

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says, “The situation in the world is still like this. People completely identify with one side, one ideology.... Reconciliation is to understand both sides, to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side and then to go to the other side and describe the suffering being endured by the first side. Doing only that will be a great help for peace.” In Mr. Feruda’s words, he tells a piece of the story of both our nations,

with a gentle tale of how any nation can lose its way. However, in the stories that our own nation tells of this devastating time, we only tell one part of the story – allowing no room for even the moral ambiguity of our decision – and certainly not the moral repercussions of what has followed.

At the end of the war, as a part of the surrender, Japan adopted a new constitution that guaranteed democratic rights and freedoms and which is known as a Peace Constitution for the document renounces war and outlaws war as a means to settle international conflict. While in the United States, in part perhaps because we refuse to allow a moral reckoning of our own actions and what we were willing to do, not once, but twice, we have continued on the path of nuclear proliferation, including building new nuclear weapons that are exponentially more powerful than the ones we used against Japan.

This is a challenging subject – war and peace and more particularly, the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And it is complicated. Japan made an incredible turn around toward peace from a ferocious militaristic monarchy responsible for horrible, unspeakable atrocities. Our own nation, while building a friendship and allegiance with Japan did not turn away from war but has instead been engaged in nearly continual war since World War II. Indeed we took over countries and lands far into the Pacific during World War II, continuing as colonizers of resources to feed our industrial machine. And others have followed us along this nuclear path.

This week, while the overwhelming majority of Japanese were pleased to see President Obama visit Hiroshima, they also hold concern that today Japan and its President, as its neighbors pursue nuclear weapon futures, will turn away from its commitment to peace. Already, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has moved laws through the Japanese Parliament that shift the line around the use of Japan's military. For many peace leaders in Japan, and for many who remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they worry that this visit to Japan was part of a shift in Japan moving closer toward military engagement. For these leaders, President Obama offered soaring words about a world without nuclear weapons, but offered no commitments – and for many in Japan, more than an apology, they wanted to see a stronger commitment to peace and non – proliferation, for they know the true costs of nuclear weapons, and nuclear technology.

In the words from the anthem this morning, written after the nuclear disaster in Fukushima our anthem:

How difficult seeing the truth is.
How lonely thinking the truth is.
How brave speaking the truth is.
And, how warm is the hand
which is held out to people crying in the sad wind
behind the lie.

Please...
feel the connection of the sky,
and the connection of our hearts.

On this Memorial Day, let us open our hearts in prayer and love to all who have lost their lives as a consequence of war, soldiers and civilians. Let us remember the loss to families and loved ones and the costs of war to the surviving loved ones, to future generations and to our planet. May we remember the ever growing need to tell the stories of war not as lessons of victory and loss, but mindful of the moral failings of war, not to provide easy answers, but to sit with the inconvenient truth of what war brings out in us that we might realize more fully its costs and be willing to build another way.