

Emily Mitchell's Journey of Discovery to Hiroshima, Part 3

Celebrating New Years in Japan

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 26, 2008)

Well, by now you are well into Emily Mitchell's fantastic experience as she travels to Hiroshima, Japan. We have seen her anticipate the journey, go through the emotions of actually arriving in the city she had only read about and the city to whom she had written an apology as an Oak Ridge girl gone to college.

Can't you just see her struggle with her heritage? But, unlike many of us, she does not put it out of her mind, she acts on the impulse to understand the depths of meaning associated with being a product of the Atomic City, the "Secret City," the place where the uranium 235 was separated that was the source of destruction to this city she is now visiting.

Last week, after she got through the airports and flights, we saw through Emily's eyes, a beautiful Japanese city as she first arrived in Hiroshima. We walked for hours with her as she got her bearings.

We experienced the snow, the streets, the rivers...yes, the rivers where she suddenly stopped enjoying the beautiful city and realized these were the same rivers where the survivors of the initial blast of Little Boy – the bomb for which Oak Ridge worked so hard to separate the uranium 235 - went to gain relief from the burns covering their bodies. Did you notice her emotion? Did you feel her awareness? Wow, she is truly taking us with her on her journey of discovery.

Let's go with her now to even more unique experiences as she brings in the New Year in the midst of strangers who are quickly friends!

January 1, 2008

5:00 P.M. Japan Time

New Year's is that arbitrary moment designated as the separation point between one year and the next. It is a time of contrast: light and dark; fire and snow; old and new; past and future. Remembering and hoping.

Mine started with snow and fire. Miyajima is an island not too far south of Hiroshima. The bright orange "floating torii" gate at the entrance of the Itsukushima-Jinja shrine is probably one of the most recognizable sites in Japan.

It was between snowing and sleeting. My right hand turned red and then numb, as I kept taking my camera out of my pocket to take more pictures of the gate or the small, fearless deer that wander the island. I had read about a ceremony going on at the shrine for New Year's, but I was beginning to wonder if it would be worth it to stay six hours until midnight, and risk missing the last ferry back, and have to stay another five and a half hours until the first ferry of the morning

A group of people started gathering, and several 'teams' of Japanese men and boys lined up alongside giant wooden columns. Something must be happening soon, before they succumb to hypothermia, considering their outfits. I found a young woman nearby who didn't look Japanese.

"It's a ritual for the prevention of fire disasters in the coming year," she explained. We chatted to pass the time, and to take our minds off the cold.

Suddenly, there were cheers and whistles. Then fire everywhere!

"I guess if there are so many people here it has to be safe," said my waiting partner.

"Or we'll just all burn together."

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Fire sparked from the giant torches. The teams started marching/running the flaming pillars between the shrine and another torii gate on the path. I could never tell where they were trying to go. The people standing around had soon produced their own miniature torches and joined the continuous march. I didn't understand the meaning of the ritual, but at least it got a bit warmer for a while.

I opted not to risk a homeless overnight adventure on the island, so I went back to my hostel, just in time to catch the other guests leaving to look for a New Year's Party. Since New Year's in Japan is traditionally a very family-oriented holiday, we were pretty hard-pressed to find a place that was open, and with people in it. The leader of our search party was a Hiroshima native, who kindly tolerated our small international conglomeration. Eventually, we found a place with loud music and free food, for only a 1000 yen cover charge (what more can you ask for on New Year's?)

We counted down to midnights. "San, ni, ichi..." Since our English-speaking group comprised half of the bar's clientele for the night, there was a lot of "Happy New Year!" wishes as well as the Japanese equivalent, which I was taught many times last night and immediately forgot.

Next thing I know, Giglio, a Barcelona native from our hostel, had befriended a group of Japanese youth. They led us to a shrine in the north part of the city, where there were tents set up like a carnival, selling fried octopus and pancakes and good luck charms. Our new Japanese friends showed us how to throw a coin into a large, suspended sheet in the temple, bow, clap twice, and then bow again. I'm not sure what exactly I was praying for when I threw my coin in, but it was 2:00 A.M. and seemed like the appropriate thing to do.

Somewhere between then and 3:30 in the morning, our group separated, until it was just me and Australian Pat, slightly lost, and both unable to speak or understand Japanese. After several incidents with pointing, "Happy New Year!" and "Peace Park?" we made it back to the park near our hostel.

The illuminated Atomic-Bomb Dome stood as a silent witness of the past on this night of remembering.

"Let's go faster," Pat said, "I always cry when I look at it."

Here, too, was a moment of light and darkness. That bright light initiated an untimely night, a black hell. I stopped to look at it.

"You know, I just don't understand it," he began when he realized I wasn't walking with him, "who would bloody do something that horrible? I mean those were *people* in there. Just standing around and then in an instant, vaporized. There's just no justification for it, none!"

I felt myself getting defensive. **We** did this.

"How does it feel, you know, being from America and all, to look at this, and to be here?"

"I don't know," I answered, "That's the hardest part, I think. Not knowing how to feel about it.

Because one day, I'll read a book about the Manhattan Project, and it makes sense why they did it. Yeah, it's terrible, but for what they knew at the time, what they thought they knew, and given the circumstances, it's almost like they didn't have a choice. Another day, though, I'll read a book on Hiroshima, and then it won't make any sense. Then it seems that no amount of political gambling or military intelligence could ever justify using it.

"But regardless, I think it was unavoidable. If not Hiroshima, it would be another city, in another war. We were just the first. Once the possibility of an atomic bomb was known, Pandora's box was opened. And there's no mulligan in history."

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It was 4:00 A.M. We talked more about the idiocy of war, the plight of humanity, the feasibility of Communism: the usual topics for a New Year's Eve.

We went back to the hostel, leaving the skeletal remains of an atomic city illuminated, a silent instigator of thought and confusion, a reminder of what should never be forgotten.

January 2, 2008

9:18 A.M. Hiroshima

"That's really powerful stuff." I walked into the hostel common room as the Canadian couple started telling about their day in Peace Memorial Park.

"Yeah, I was standing there with my camera and thinking 'I wish these people would move so I could get a better picture.'"

"And then we noticed that they were crying," Michelle finished the story for her husband.

"They were old enough, too," he continued, "that they could have been directly affected by the bomb. They probably had family members that were killed."

Flowers had appeared at different monuments in the Park over the last few days, as those touched by the bomb brought bouquets to this mass grave, almost indistinguishable from the city itself.

"Yeah, I felt like such a jerk," joined a guy from D.C. "I wanted to apologize to them for the bomb, but, I don't know, I guess I wasn't directly involved or anything. But I still felt like crap."

I didn't tell them where I was from. I don't know if it would have mattered.

"My grandfather was deployed in the Philippines during World War II," my sister told me the day before I left for Japan. "He wasn't in the Bataan Death March, but he had friends that were. He's hated everything Japanese since then." She told me about the time her four-year-old daughter had wanted to go to a Japanese steakhouse for her birthday. He was reluctant, but went anyways. It was the first time, she said, that he had ever really talked about the Death March.

"So, you see, even something as terrible as the bomb, or the Bataan Death March, can eventually be forgiven."

Wounds heal, but scars still ache.

We haven't forgotten.

How did you feel when you read about Emily's confrontation with the impression her new-found friend "Australian Pat" had of the people "who would bloody do something that horrible?" Did you immediately think "How wrong! We did it to stop the useless killing of American boys!" I did!

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You and I may well have formed our outlook on the whole issue of the atomic bomb years ago. Emily is just now discovering her outlook on the whole issue of being a product of Oak Ridge – specifically the people “Australian Pat” is talking about.

Next week, we go with Emily inside the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and then come along as she visit's Koyto...the city Secretary of War Stimson spared.

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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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The Hiroshima Atomic Dome at sunset