

Emily Mitchell's Journey of Discovery to Hiroshima, Part 4

From Oak Ridge to Hiroshima — A terrifying night, the beauty of life

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 4, 2008)

As we continue our journey through the eyes of Emily Mitchell, get ready for yet more of her emotionally frank and often surprising reactions to what she is seeing as she takes in the standard tourist visits to memorials and other things in the modern city that was once devastated by the first atomic bomb used in warfare.

First she takes us through her less than rewarding visit to the Peace Park. You may find her experience at the Peace Park unexpected but she faithfully reports her reaction, it is what it is and she faithfully reports her emotions.

Next you will marvel at her insightful visit to the city that Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson chose to preserve while putting other cities on the inevitable path to destruction. She wondered why, she wonders no more. You will learn through her to appreciate Stimson's decision.

January 2, 2008

10.45 A.M. at Peace Park, Hiroshima

I'm sitting on a bench outside of the Peace Memorial Museum. This is the first day it has opened since I've been here, but I don't want to go in yet.

A constant stream of people, both Japanese and foreign, approach the Cenotaph dedicated to bomb victims, take pictures, then bow for a few moments in prayer or remembrance.

An old man is sitting on the bench next to me, wringing his hands and sniffing from the cold.

A pair of children obediently hold onto their mother as she leads them to the flower-laden Memorial. These children will grow up in a city where the atomic bomb is for granted. They will always know of the historical reputation of their home, but they might never really understand it.

I wonder if they, too, will someday wonder what it was like on the other side, or if they will even care to find out.

January 2, 2008

6:00 P.M. Hiroshima

"In one hour a frightful, blind force had destroyed what it had taken generations to build. Terrifying death seized man and beast in his claws and crushed them.

"Ravaging fires consumed man and his goods; a deep and terrifying night hid the beauty of life under a shroud of ashes.

— Kahlil Gibran, *The Voice of the Master*

I went in to the Peace Memorial Museum today, ready to brave the documented horrors I had heard so much about. I came out with an unexpected apathy. It could have been my frustration at the large crowds, sucking away any spiritual significance with tourism. It could have been my slight agoraphobia that caused my discomfort, or my occasional non-conformism that prevented me from being drawn into affected sentimentality. Or it could be that the eight months of this bomb repetition has jaded me, and I've lost all ability to feel for them anymore.

The only two times I came close to anything like sympathy was at the display on Sadako, and when reading the survivor testimonies.

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This is the story of Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes:

"Sadako was living in Hiroshima when the first atomic bomb was dropped. She was two years old and recovered from her injuries. In the sixth grade she developed leukemia. She was given one year to live. In the hospital, she made a thousand paper cranes with the hope that her wish of wellness would come true, just like the legend says. She was 12 years old when she died."

The sad part is the helplessness. People get leukemia. They die. People are victims of war and poverty. They die. The hard part is not being able to do anything about it.

The witness testimonies at the Museum were jagged with this desperation. Survivors recounted their struggle to help those trapped beneath debris, then flight from the strengthening fire storm when escape proved impossible. They remembered cries for help and the knowing that nothing could be done.

To see suffering and not do anything is abhorrent. To see suffering and *know* you *can't* do anything is tragic.

When this futility persists for long enough, it grows into apathy, the only escape for overworked emotions. Maybe mine wasn't so unexpected after all.

January 4, 2008

9:00 A.M. Japan

Spared by Man

It's incredible how knowledge can so easily affect the course of history so drastically. If Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson hadn't known about Kyoto, if he didn't have that knowledge and subsequent appreciation for its importance to Japanese culture, it might not have been spared.

And instead of being in Hiroshima, maybe I would be in a younger Kyoto, writing about how a city called Hiroshima was spared because it was second on the list that morning. Knowledge preserved Kyoto. But it also destroyed Hiroshima.

It started with knowledge of nuclear fission as a means to create powerful weapons. Before that, it was knowledge of the atom, of explosives, of other nations, of war, of want. How can all this knowledge, an abstraction typically categorized as 'good,' have led ultimately to the creation of an atomic bomb? Or is the culprit, instead, lack of other knowledge: Knowledge of peace, of brotherhood, of radiation, of suffering, of mercy?

Yesterday, I traveled from a city condemned by knowledge to one spared by it. The images of Kyoto are breathtaking. Beautiful temples and shrines, meditation-inspiring gardens that drip with cherry blossoms in the spring time, and of course, the famed Gion district, where lucky tourists occasionally glimpse a geisha hurrying toward an appointment.

I had high expectations. The *shinkansen* "bullet" train pulled into the enormous Kyoto Station at 8:45 A.M. I quickly found a coffee shop to fuel up for the long day and try to figure out the most efficient way to see all the really famous sites in the next ten hours.

As soon as I stepped out of the station, instead of being astonished by gilded shrines and fragrant blossoms, like the brochures promised, I walked into a city.

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"This is it?" I thought, "This is the great city of Kyoto?" Well, maybe I just have to find the *real* Kyoto, that magical Utopian enclave hidden somewhere in this modern and slightly dirty, city. I checked my itinerary. First stop: Ginkaku-ji temple - the Golden Pavilion.

It took 45 minutes by bus to get to the Temple. On the way, I kept looking out the windows, searching for the ideal Japan.

"This is *it*?" I kept saying to myself. The bus gradually accumulated more passengers. It got hot and cramped. I began to think that maybe I should have just saved my money and stayed in Hiroshima.

We arrived at the stop for the Temple and the bus emptied. I got my ticket and brochure, and was flipping through it when I walked in. I looked up and saw the picturesque Pagoda, its golden walls reflected in the settling pond.

"Oh," it came out more as a gasp than a word. "So this is it." This is why they spared Kyoto.

The rest of the day went similarly. Get on the bus. Get uncomfortable and crowded. Wonder if this was worth it. Arrive at next shrine. Go in and...

... "Oh, this is why." I wandered through four different shrines or temples (I can't tell them apart) with a goofy smile on my face. Each was beautiful, stunning, unique; more than I had ever imagined.

Was Kyoto worth sparing? Definitely! But then, so was Hiroshima.

Kyoto was spared by Secretary Stimson – Hiroshima was destroyed, such is the results of the power accorded individuals in positions of authority. Thus it behooves us to put people in those positions who will take the long view, huh.

I would like to take a bit of space here to comment on some feedback I have gotten from readers who find Emily's journey a bit disturbing. First let me say that feedback is valuable, regardless of how this series of articles strike you, we want to hear from you. I have sent the comments on to her for her reaction.

When Emily and I agreed to do this series, I knew some people would have difficulty with any attempt to convey feelings like I knew Emily would experience. Yet, I think that is part of the healing for us all. I think this series of articles demonstrate the importance of each new generation tackling the fact that Oak Ridge provided the uranium 235 that was used in Little Boy, the first atomic bomb used in warfare, and the damage it did in Hiroshima.

Not everyone can do what Emily has done, yet each person in each generation has to come to grips with the fact that the U.S. is the only nation to ever use nuclear weapons in war...at least so far. As must be obvious, I have done so and am proud of the contribution Oak Ridge made to end World War II as well as the Cold War and all the myriad other contributions Oak Ridge has made to the world – like radioisotopes for medical research and treatment.

I have made my decision about Oak Ridge long ago. Many of you have as well. Emily is working through hers now. As I said at the beginning of this series, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience the next generation, in the person of Emily Mitchell, as she openly shares her deepest feelings and reactions. She is brave enough to actually go to the place the atomic bomb, made from uranium 235 separated at Oak Ridge, killed thousands and injured thousands more. She is gracious enough to allow us to come along as she describes her innermost thoughts.

Enjoy the journey and continue to give us your feedback. We appreciate it!

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The famous "Golden Pavilion" Temple (Kinkaku-ji).
This sight was Emily's first glimpse into the cultural riches of Kyoto

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This statue, located in the Peace Park, is called "Mother and Child in the Storm." If you look closely, you can see the A-bomb dome through the fountain mist

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The A-Bomb Memorial Cenotaph, decorated with fresh flowers and blessed by a constant stream of prayers, located at the Peace Park