

Emily Mitchell's Journey of Discovery to Hiroshima, Part 5
Those who were spared ... the hope of rebirth
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 11, 2008)

Last week through the eyes of Emily Mitchell we visited the Peace Park and also Kyoto, the city that Secretary of War Stimson saved by choosing to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Emily is getting familiar with Hiroshima and making friends. This week we see her grow more and more comfortable with the city and the surroundings that she is now accustomed to and at ease with.

She also notes how fate (she calls it "spared by God") spared Kokura, a nondescript city that but for fair skies over Hiroshima would have taken its place among the elite and well known cities of the A-bomb. But as Emily visits Kokura, she feels it is a "city that has misplaced its soul" and is just moving ahead without concern for the loss. Again she has shown us her keen perception and led us to see clearly the impression Kokura made on her.

Let's catch up with Emily and share her ongoing experiences.

January 5, 2008

5:46 P.M. at Hiroshima

It's impossible to imagine Hiroshima as it was then. I've only been here a week, but I've become quite fond of it. I already marked out my favorite haunt for coffee in the mornings, my favorite sushi restaurant, and the most convenient 7-Eleven.

I know how to navigate the public transportation system, and I know to get around Japan on the bullet train. I know how to eat soup with chopsticks, and I know what fried octopus tentacles taste like.

I've prayed for good luck at a shrine at 2:00 A.M. on New Year's, and I've sung karaoke till the wee hours with a group of friends and strangers hailing from England and Ireland to Australia and Japan.

"How've your findings been?" Stephen, the Irish Karaoke-er was asking about my research in Hiroshima. "You know, the Peace Museum and all that."

"It's different than I thought," I began, "It wasn't as depressing as I thought it would be. I guess I've just been researching it and reading about it for so long that I knew everything that was in there already."

I thought for a second, "The city, though. I really like Hiroshima."

I'm familiar with the city now. The Atomic bomb dome, the Peace Park, the Hondori shopping district, are all comforting now, and expected. As I was walking by the Cenotaph today, I noticed a Japanese family taking pictures. I immediately labeled them as tourists, only a moment before remembering that I, too, am still a tourist here. Sometimes I forget!

"I noticed the other day," I continued, "that when I was planning my itinerary for Kyoto, at the end of the itinerary, instead of putting, 'Go to Hiroshima,' I accidentally wrote, 'Go home.'"

If I have become attached to, and slightly possessive of, this city, after only seven days of knowing her, how much more attached must her citizens have been in 1945, when their home was razed in a flash of light and an instant of explosion?

In all the books I've read about Hiroshima, and in nearly all the extended accounts of the after-math, there pervades a sense of confusion and indirection, as if 100,000 children suddenly became orphans.

In a "normal" life, we work, or go to school, and eat and sleep, and if we're lucky we travel, and we laugh, and we find love. But if we are stripped of these trappings of society, when there is no job, no school, no order, no organization, then where is the meaning?

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We find purpose in our lives through the things we do, or the things we have, or the people we love. That purpose dissolves when those things are gone. The survivors of the bomb, those that were left and were left nothing, what did they have to live for?

Perhaps...they live for the hope of rebirth.

I am taken with a city that is younger than my grandfather, a city which I subconsciously call 'home.' The other Hiroshima, the ancestor to this one, is just a ghost, barely visible in the leftovers of the skeleton dome, and hardly recognizable in the thousands of 'Peace' labels that litter the city.

I wonder what that city was like. I wonder if I would have fallen for her, too. Or if she was worth knowing, or maybe we should let the past remain there, let history rest in peace, her subtle residue guiding our future.

January 6, 2008

2:53 P.M. at Kokura, Japan

Spared by God

At least today, Kokura smells like the first day of a Florida vacation. It walks like a modern European city, and caters to the wealthy idle. It has its beauty, its little surprises. It has the fish market and the shopping arcade. It has the six-story mall right next to the shrine.

Kokura is just like any other nondescript Japanese city (of course, I say this based on my extensive experience in a total of three different cities in Japan). It is not breathtaking like Kyoto, it is not thought-provoking like Hiroshima. It is in every sense, average.

It almost wasn't. Its normal, unsurprising history was almost entirely different. It was supposed to be Kokura, not Nagasaki, that got the second bomb. And if the skies hadn't been clear over Hiroshima on August 6, Little Boy would have been redirected here. Maybe then Kokura would merit at least a mention in the guidebooks, or more than eight sentences on Wikipedia.

I wonder if someone woke up on August 9th and grumbled because of the clouds in the sky, and if he wished for sunshine. I wonder if later he found out that those clouds had spared them from being the second city to experience the power of a nuclear weapon. I wonder if they even know.

If Kokura has a claim to fame, a characteristic that distinguishes it from the rest of Japan, that must be it. The Lucky One - the city that was *almost* destroyed - the one that got away!

Maybe if I spent a week here, I would learn to love this place, too. Maybe I would bless those clouds that protected it that day. But I'd rather be back in Hiroshima. I'd rather be sitting by the river watching the orange sun-glow fade on the Dome, and listen to the two young guitarists practice under the bridge because the acoustics are better there.

I'd rather watch the occasional pilgrim approach the Monument and stare through its arch at the Flame of Peace that seems to rest just at the base of the Dome, because of how it lies. I'd rather ponder the significance of mortality and premature death in a city that is all too familiar with these mysteries.

At least in Hiroshima, there is some kind of feeling. Here, though it feels as though the city has misplaced its soul, and hasn't yet bothered to go looking for it. Maybe it's the tragic past of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

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the fate that Kokura unintentionally avoided, that makes them seem important, and in comparison, makes Kokura seem insignificant.

There's a certain beauty in tragedy, that which forces us to appreciate the miracle of the mundane. Without tragedy, routine becomes expected, for granted, and life drops its weight into superficiality.

I am grateful for the tragedy of the atomic bomb, even if the only resulting good is that it infused a permanent depth into the heart of a city. But of course I can say that, since I never had to suffer it. It's easy for me, an outsider, a foreigner, a daughter of Oak Ridge, to rationalize the emotion out of a subtle genocide, to say "It was for the best." Of course it's easy from 62 years and a hemisphere away, to forget that these were people, too.

"Those were people in there," the words of Pat the Australian come to mind, that night we found ourselves by the floodlit remains of the ancient Hiroshima.

Shogunai. "It can't be helped." We have, in the West at least, adopted and retained the idea of a linear history. So what's past, can never be revisited. And if there's naught we can do to change it, why worry? Why not appreciate the good that came from the evil? But, I think even if we could change it, if we could go back to August 6 and keep the *Enola Gay* from releasing the bomb, I'm not sure I would want to.

Last week I told you that I had gotten a whole lot of positive feedback and a couple of questions wondering if Emily (or her generation) appreciated what World War II really meant. I sent the e-mails on to her and asked her to react to the questions and comments. Here is her reaction:

March 1, 2008

I didn't mean to disrespect our veterans.

I didn't mean to belittle the sacrifices so many soldiers have made with their lives – and deaths.

I understand that we were forced into World War II by a world that wouldn't – that won't – tolerate peace.

I'm not an expert on history; I'm definitely not an expert on the military; and, as could easily be guessed, I'm anything but knowledgeable about military history.

I write about Hiroshima because I want to be able to jump out of the preconceptions my particular cultural upbringing has built around me. I want to see things as they saw them. I want to feel how the people of Hiroshima felt. Not to condemn the U.S. (although it might seem that way), or to incriminate the scientists that made the bomb or the soldiers that dropped it, but rather, by going too far on the other side of the scale, to somehow balance the judgment.

I look for Hiroshima because too many times I've felt uncomfortable talking to a Japanese person, and confused talking to an Oak Ridger, about the bomb.

I look and I write what I think and feel at the moment – these thoughts and feelings are the most volatile. I do it, hoping for but not expecting answers, not expecting resolution, but finding instead that with each small discovery, the picture becomes more complicated and more tragically beautiful; but at least now I feel like I can see it.

Mine is a selfish motive. It would be silly to pretend otherwise. I don't write to persuade. I write, and look, because I have to. I welcome those who wish to join my search; appreciate those who take the time to consider my thoughts; respect those who disagree.

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I'm not trying to change anyone's mind. I'm just trying to find a peace for my own.

Wow, Emily has once again proven her unique ability to get to the heart of the matter and then to go deeper and to share her soul. She has opened some memories and brought long held feelings to the surface by her experience and the insightful manner in which she is sharing her experience in Hiroshima, Kyoto and Kokura.

The two individuals who sent e-mails that generated the above response are much appreciated. The many positive remarks, e-mails and phone calls are also appreciated.

Emily did not agree to do this series to gain popularity or as she says, "to change minds." It is all about her. It is all about a personal journey. We are privileged to be allowed to share in her search for meaning.

There is one more article in this series. Next week we will see Emily's conclusion to her journey of discovery.



A view in Hiroshima.

The mountains in the background helped concentrate the blast of the bomb, making it more destructive.

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Kokura Station, the entry point into Kokura

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A taste of the public entertainment scene in Kokura. These guys could rock!