

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message

“An Empty Urn” by Tamiko Panzella

** “An Empty Urn” is written by Tamiko Panzella, a grand-daughter of Mrs. May Yamaoka, a devoted member of Alameda Buddhist Temple. The essay was partly read by Ken Watanabe, a famous Japanese actor, when NHK broadcasted the TV program entitled, “Ken Watanabe Report from America: Hibakushas who lived under the Star-Spangled Banner” on August 21st on TV Japan. I would like to share this very impressive essay with you. Thank you very much, May and Tamiko!*

I am looking up at a wall covered in Japanese characters. I am crying, even though I cannot read a single one. But I know that each name represents an elementary school-aged victim of the atomic bomb. The wall is covered in sisters and brothers, daughters and sons. I know that they died unimaginably painful deaths, that they each witnessed true evil within the last moments of their too-short lives. They died on August 6, 1945, in Hiroshima, Japan, and my grandma's sister was one of them.

Under any other circumstances, I would be embarrassed for crying in public. But so many tears have been shed in this place that mine go unnoticed. An elderly man sits on a bench behind me, and he is crying too. Maybe his brother or sister is up there on that wall. Maybe his family never found his sibling's body among the heaping piles of burnt, tattered flesh. I know that my grandma and her father found little Mana's body after searching through the wreckage for three days and her father recognized her only by the embroidery on her undergarments; her face had been burned and bruised beyond recognition. If they had come along a few minutes later, she would have been buried in a mass grave with hundreds of other unidentifiable casualties. Maybe this old man's little brother or sister had been in one of those piles, and he is crying here in hopes that this empty urn of a monument will carry his prayers. Or maybe he is like me; maybe he does not read Japanese either. Maybe he is crying because he knows that for every name was a child's face. That those faces blended together, indistinguishable from one another in the chaos that followed the blast, just as their names seem to blend together now on this wall. That each child's cries were indistinguishable among the thousands of other desperate voices. That the streets and buildings in which those children had been brought up were made indistinguishable, eradicated in wind that followed the intense flash of heat.

I look around and still can't believe that Peace Park, so full of color and beauty, was the setting for one of the ugliest events in history. Lush, green grass has overtaken the ruins that once spanned a one mile radius. The fallen buildings have been replaced by monuments and memorials, each covered in origami cranes in flocks of one thousand. My own cranes are flying somewhere among the others. The thousand cranes that my family, my friends, and I worked so hard to fold blend into the rainbow of the hundreds of thousands of cranes that other groups have folded. Each time I come to Japan, I bring one thousand cranes with me. This time, my new roommates helped me. I taught them how to fold the birds, and the story of how this tradition started.

I told them that Sadako Sasaki was two years old when the bomb was dropped. Ten years later, she fell sick as a result of the radiation. While in the hospital, she heard a story about a crane who lived to be one thousand years old. She thought that if she could fold one thousand paper cranes, the gods would cure her. She reached 644 before she died at twelve years old, and her classmates finished the remaining 346 to be buried with her. A few years after her death, a statue of her holding a golden crane was erected in the Peace Park. Since then, millions of people have brought thousands of millions of cranes to Hiroshima.

“Aww,” my roommates crooned when I finished my story. “That’s so sad.” But they did not cry. And they could not understand why I, the girl who never lets anyone see her cry, was reduced to tears over a story about someone I did not even know. They helped me fold the cranes, but they did not understand what they were folding for. That the fruits of their labors would bring a splash of color into a place that seen so much darkness. That they were folding wings to help a city that has been brought to its knees, fly.

“Do you want to help me?” My little cousin, Alison, taps me on my leg and snaps me back to reality. “With what?” I asked, dabbing the last tears from the corners of my eyes. “We’re making an offering.” She hands me a small water bottle, and I can tell that she is unsure of what she is supposed to do with it. I take her hand and lead her around the wall to where a tall memorial statue stands. I open the bottle, hand it back to her, and prod her to step forward. She places the bottle at the statue’s feet, then steps back next to me. We put our hands together, bow, and whisper, “*Namu Amida Butsu.*” “I put my faith in Buddha.” She looks around self-consciously, probably wondering why people are looking at her and smiling for doing what would usually be considered littering. She cannot grasp the significance of her actions; she does not know that she has provided fresh, clean water for people who had been so thirsty that they drank, and were ultimately killed, by water poisoned by radiation. If she knew, she would feel as proud as I did when I performed this ritual some thirteen years ago.

I was six years old when I made my first trip to Japan. My mom, my uncle, my sisters, and I went into the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum while my grandma waited outside. “Why isn’t she coming?” I asked, but I was shushed and ushered into the museum. I would find out soon enough.

It started off like a normal museum, but within a few rooms I began to feel as if I had descended into a nightmare. I saw images of extreme pain and suffering – people whose bodies had been mangled, whose clothing patterns had been emblazoned onto their skin, whose skin had melted and dripped off their bones like wax off a candle. I was carried out the emergency exit to where my grandma waited outside. We cried together, and I wondered why anyone would purposely cause so much pain, why they would be so mean. I would have nightmares for the following weeks, waking up in the middle of the night and asking those same questions.

My aunt remembers this and has decided to spare Alison the terror. We will not be visiting the museum on this trip. A part of me envies her innocence. But I will never forget the sense of pride I felt when giving water to those who had been thirsty for so long. My aunt may have mercifully spared my cousin the terror, but without that terror her actions have no meaning for her. I can feel the way my experience changed my life each time I choose forgiveness over anger, kindness over hostility, or love or hate.

I return to the other side of the wall where my grandma is showing the rest of my family which characters spell out her sister’s name. “There,” she says, pointing at the Wall. “Mana Tamura.” Her sunglasses cover her eyes, so I cannot tell what she is thinking. She is probably remembering her little sister as she was during the good times. I wonder if she is ever able to repress the awful memories of the three days she and her father spent looking for her body. I see a tear trickle out from behind her glasses and know that she has not forgotten.

We step back and look up at the wall of names which immortalize the children who proved to be so mortal. Now she is crying, I am crying, my sisters and my mom are crying. The old man is still sitting on that bench behind us, and he is still crying. Hundreds of people are probably crying throughout the park. Maybe they are crying for their lost brothers or sisters, sons or daughters, mothers or fathers. Maybe they are crying for their

friends, neighbors, their teachers, or their classmates. But they are probably like me: we are crying for them all.