The Consequences of Arrogance

Elizabeth Nist

As we walked to the train station in Kobe that morning, I was looking forward to the hour and a half ride to Hiroshima as a chance to meditate on how I felt about my country's development and use of the atom bomb.

I was eight months old on August 6, 1945. Sometimes I feel as though the bomb is my fraternal twin, The Little Boy -- an intrinsic part of my psyche, a living being. In my daily routine, I block the bomb out of my mind--just as I numb myself against the facts of germ warfare, world hunger, acid rain, the thinning ozone layer, and all the other human atrocities that, together, overwhelm me. But in Hiroshima, I didn't want to be numb. I wanted to be sensitized. I wanted to be vulnerable to the human experience of atomic war.

All of this churned in my mind as my husband Jack and I climbed the stairs to the boarding platform and looked for our gate. After a week in Kobe, I was becoming more confident of my sense of direction even when I couldn't read any of the signs. I was getting used to strangers on the trains approaching us with broad smiles to ask if they could practice their English on us and then looking confused by our American accents. I was getting used to being stared at. "Gaijin!" (Foreigner!) Children giggled behind their hands watching Jack duck his 6'2" frame to enter a doorway. "Takei des yo!" [Giant!]

Three weeks in Japan--but not as tourists staying in hotels, taking guided tours, and speaking English all day. We were guests of the Kido family, staying in the Tuan home: Kido-san, the father; Kaneko, the mother; Shotaro, the eldest son (age 21); Junko, the daughter (age 22); Daikichi, the youngest (age 14); Sakuko, an aunt; and more aunts, uncles, and cousins who lived nearby. We felt honored and welcome. Every day a different family member guided us on and off trains and through mazes of street malls, teaching us Japanese signs and a "survival" vocabulary.

Shotaro had spent a year with us as a foreign exchange student, and the family had spent Christmas with Jack and me and our twin sons, Bobby and David, in our home in Utah. Ever since their visits they had repeatedly invited us to come to Kobe.

Only Kido-san and Shotaro spoke English with any fluency. Nevertheless, Kaneko and I developed our own style of conversation, always with the dictionary alongside the constant flow of gestures and laughter. We were close friends, not only sharing each other's homes and holidays, cooking and doing dishes together; she had even shared her son with me.

The evening before our trip to Hiroshima, we sipped tea with Kido-san and Kaneko at their dining room table. They talked about the War. Kido-san was in elementary school then, watching from the safety of Mount Rokko as his city was bombed by Americans. He told us of finding his father sitting on a tattered box in the middle of the smoking cinders that had been their home. He told us we were sitting on top of those cinders now ourselves. Kobe, like all Japanese ports, was almost totally destroyed by U.S. fire-bombing. This was months before we "bombed" Hiroshima.

The general belief that we dropped the bomb to save thousands of American lives is a myth. By the end of July the Japanese knew they were beaten. Their cities were already in ashes.

Kido-san seemed to understand intuitively that we should not have a guide to Hiroshima. Instead he gave us a map and careful instructions. Kaneko wrote their name, address, and telephone number in Japanese. "Get lost, show this, anybody. They point you."

I stopped, nervously hesitating at the entrance gate to the Peace Garden, quelling the emotion these thoughts provoked in me. I was afraid I would cry. Jack stood transfixed in his own anxious pilgrimage.

Looming ahead of us, a large statue was set against the backdrop of a fountain of water with a view of the Memorial Museum behind. The sculptured figure of a mother in stride bent over the infant in her arms without losing hold of another child clinging behind her: Mother and Child in the Tempest.

Suddenly my emotion exploded. "The sins of the fathers . . ." I felt betrayed by my country. As a second generation World War II survivor, I am not caught up in the same spirit of revenge, racism, and protectionism as other older Americans are. I feel trapped in the dilemma of either supporting a national government that wages illegal wars and then lies to me or denouncing the fatherland that has shaped me. How can intelligent, moral people commit violent acts against one another? What does the constant threat of annihilation do to us? Does a mother finally have only the fragility of her own body to shelter her children?

There, beside the Fountain of Prayer, I looked up into the larger-than-life face of this universal mother enfolding her children. I wondered if my own sons and daughter would survive the world bequeathed to us all.

The displays in the Museum retold the story:

•On August 6, 1945, the Enola Gay, an American B-29, dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

•By the end of 1945, atomic bomb deaths in Hiroshima numbered between 130,000 and 150,000.

•Another 60,000 to 80,000 people died in Nagasaki.

•Many more died over the years after the bombings from chronic illnesses caused by radiation. Some victims are still suffering from radiation-related sickness.

Facts. Touring the Peace Memorial Museum was like watching the 10:00 p.m. news. The facts distanced the event nearly half a century into history. Cold, hard facts.

Written text in several languages explained each exhibit. The English text was obviously written by Japanese: the angry voice was distinct and filled with a clear pattern of non-native errors. This bothered me. The Museum is an international center to promote peace and understanding. Why hadn't the Japanese asked a native English speaker to edit the

text . . . as a courtesy to English-speaking guests? It jarred me. In a country otherwise so pre-occupied with correctness, why would they be so cavalier about my language? I looked up. Jack was nearby, but also alone, on his own tour. Here there were so many foreigners, we each blended anonymously. I moved on slowly from exhibit to exhibit.

A diarama of life-sized wax figures searching for water, for the river, for escape from the fire-storm. Procession of Ghosts. Clothes burned in an instant. Hands, faces, breasts swelled in purple welts that burst and left skin hanging like rags. Humans pushed on, holding their hands before them and dragging their burned bodies, falling and piling onto one another, groaning and dying. . . .

•Graphs and statistics of thermal radiation and blast pressure . . .

•A photograph of a human shadow imprinted on the steps at the entrance to the Sumitono Bank . . .

•Photographs of groups of people taken approximately two hours after the explosion . . .

•Streaks of "black rain" on the white wall . . .

While I was looking at the remains of belongings of a Hiroshima schoolboy--a melted metal lunch-pail, a burned school book, and the shreds of his uniform--I overheard a young man and woman passing by me. They spoke in heavily accented English--his accent German and hers perhaps Dutch or Belgian. I understood distinctly only his condemnation, " . . . American barbarians!" And he, a German!

". . . An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew./ A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belson." Sylvia Plath's lines rang in my head. How is Auschwitz different from this? How is Pearl Harbor different?

At that moment I understood. There is no difference. These events are all the consequences of arrogance: the German arrogance as the superrace, the Japanese arrogance as world conquerors, the American arrogance as inventors and controllers of the bomb. Even here, the Peace Memorial Museum's presentation of exhibits is itself a kind of propaganda, wholly one-sided, showing only the intense suffering of the Hiroshima victims. Not once is there mention of the Japanese provocation that brought the United States into the Pacific War nor is there any hint of the atrocities committed by the Japanese against their Asian neighbors and American POWs. But I have been to Pearl Harbor, too.

Somehow, all sides of the story must be told together. The focus must not be on the suffering so much as the cause--the arrogance that leads to one man's, one nation's, cruelty to another.

The drawings and stories of the Hiroshima survivors are strikingly similar in horror and tone to the drawings and stories of Jews who survived German concentration camps. In the Museum Hall there was a watercolor depicting the inside of a warehouse lined with rows of tables loaded with boxes of bones and debris. A few solitary figures carefully picked over the piles with chopsticks. It was titled: Looking for Relatives.

Usually works like this are exhibited separately, in places constructed to sanctify suffering and justify nationalism rather than to sanctify understanding and justify internationalism.

Finally, Jack and I paused to rest in the Hall lounge. Jack, a former Navy pilot, said the images in the museum did not shock him as much as he thought they would. He took a yellowed newspaper clipping out of his wallet. The picture, headlined "A Breath of Hell," showed a

little girl running down the road, naked, her arms in the air, screaming in pain, her back burned off by napalm.

"When I saw this in Vietnam, I thought, 'Nothing Not even my own life--can justify that . . . nothing,'" he said. "What's the difference here? It's the same experience."

A Hiroshima survivor's painting shows a fatally burned bomb victim fleeing in pain.

We walked along the edge of the reflecting pond, through the park, toward A-bomb Dome. A group of people chanted and waved placards in front of the Cenotaph, exploiting the sentiment of this park to draw attention to their own cause.

Flocks of doves engulfed tourists who offered them food despite the signs warning that the birds carry contagious and fatal diseases--doves originally set free in the tradition of peace at the dedication of the Garden.

We photographed Hiroshima's various monuments: the Memorial Mound, A-Bomb Dome, the many colorful bouquets of children's paper cranes. We stopped in the middle of Aioibashi Bridge and watched children floating paper sailboats along the shore of the Ota River. Ground Zero. The estuary where the Ota River fans into the six rivers of Hiroshima was the aiming point, an easy target from the air. For some time I stared quietly at the children playing below me.

Then, we turned back. Jack rang the Bell of Peace, but I could not. For me the symbol of peace is silence. Here, in this place, even sound felt like an act of aggression.

As we left the Garden around dusk, palm trees waved in a breeze off the Inland Sea. Outside the Peace Park the lights of the city came on, and the streets filled with people returning home from work. It seemed as if war had never happened here in this clean, modern, and vigorous city.

I don't know what I really anticipated I'd find in Hiroshima when I left Kobe that morning. I think I half expected a huge, city-wide brown hollow of wasteland with a museum and a pond in the middle. Instead, I saw a lush, crowded metropolis. The physical scars on the city were nearly healed; my own wounds from the bombing are still festering.

Consequently, I feel compelled to share what I saw there--to risk inadequate communication in order to prevent a more terrible danger: forgetting. For the pressures to erase Hiroshima from our historical consciousness are stronger now than our desire to remember and understand. Indeed, as time passes and new generations come to power, memory fades. Psychic numbing is one of the greatest problems of our age--our national narcotic.

A combination of technical prowess, economic priorities, and American protectionism blocks our emotional perceptions of what modern technology is doing to all of us--

arrogance disguised in "progress." As new nationalisms, new alliances, and new weapon systems are promoted, the past is deliberately and selectively obscured.

What can I do? First, I can remember. While I may not be able to bring the sunken U.S.S. Arizona to the Inland Sea, I can bring the stories of Auschwitz, Pearl Harbor, and Hiroshima into my classroom. I can promote an international perspective--a world view --by transforming my curriculum, by participating in programs like peace conferences, international student exchanges and foreign language training. I can stand up against the arrogance of any who would strip me of my liberties in the name of a patriotism that is blinder than justice, that gives loyalty to demagogues like Hitler, that allows my "democratic" national government to defy international law when such law becomes inconvenient.

I can work for the rights of all people to live with hope for the future, food for the present, opportunity for self-actualization in any normal lifetime.

I have come away from Hiroshima having found the courage to accept myself--as I am--unsure about lifeboats of beliefs which family and friends cling to with such strong conviction. There are few answers, but many questions. The challenge is to accept life without certainty. In fact, I must embrace uncertainty; I must wrap my arms around it and hold on to "not knowing enough" to impose my views on others. I can only oppose those who do.

I am the mother standing in front of the Peace Museum at Hiroshima, sheltering the daughter clutched to me as I reach behind me fearing I will lose hold of my sons' hands.

Christmas Eve, 1985--the year Shotaro's family was with us in Utah--our son David, age 5 then, talked about war as we tucked him into bed.

"Dad, animals kill for food, don't they?"

"Yes, David, they do."

"And people kill for food sometimes too, don't they?"

"Yes."

"But animals kill because they're hungry. People don't always kill only because they're hungry, do they?"

"No. Sometimes people kill for other reasons."

"Like war? You were in a war, weren't you Dad? What's war like?"

"Like a nightmare, and you can't wake up."

"I don't want to be in a war."

"I hope you'll never have to be, David."

"Don't worry, Dad, I won't. The world is more sane than that."

❧ *Elizabeth Nist teaches literature and composition at Anoka-Ramsey Community College. This essay was revised during a Minnesota Writing Project Summer Institute. Liz is also Past President of MCTE.*

❧ *The drawings included in this section were done by survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and are presented here through the courtesy of Donna Casella who teaches at Mankato State University.*

Bridging Our Worlds: Celebrating Literacy and Community

What?	**A Literacy and Book Fair**
When?	**Friday, October 20 7:30 p.m. - 10:00 p.m.** **Saturday, October 21 9:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.**
Where?	**Ronald M. Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning** **1030 University Avenue St. Paul, MN 55104**
Registration:	**Available On-site $20 for 2 days, $15 for 1 day, half price for students**
Co-Sponsors:	**ARTS-US, SASE, Milkweed Press, Inner City Youth League, Creative Consultations, Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Schools, COMPAS, and a variety of booksellers.**
Friday:	**7:00 Registration** **7:30 Kickoff: Afrikan Perfection (Afrikan Drum Corps), Readings and panel of authors and educators** **8:30 Readings & storytellers (concurrent sessions)** **9:30 Reception: music and food, book fair**
Guest Authors:	**John Minceski, Alexs Pate, Mary Rockcastle, Deborah Keenan, Julie Landsman, Rose McGee, George Claborn**
Storyteller:	**Jerry Blue**
Saturday:	**9:30 Kickoff: Walker West Music Academy and other student performance groups** **10:00 Group reading of authors** **10:30 Readings & storytellers (concurrent sessions)** **11:30 Student readings and performances** **12:30 Reception: music and food, book fair**
Guest Authors:	**Linda S. Finney, Alma Curry, Venise Battle, Michael Fedo, Davida Adejouman, John Caddy, Diego Vasquez**
Storytellers:	**Sean Brown, ARTS-US Young Storytellers**