

# **Emily Mitchell's Journey of Discovery to Hiroshima, Part 2**

## ***Descending on the "Land of the Rising Sun"***

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 19, 2008)

Last week we began our journey to Hiroshima with Emily Mitchell, a young lady working on her Senior Thesis Project at the University of South Carolina. In May, she will receive a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Religious Studies and Mathematics, and a minor in Spanish. She plans on eventually going to graduate school to pursue a PhD in Mathematics. Next year, however, she will be in Guatemala, volunteering with the San Lucas mission.

Emily chose to focus her Senior Thesis Project on the history of the Manhattan Project, and her connection to the atomic bomb through Oak Ridge. She has agreed to take you, the reader, along with her as she openly experiences her visit to Hiroshima. You will see the city from the eyes of a young Oak Ridge native. Her emotional experiences and her insightful search for meaning will enthrall you and entertain you as well. Come with me now as we continue our journey with Emily.

December 30, 2007

4:00 P.M. Japan Time

My first moments in Japan weren't exactly what I was expecting. I had imagined flying over this historically significant country and seeing it just like the WWII B-29 bombers flying in over Tokyo or the *Enola Gay* dropping the first nuclear weapon on Hiroshima. I had imagined great feelings of connection with the past, an instantaneous and momentous realization of the significance of war and time and culture.

Instead, it was cloudy. The only breathtaking moment was at the very beginning of our descent into Tokyo, when we dropped below the top cloud bank and came suddenly upon the intense orange glow of the lingering sunset. It seemed oddly appropriate that I saw Japan for the first time, precisely when the sun was setting over the Land of the Rising Sun.

We touched down at Narita International Airport, about one hour north of Tokyo by train. The initial awe at being in a foreign country was quickly transformed into panic.

"When did you say your next flight is?" my seat buddy asked. We didn't bother talking to each other until we were landing. I think we both dreaded the prospect of trying to hold conversation with a stranger for ten hours, with no escape.

"5:25" I replied.

"Whew, that's cutting it kind of close," my temporary friend said. It was 4:40 and we were still on the airplane. Commence deer-in-headlights look. I half-walked, half-ran out of the terminal. As I turned the last corner marked "International Arrivals" a four-letter word slipped out of my mouth. Customs, I had completely forgotten about Customs.

First, though, I had to stand in the "Why are you in Japan and did you bring anything illegal into our country?" line. It was very long. 4:53. OK, as soon as it says 5:15, I'll panic. I started imagining how I would get a hotel in Tokyo and find another way to get to Hiroshima. A bead of sweat ran down my back. I couldn't tell if it was from the time-crunch or the half-marathon I had just run to get to the line.

Desperation was only minutes away, when a miracle happened. I don't know what his name was, but I'm positive he was magical. He seemed to materialize out of nothing. In his hands he held a sign that read "Hiroshima." He shouted something, and two American-looking men with shaved heads raised their hands and ran up to him. He put them in the front of the line. "I need friends like that," I thought, still perspiring more than necessary considering the ambient temperature.

"Mitchell!"

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Did he just say my name? How did he know?

"Mitchell! Hiroshima! Mitchell!"

He really is trying to find me! Oh no, he's walking away.

"Excuse me!" I yelled, as loud as I thought appropriate for the situation. He kept walking towards the back of the line. What do I do? I started waving my hands.

"How do you say things in Japanese?" I said to myself.

"Sumi masen." A young man had heard my desperation, which apparently wasn't as quiet as I had thought. It worked. The magical airport man motioned me to the front of the line.

"You go here." I gave the bureaucracy agent my papers, and it seemed to take him an absurdly long time to finish the documentation.

As soon as I stepped past the desk, he appeared again. He directed me to the luggage carousel. When it appeared that I wasn't going fast enough, however, he began to run with me. I pointed to my bag and he grabbed it, almost handed it to me, then changed his mind and began running with my suitcase to customs, then to another line.

"OK, you tell someone you go Hiroshima." When I got in line, I saw the other two Americans going to Hiroshima. Everything will surely be alright now. An airport employee was showing the passengers a sign with a picture of a boarding pass on it. I gathered that we were supposed to have our boarding passes ready - uh-oh.

"I don't have one," I hoped the sign-holder could understand English.

"Oh no," my guardian angel reappeared behind me, grabbed my bag again, and ran me to the check-in counter. I got my ticket and my personal airport fairy pointed me up the escalator. I followed his directions to the departure gate. My lungs started to work again, and my breath returned to normal.

The two Americans were at the same gate. We started joking about the man that had single-handedly ushered all of us to our flight, right on time. I remarked that I was surprised he hadn't gotten frustrated with me. I certainly would have.

"Well, it's different here," the one with the cap said knowingly.

"You mean - people are actually nice?" I joked. He smiled and nodded, "Yeah."

December 31, 2007

5:15 P.M. Hiroshima

Going to Japan is like going forward in time. In fact, that's exactly what it is. At least if you fly in from the East.

"It is now tomorrow," the flight attendant informed us as we crossed the International Date Line. Besides this wormhole in the fabricated space-time organization we are constantly threaded into, the things here also seem to be from the future. It could be that, not being from a big city, I'm not

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used to the enormous TV's on the street corners advertising J-pop music videos, or the department stores bigger than Delaware, or the ubiquity of high-tech electronics, especially in the hands of small children.

I find myself expecting things to be a certain way, just because they've always been that way. Every time I cross the street here, I have to say to myself "Look right, *then* left," so I don't get run over. It still surprises me that magazines and books are read from right to left, and instead of shaking hands, people bow. These are things that have always been a certain way. I had taken it for granted that they are done *my* way, everywhere. I am constantly reminded here that maybe I am not the center of the world; maybe my culture isn't 'right' or 'standard,' but just one of many.

I was walking around the city yesterday, to get my bearings and some endorphins. It was cold and snowing. I walked for hours. From the Peace Memorial Park I went East through the Hondori shopping arcade to the Peace Promenade on the Kyobashi-gawa River. The sun came out, and the falling snow sparked on rippling water. I stopped walking, absorbing the beauty of the peaceful river amidst the city bustle. It was a different notion, however, that kept me motionless.

"This is one of the rivers," I remembered, "in which they tried to escape." This is one of the rivers in which they drowned. This is what I've read about from Hersey, Ibuse, and Dr. Hachiya's books about the immediate aftermath of the bombing.

I wondered, how much of this riverbed still retained remnants of those desperate bodies. After 62 years, how much of this mud still remembers that apocalyptic morning?

I shuddered and walked back toward the center of the city. It's easier not to think about it.

Wow, is this exciting or what! We are traveling in the steps of discovery of a young lady as she seeks truth amidst the memorials, the rebuilt city, the rivers and the people of Hiroshima. Can you feel the change in her? Can you see what she is going through?

Next week we will continue this marvelous journey as Emily visits Miyajima, an island just south of Hiroshima. Through her eyes and camera we will see the famous bright orange "floating torii" gate at the entrance of the Itsukushima-Jinja shrine - likely the most recognizable image of Japan.

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One of the rivers Emily saw where the victims of Little Boy tried to escape –  
the A-Bomb Dome is seen at left