

Emily Mitchell's Journey of Discovery to Hiroshima, Part 6

A final trip to the Peace Museum

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 18, 2008)

Feedback has been very strong from this series of Emily Mitchell's journey of discovery. Thank you readers! To include some of the feedback and her response, will require the series to run another week. I hope you agree that Emily's documentation of her recent trip to Hiroshima, Kyoto and Kokura, Japan has been a most interesting series. It has been a joy for me to bring it to you.

The additional material that has been generated by comments and response adds to the overall story of her journey. I think you will agree that the addition of a comment on her writing, her response, and the resulting reaction of the reader adds to the value of the whole issue of using the atomic bomb to end World War II.

Through her eyes and by her excellent writing ability, we have been privileged to journey along with her. She has experienced the emotions of youth, the vision of a young lady who is quite mature for her age and the insight of an Oak Ridger at heart seeing Hiroshima for the first time. By her excellent writing, she has allowed us to be there as well!

Because of the substantial amount of interest and feedback to these articles, I have asked Emily to give us her thoughts now that the trip is over and now that the published series has produced such a huge response from readers. She has agreed to write her thoughts for us as she looks back on the whole experience. I plan to publish her concluding thoughts after the series is completed.

I also want to hasten and express my sincere thanks to you for the manner in which you have expressed appreciation for Emily and her courage to write her feelings down for all to see and examine. You have been a marvelous audience, not all complimentary and not all critical, but a good balance of honest reactions to her writing. That was most valuable.

Let's now join her as she concludes her time in Hiroshima and next week we will see her make her way back from Japan to Oak Ridge and home! But first, let me warn you. In this section, Emily comments on a Manhattan Project "A" award pin she found on display at the Peace Museum in Hiroshima.

Seeing it there has a strong emotional impact on her. Knowing the significance of the dedicated effort of those who were presented that pin caused me to react negatively to her comments.

You may do so as well. I implore you to stay with her and try and understand how a young lady who is experiencing such emotional involvement with her chosen path to discovery might feel.

I dare say we older Oak Ridgers would not share her reaction, but please know her reaction is honest. We need to know and understand that. We need to appreciate what goes through the mind of this upcoming generation who never experienced World War II (or in my case, Vietnam) but must deal with the results of previous wars.

Now, here we go.

January 8, 2008

2:55 P.M. at Narita International Airport, Japan

Yesterday was my last day in Japan. I went to the Peace Museum half an hour before it closed, hoping to see some of the exhibits I had skipped previously due to the crowds.

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There was a special exhibit downstairs of recently donated items. Most were small things, otherwise dispensable except for their connection to the bomb. I passed by most of them with no more than a glance or a skimming of the explanation plaque. The one thing that made me stop, lean my nose to the glass case and raise my hand to my cover my mouth in astonishment, was something I was quite familiar with.

A pin with a large "A" on it had been given to all the scientists that worked on the Manhattan Project. I had seen the pins decorating the lapels of Oak Ridgers in Manhattan Project documentaries, in books on the same topic, and maybe in the Museum of Science and Energy.

Usually it was a symbol of recognition, an award for an impossibly daunting task: to build the world's first atomic bomb. But in this other context, juxtaposed with a little girl's doll that was burned in the blast, or an old man's broken glasses, found on a pile of radioactive ashes, the only reminder of his existence, the pin seems like a terribly inappropriate joke. It would almost be akin to giving a trophy to a Nazi soldier for exterminating the most Jews in a given time.

I stared at the pin, now dull and corrugated, and the once-shiny surface seemed a vain attempt to cover a public embarrassment, stained scarlet by 140,000 sins (or 'casualties,' depending on which side you're on). I was suddenly embarrassed to be an accessory to this ridiculous award. I left the Museum quickly to watch the sun attempt to cast its last light on the Dome through a gray sky.

"I didn't do anything," the German girl was defending herself before a lighthearted accusation. Several of us had just stepped out of the karaoke room to get water, and, as often happens in Hiroshima, conversation on World War II began.

"Yeah, but, you killed all those Jews. Or your country did at least," the Australian-Malaysian argued half-heartedly.

"Exactly! It was my country. Not me. It wasn't my fault I was born there."

So I guess we can be forgiven for the sins of our fathers. Or, if nothing else, justify our own innocence.

Now for the reader comment and exchange with Emily I mentioned.

A reader wrote that Emily's thoughts were both interesting and disturbing and wondered why she and others never seem to consider the alternative to using the atomic bomb. The reader was a World War II veteran who had survived the European action.

This soldier was then slated to go to Japan for the planned invasion there. The bomb ending the war was cause for celebration for those who knew they were headed for that invasion as with all who experienced the killing of World War II.

The reader went on to say that when young people recount the tragedy of the victims some (such as the Australian who Emily met in Hiroshima) castigate America without ever considering what alternatives to using the atomic bomb really existed.

Emily's response follows:

March 5, 2008

We do not celebrate death.

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We do not rejoice in suffering.

Those who do are labeled mentally abnormal. Or, they are not rejoicing because of the suffering itself, but rather from a parallel but favorable result of the same cause.

Like abortion. No one is ever excited about preventing a potential little person from enjoying life. Rather, they are relieved that a potential mother unfit for a child was prevented from whatever hardship that child would bring, or endure.

Like the death penalty. No one gets tickled at the thought of stripping years from a person's life. Rather, they are glad that a person with dangerous tendencies will be prevented from hurting anyone else.

Like war. We are never happy to hear about conflict. Rather, we are honored to uphold justice and protect our fellow countrymen the best way we know how.

Like the atomic bomb. (You knew it was coming.) No one was thrilled that Hiroshima was destroyed. Rather, they rejoiced because a potentially worse destruction was avoided.

But that doesn't mean that it never happened. The potential mother still wonders what her child's favorite color would have been. The prosecutor still questions whether or not the convict had really repented. The soldier still pictures a family on the other side of the village he just bombed. The scientist still wonders if there could have been another way...

Kallistos Ware is an Orthodox Bishop. He is clear about Original Sin: "Even though we are not, in the strict sense, guilty of the sins of others, yet we are somehow always involved." We may not be guilty. But that doesn't mean we don't feel somehow attached to it. It doesn't mean we don't wonder...

Yet these "could-have-been's" do nothing. We still haven't figured out how to change the past. Why do we continue to try?

The "what if's" and justifications and criticisms of the bomb mean nothing, because nothing can be done to change it. We can't undo Hiroshima. We can't shove nuclear secrets back into the realm of the unknown. But we can understand what happened. And from this understanding we can gain knowledge, and from this knowledge we can develop wisdom. From this wisdom, then, we can make those decisions that affect our futures.

The past is past. It becomes important only when we use it to improve the now. The trick is learning how to make those connections. The problem is not being able to see the million and one potential futures wrought from each opportunity, and the million eliminated with every choice. We did the best we could. The scientists did what they felt compelled to do. The soldiers did what they had to do. Truman made the choice he felt he had to make. But that doesn't mean it didn't hurt.

Emily's response seemed to help bridge the communication between generations.

The reader sent me an e-mail saying that the reply from her confirmed that she is a very intelligent and thoughtful young lady. Who with a little more introspection will realize that just as we cannot change the past it is equally useless to mourn it.

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However, it is human to wish past bad things undone, but necessary to consider how the future might have been changed if it had been done differently. The reader ended by indicating that our future is safer with people like Emily in it.

I hope you agree with me that this exchange of feedback and response adds even more perspective to Emily's journey of discovery. She reflected a full understanding of the heart of the reader's comments and added a depth of understanding that impressed the reader with her appreciation for the comments and insight into the larger perspective of war and death.

Next week we will wrap up the last segment of Emily's journey and see her arrive back at home in Oak Ridge.



The A-Bomb dome at sunset

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The "A" award pin on display in Hiroshima Peace Museum



Clock showing 8:15 AM on display at Hiroshima Peace Museum