



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

n-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Hiroshima Message: Reconciliation Instead of Retaliation

by Tadatashi AKIBA

We have long continued our effort to raise public awareness of the need to abolish nuclear weapons by conveying to the world the facts of the atomic bombing and the message born out of the suffering and struggles of the hibakusha, the survivors of the atomic bombings. Our hope and wish is to create a 21st century of peace and humanity free from nuclear weapons and violence and free from all hatred and terror.

The theme of my presentation today is ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. According to Ernst Heinrich Haeckel and Sigmund Freud, it means that the development of the individual is a short and quick recapitulation of the development of the entire human race. I am interpreting this rather loosely to mean that the rebuilding of Hiroshima recapitulated the essence of human history by recapturing the wisdom and legacy of the entire human race. Actually I am saying more. In order for evolution to occur, the arrow should also be directed the other way as well. The rebirth and re-creation of Hiroshima should become a model for building the future for all of us.

A-bomb Damage

On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped a single atomic bomb on the center of Hiroshima. At the time, approximately 350 thousand people were living in the city and by the end of December 1945 about 140 thousand of them were dead.

The combined effects of heat, blast, and radiation instantaneously slaughtered a hundred thousand human beings and reduced Hiroshima to rubble -- an experience that was, to those who witnessed it, the "end of the world." Conditions in the city immediately after the bombing are impossible to convey adequately in words. People became ghosts or demons, their skin charred and dangling from their bodies, their flesh and even bones exposed. Mothers tried desperately to nurse charred babies. Babies clung desperately to the breasts of dead or dying mothers. Those who managed to survive had lost everything, even hope. Many who survived sincerely envied the dead. In fact, we know from eyewitness accounts that many victims took their own lives as soon as they were fully conscious of having survived.

To make matters worse, uninjured survivors and even relief workers or relatives who entered Hiroshima after the explosion fell ill and died of what was then called A-bomb disease. We know it now as radiation poisoning.

Including these "entry survivors," 85 thousand official A-bomb survivors were living in Hiroshima City at the end of March 2003. Even now, a half-century later, thousands still suffer the physical and emotional aftereffects. A-bomb survivors, or hibakusha, know in their bones the devastating inhumanity of the atomic bomb. What they saw of "the end of the world" was enough to convince them that nuclear weapons are an "absolute evil." They are determined "never to allow anyone else to experience such horror." Having seen the end of the world, they have worked for five decades to prevent it.

Reconstruction of Hiroshima

(1) The heroic efforts of Hiroshima citizens

For hibakusha, the reconstruction of the city started with securing their own lives. As I mentioned earlier, the entire city was hell, a lifeless chaos. And in this hell, while many of the living literally envied the dead, many of those who wanted to live were dying mysteriously.

Under these circumstances, courage was not enough. For the hibakusha to continue to live, they needed desperately to understand the meaning of life, the meaning of survival. Philosophy to them was not an academic exercise, it was the first essential step toward mobilizing the energy for survival. They were forced to capture and internalize, mostly on a subconscious level, the entire wisdom of human history and philosophy.

As a symbolic representation of this process, let me read an English translation of Sadako Kurihara's poem entitled "We shall bring forth new life"

We Shall Bring Forth New Life

It was night in the basement of a broken building.

Victims of the atomic bomb

Crowded into the candleless darkness,

Filling the room to overflowing --

The smell of fresh blood, the stench of death,

The stuffiness of human sweat, the writhing moans --

When, out of the darkness, came a wondrous voice.

"Oh! The baby's coming!" it said.

In the basement turned to living hell

A young woman had gone into labor!

The others forgot their own pain in their concern:

What could they do for her, having not even a match

To bring light to the darkness?

Then came another voice: "I am a midwife.

I can help her with the baby."

It was a woman who had been moaning in pain only moments before.

And so, a new life was born

In the darkness of that living hell.

And so, the midwife died before the dawn,

Still soaked in the blood of her own wounds.

We shall give forth new life!

We shall bring forth new life!

Even to our death.

Thus the reconstruction of the city started on a new terrain. Hibakusha built most of what they needed with their bare hands initially. I do not have to tell you how difficult the job must have been. Finding clothes to wear, food to eat and shelters to sleep in for that population was not easy. However, the mayor, city officials, business people, citizens and all others who had the tiniest relation to the city made a gargantuan effort. Even today I cannot think of that period without bowing my head toward those whose blood, sweat and tears accomplished so much.

It is also important to note that, in addition to the heroic efforts of Hiroshima citizens, the reconstruction of our city was made possible by generous help from our neighbors and from all over the world.

As soon as people in the suburbs of Hiroshima and nearby areas had heard that Hiroshima was in need of help, right after the bombing, many came into the central areas of Hiroshima to help the injured and those in need. It is an essential part of human nature to help those in distress. All of us want to help. And I must mention especially that even today hibakusha and their friends have strong urges to help. For example, at the time of the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, hibakusha and citizens of Hiroshima organized relief teams to help the victims and to restore the city. After September 11th, Hiroshima citizens reacted in a similar fashion. Some people flew to New York to participate in reconstruction efforts and others raised funds for the same purpose.

(2) Generous help from all over the world

People throughout the world poured considerable good will and fresh energy into sustaining and reconstructing the lives and health of the hibakusha, their society and the city itself.

Let me mention just a few names to illustrate the kinds of acts that touched Hiroshima.

Dr. Marcel Junod, the chief representative to Japan of the Red Cross International Committee, negotiated with GHQ and obtained roughly 15 tons of medical supplies, which he gave to the governor of Hiroshima Prefecture. These supplies included normal human plasma and other valuable items never before available to Japanese doctors.

The New Yorker magazine devoted one entire issue of August 31, 1946, to report the story of the tragedy as told by Mr. John Hersey. Within one day, 800,000 copies were sold. As a result, the world understood the human dimensions of the tragedy and suffering. Also notable were the thousands of letters we received encouraging Hiroshima citizens and making generous personal offers of assistance in rebuilding the city.

Mr. Floyd Schmoer, a Quaker activist, built "Houses for Hiroshima" using money donated by American citizens and his own hands, together with those of international volunteers. Mr. Norman Cousins, chief editor of the Saturday Review, created a program that recruited "spiritual parents" to adopt the orphans who had lost their parents, family and relatives. Another effort by Mr. Cousins called the "Hiroshima Maidens" project made it possible for twenty-five girls to receive operations at Mt. Sinai Hospital to remove keloid scars. The operations improved the girls' appearances, but more importantly gave them new hope and confidence for the future.

These efforts not only gave hibakusha new hope to live and renewed their trust in humanity but also helped volunteers, participants and others who cooperated to heal from the collective wounds brought by the atomic bombs, thus uniting those people who were trying to transcend the framework of hatred, violence and retaliation.

(3) The Hiroshima Peace Memorial City Construction Law

A major instrument that made the citywide reconstruction effort possible was a special piece of legislation, The Hiroshima Peace Memorial City Construction Law. It was promulgated on August 6, 1949, to promote Hiroshima's recovery. The intent of the law is expressed in Article One: The law "aims at the construction of Hiroshima as a Peace Memorial City, a symbol of the ideal of making lasting peace a reality."

The law established basic guidelines for the reconstruction. The national government began to provide substantial financial support and granted the city former military and other national property. The rebuilding of Hiroshima was underway.

In 1952, the Peace Memorial Park and the Peace Memorial Museum, also known as the A-Bomb Museum, were completed. On the memorial cenotaph in the park one can read the following inscription: Please rest peacefully, for we will not repeat the evil. These words summarize exactly what I have tried to convey to you.

The achievements of hibakusha

Having witnessed the ultimate consequence of animosity, hibakusha deliberately envisioned a world beyond war in which the human family learns to cooperate to ensure the wellbeing of all. In fact, they believed for decades that the human family was evolving slowly but steadily in that direction.

Now, however, they see the world being forced into a framework of fear and hatred. They see gullible publics being persuaded that only a powerful military backed by nuclear weapons can protect them from their enemies. They see the world diving headlong toward a militarism far too reminiscent of the militaristic fascism that commandeered their nation prior to World War II.

If we hope to survive the 21st century, we must emphasize that understanding the experience of the A-bomb survivors is among the most important tasks we face.

In my 1999 Peace Declaration, I summarized three important achievements of the hibakusha. The first is that the survivors opted for life under the circumstances under which no one could have blamed them had they chosen death. Even under those conditions, they chose to live not as desperate animals but as decent human beings. Very early on they began rejecting hatred and revenge in favor of reconciliation. This superhuman effort to remain human has proven extremely important.

The second accomplishment of the hibakusha derives from their willingness and determination to tell the world what happened to them. To talk about an experience burned so intensely into one's unconscious is to re-experience the unspeakable pain of that day. Nevertheless, our hibakusha tell over and over about an experience they would prefer to forget. In doing so, they may very well have prevented a third use of nuclear weapons.

The third achievement of the hibakusha is their rejection of revenge and their pursuit of reconciliation. They do not see the human race as a collection of enemies. They refuse to view international society as a tense standoff among selfish entities inevitably battling over territory and resources. Rather, they see all human individuals as members of one big human family, a single unit. They have adopted a revolutionary worldview that regards the human race as a single whole and works toward reconciliation.

Reconciliation and humanity

Their point of departure is deceptively simple. When the hibakusha tell their stories, one of the most commonly heard phrases is "I want no one else to suffer the way I did." This statement is revolutionary because it truly means "no one." Not President Truman who ordered the bomb dropped, not the scientists who created the bomb, not even the military personnel who actually delivered it. This inclusiveness is the essence of the hibakusha's worldview.

Personally, I believe that hibakusha had subconsciously captured this truth the moment they chose to live. Then slowly but surely, it has emerged on the conscious level as their determination to turn the world away from revenge and retaliation, and toward reconciliation and co-creation of a collective future. Every day it becomes more obvious to me that within this message lies our only hope.

World situation

Why do I feel this way? The answer is quite simple. Worship of nuclear weapons is rapidly leading us toward a crisis. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the primary international agreement for the abolition of nuclear weapons, is on the verge of collapse.

The United States, the nuclear superpower, has publicly reserved the option of a preemptive first strike with nuclear weapons. It has openly stated its intention to develop small "useable" nuclear weapons and is seeking to resume production of plutonium pits, the atomic bomb triggers for hydrogen bombs. All these efforts are clear violations of the NPT. In addition, North Korea has withdrawn from the NPT and has told the US it plans to build and possess nuclear weapons. India, Pakistan, and Israel still refuse to sign the NPT.

However, the problem goes beyond nuclear weapons. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11 two years ago, the world appears enthralled by the concept of retaliation. Somehow it has become acceptable to claim, as President Bush did in his September appearance at the UN, that war is necessary to preserve the peace. We have finally entered that Orwellian realm in which politicians say "War is peace," and people believe them.

This situation is symbolized most powerfully by the US-UK war on Iraq. Those who started that war discounted millions of people around the world who were calling desperately for continued UN inspections and a peaceful resolution. As a result, thousands upon thousands of innocent women, children and elderly have been needlessly slaughtered, and the natural environment has been contaminated with substances that will remain dangerously radioactive for billions of years. Meanwhile, the weapons of mass destruction, which were the original excuse for the war, have yet to be found.

It is no exaggeration to say that by ignoring UN inspections and resolutions representing the "rule of law," we are returning to an age in which the "rule of power" based on violence determines the fate of the world. The planetary symbol of the rule of law is the United Nations. The United Nations is a light illuminating a future of peace for the human race. We must make every effort to ensure that this light is not extinguished. We must help it shine ever more brightly.

It is important to remember that the United Nations was established because we, the human race, learned important lessons from World War II and our pre-World War II history. We wanted to make sure that we would not repeat our predecessors' mistakes. However, I fear that our memories of World War II, especially those of the atomic bombings, are fading rapidly around the world.

Most of us, including those guiding the world today, have no experience of war. We, and they, just can't imagine the horror of the atomic bomb. We don't spend much time learning about it either. John Hersey's Hiroshima, Arata Osada's Children of the A-bomb, Kenzaburo Oe's Hiroshima Notes, and Jonathan Schell's Fate of the Earth -- these good books are all but forgotten. As George Santayana warned, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Unfortunately, we are forgetting, and the danger of nuclear war is mounting.

Toward the abolition of nuclear weapons

We cannot simply sit and watch this ominous trend develop. Let me describe briefly what the City of Hiroshima is doing to change it.

(1) Hiroshima-Nagasaki Peace Study Course

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the hibakusha's message carries our only hope. We must make sure that the facts about Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the hibakusha's message are shared throughout the world. For this purpose we are making efforts to establish Hiroshima-Nagasaki Peace Study Courses in major colleges and universities around the world.

Earlier I described three major achievements of the A-bomb survivors, the second of which was the hibakusha's commitment to talk about the A-bomb tragedy and thereby help to prevent a third use of a nuclear weapon.

A-bomb survivor testimony is extremely effective in conveying the tragedy of the bombings. The words and gestures, the very presence of a survivor is so powerful. Therefore, we have relied too heavily on sending them to classes, meetings, exhibitions, conferences and symposia.

Now we are beginning to realize that we will not be able to rely on them much longer. Their average age is already over 70, and we have lost some of our most dependable speakers. Whole groups have disbanded for lack of membership.

Therefore, we must find effective ways to present the hibakusha message and the tragic facts of the atomic bombings without the hibakusha. One way we have found is by establishing what we are calling the Hiroshima-Nagasaki Peace Study Course in colleges, universities and communities around the world.

Through this academic approach, we seek to educate students from vastly differing backgrounds. We will take steps to provide information about these courses, and their curricula, through websites around the world in order to encourage their propagation and exchange experiences.

The Jewish experience, particularly the holocaust experience, has a prominent position in academia. It has been studied formally and taught to succeeding generations in numerous college and community courses as an important human experience or legacy.

The experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, are barely mentioned in most school and university curricula. Few have any courses at all that convey this experience to our young. The basic information is sometimes presented as part of a peace campaign or a special lecture. Sometimes survivors receive special opportunities to tell their stories, but it is extremely rare for a university to take the A-bombings up as a formal academic subject.

With gratitude, I would like to mention several of the few universities, which have been engaged in this effort. International Christian University and Waseda University in Tokyo, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima City University and Hiroshima Shudo University in Hiroshima, and several other universities in Japan, have offered courses such as this. In the United States, I know that Tufts University, where I formerly taught, American University in Washington DC, Wesleyan University, Brown University, Binghamton University, Connecticut College and a few others have offered courses similar to what I am calling for. And other universities will join shortly. One is the Institute of Political Science Studies in Paris (Institut d'Etudes Sciences Politiques), a national educational and research institute, which is going to start a Ph.D. course on Hiroshima and Nagasaki this coming spring. Berlin Technical College will start its course next summer. A number of other universities are showing great interest in starting their own courses as well.

This activity is among our highest priorities, and I will do whatever I can to encourage the establishment of these courses in schools around the world.

(2) Mayors for Peace and its Emergency Campaign to Ban Nuclear Weapons

Since I used to teach at a university, working with academic institutions comes natural. Another effort has to do more directly with my role as the mayor of a city.

The cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki formed an international organization called the Mayors for Peace in 1982 to encourage solidarity among the cities of the world in an effort to arouse demand for a peaceful world free from nuclear weapons. Today, we have 555 city members in 107 countries and regions. The number is increasing quite rapidly. We meet every four years in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and we employ a number of techniques to lobby national governments to eliminate nuclear weapons. This is another responsibility of the highest priority, and I encourage all mayors to join our conference and strengthen our solidarity in working toward the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Last April, as President of Mayors for Peace, I attended the NPT Preparatory Committee meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland. At this meeting, I had the opportunity to speak to the delegates and express the intense desire of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for the abolition of nuclear weapons. I requested that when the States Parties review the NPT in 2005, they take this opportunity to pass by majority vote, regardless of any nations that may oppose it, a final document that stipulates the following: first, the immediate de-alerting of all nuclear weapons; second, unequivocal action toward dismantling and destroying all nuclear weapons in accordance with a clearly stipulated timetable; and third, negotiations on a universal Nuclear Weapons Convention establishing a verifiable and irreversible regime for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

In 2005, the 60th anniversary of the atomic bombings, the mayors who belong to Mayors for Peace are going to help our people raise their voices and lobby their government leaders to end the nuclear crisis. In October 2003, at our Executive Meeting in Manchester, the Secretariat proposed an Emergency Campaign to Ban Nuclear Weapons. We received overwhelming support, and it has now been decided that we will work with other NGOs around the world to promote a worldwide grassroots campaign.

First, we will mobilize a dozen or more members of the Mayors for Peace and hundreds of NGO representatives to attend the NPT Preparatory Committee next year in New York. This will lead to mobilizing hundreds of mayors and thousands of NGO representatives to attend the Review Conference itself in the year 2005.

I am happy to report that while I was in Pakistan, India and the United Kingdom recently I talked to the mayors of several cities and they are willing to join this campaign.

At the 2005 NPT Review Conference, member mayors will attend the opening ceremony and speak during the time allotted for NGO presentations. They will use techniques of nonviolent activism to pressure their national governments. They will coordinate their efforts with other NGOs to hold meetings, symposia, concerts, picture exhibitions and other grassroots events to ensure that governments know where the people stand on this issue.

Between the 2004 Preparatory Committee and the 2005 Review Conference itself, we will call on member cities to raise the profile of the anti-nuclear movement on Hiroshima and Nagasaki days, August 6 and 9 of the year 2004. Making these days major events will arouse public interest leading toward the 2005 Review Conference. Each city will implement its own citizen-oriented program, but we are also hoping to find a way to link these activities, perhaps through television or Internet simulcasts.

"Impossible," some will say, "The nuclear powers will never agree", and "The military industrial complex is too powerful". Well, I have no illusions about the task before us. It took a hundred years and a terribly bloody war to free the slaves in the United States, and then another century to free them from the terror of lynchings and the humiliation of segregation. It took 30 years for Gandhi and Ali Jinnah to free India and Pakistan from British rule. It took 15 years to stop the Vietnam War. And Nelson Mandela was in prison for 28 years. Bottom-up change requires time and great sacrifice. Again, people of moral and spiritual vision must again take up the struggle. The abolition of nuclear weapons is no less important and no less just than the abolition of slavery. We are not just fighting a technology or a weapon, either. We are fighting the very idea that anyone could, for any reason, unleash a nuclear holocaust. We are fighting the idea that a small group of powerful men should have the capacity to launch Armageddon. We are fighting the idea that we should spend trillions of dollars on military overkill while billions of us live in dire, life-threatening poverty.

Concluding Remarks

Our immediate objective is the elimination of nuclear weapons, but our long-term goal is to make this planet a "spiritual home for all people." We need our planet home to be filled with compassion, to be a source of creativity and energy for our children and youth, a personal place of rest and comfort for all, young or old, male and female. In that "spiritual home for all people" grows an abundant Forest of Memory, and the River of Reconciliation and Humanity flowing from that forest is plied by Reason, Conscience and Compassion, ships that sail ultimately to the Sea of Hope and the Future.

I want my children and grandchildren to gaze with yours at the setting sun over the Sea of Hope and know that, despite our conflicts and other serious problems, their world will not explode in terminal, radioactive violence. To achieve this simple and obvious objective, we must all do everything we can to eliminate nuclear weapons and eliminate war altogether. I hope you will join with me here today in committing ourselves wholeheartedly to accomplishing this lofty goal, this realistic goal, by the time we turn this world over to our children.

Hiroshima Mayor Tadatashi Akiba delivered this address to the inaugural conference of the Asia office of UNITAR in Hiroshima on November 17, 2003. Akiba is the chairman of Mayors for Peace.