

Emily Mitchell's Journey of Discovery to Hiroshima, Part 8

Dealing with the shades of gray – the hardest part

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on April 1, 2008)

Last week we wrapped up Emily Mitchell's journey of discovery as she returned from her 10-day trip to Hiroshima, Kyoto and Kokura, Japan. By now you have come to know and appreciate Emily through her exceptional writing skills. She is able to convey her innermost thoughts and reactions as effectively as anyone I have known. I admire her!

In the introductory article to this series, I gave you the reason for her journey. She is studying at the University of South Carolina, and in May 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.

This assignment from which you saw the journals is part of her Senior Thesis Project. In order to graduate from the Honors College, each student must complete a major project, which can be anything from scientific research to writing a novel. Emily chose to focus her project on the history of the Manhattan Project, and her connection to the atomic bomb through Oak Ridge.

As you will recall, when I learned she was going to Japan, I asked her if she would share her journey with us through *Historically Speaking* and she agreed. That began a close working relationship between the two of us. I have brought you readers her reflections as accurately as I could and have refrained from editing her materials except on rare occasions. So you have gotten as good a sense of her journey as I could provide.

Last week, I added some summary thoughts about the use of the atomic bomb from my perspective. I also encouraged you to stay with us one more week in this series to allow Emily to reflect on the experience of having her journals published and dealing with the reactions (both encouragement and expressions of concern). She has done that. Join me now as we enjoy her summarization of the whole experience for her.

This is the hardest part.

I didn't expect so many people to respond to the journals. Last week I went home for the beginning of my spring break. People I never knew that I knew kept coming up to me and telling me they had been reading about my travels in the *Oak Ridger*.

Responses ranged from "magnificent" (thanks, Mom) to "interesting" (most probably a euphemism for something less than complimentary). Honestly, it's kind of frightening.

After a couple of days at home, I began to wonder whether each stranger that I saw also knew about my Japanese jaunt – if they, too, had judged me and my apparently puerile perception of one instance in an incredibly complex war.

The critical circle is now broader than my immediate family and friends; its face is blurred and indistinguishable, so my words now are chosen more carefully. I find myself struggling to avoid offending anyone, balancing delicately on a line that separates two disjoint opinions. I've never been one for conflict.

I don't want to write like that, though. I said before that this journey was for my own mind. Honesty is more important now than delicacy. I will try to set aside the lingering image of the potential critic glazed into the ceiling of my memory, to find this honesty.

The second part of my spring break was spent "camping," which means some friends and I rented a cabin in the mountains so that we could go hiking during the day and watch "Cash Cab"

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at night. We started the second day of hiking on a trail that was either 2.5 or 5 miles long. After a while, we realized there was no end in sight, so we sat down to eat sandwiches and Pringles, and decide if we would continue on, or turn back.

"Isn't it funny how we always expect something spectacular at the end of a trail?" my friend asked. It occurred to me how perfectly apt his observation was to my 'research' on the atomic bomb, or any journey for that matter.

Each journey begins with an idea of a goal. We follow a path, sometimes in the footsteps of others, sometimes carving our own. We travel toward our goal, toward that numinous moment when all our struggles to get there will be deemed worthwhile. But what happens if we never make it? What if we get tired, or the path is too long?

Or what if we get there and the end isn't what we expected? What if there is no end, and instead the trail just dissolves into the wilderness?

I want to say something important. I want to say something perfect, something that ties together this year of digging up the past in an aphoristic way. I want to be able to concretize every bit of information and every notion of a feeling and every moment of a history.

I want to put them all in a compartmentalized box. I would close it with masking tape and put the date on the lid with a permanent marker. The box would go in the top of my closet, neat and forgotten. I want to finish this journey, to seal it. But I'm afraid it might not work out that way.

When I was younger it was different. Everything was so easy to label "black" or "white." An action was either "right" or "wrong." The idea that it could be both was silly. People were either "bad" or "good." Bad people went to jail, and good people went to heaven. Life was simple, comprehensible, beautiful.

Then things began to change. Subtly, so that the change could only be noticed from further ahead - from looking back on a vague time period when things were different - I began to think more, to think for myself more. I began to descend gradually into a dangerous mixture of skepticism and faith.

That's when I came across this new understanding that there are two sides that fight in a war. And the winners write the history books.

Then these preconceptions about Oak Ridge that I didn't even notice were there, let alone colored, became incredibly complicated. I struggled to see things from both sides, and since I had always been on the American side, I crossed an Ocean in search of the other perspective.

I spent conversations and stories mentally walking in others' shoes. They make sense alone. It's the combination of opposing ideas, each legitimate, that drives me crazy.

I imagine myself in Oak Ridge and I think proudly, "This was necessary. Of course! There was a job to do, and they did it well. How wonderful it is that I came from such an amazing city.

But then," I place myself in Hiroshima and think, "This never should have happened. These were people, too."

I am attached to Oak Ridge by birth, to Hiroshima by choice (and curiosity), stuck between two interpretations of the same world-changing event. I lean toward whichever side is easier at the moment, whichever opinion will save face.

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In my Japan journals, I've leaned toward Hiroshima. One reason is because I was there, so I was adopting, trying on this other view. The other reason is because in an environment where tolerance is becoming so important, it's often easier to turn against my own heritage than condemn someone else's.

My neighbor read my journals in the Oak Ridger and invited me over to see pictures of her own trip to Japan. She told me about the Japanese family that she had come to consider part of her own. Her spiritually adopted Japanese "son" told her once that if he could only know which religion was the right one, he would be the happiest person in the world. "You can choose!" she had offered.

I can choose. We are expected to choose. Not just a religion. Everything! A way of life, a philosophy, a school, a style, a personality, a moral code - "Choose!" the world shouts at us. "If you're not for us, you're against us." It's easier to judge when you don't have to deal with shades of gray.

But why should we have to? Why can't we profess every religion? Why can't we be on everyone's team? Why can't we stand with one foot on each side of the dividing line?

Why should we always look for the spectacular end of the trail, when there is so much beauty along the way? Why should we cast our gaze toward our hurried feet instead of stopping to notice the tiny blue flowers on the edge of the path, or listen to the constant rush of spring water, or inhale the nearness of white pines?

I've spent a year looking into the past. I left this country to spend ten days in a foreign country, looking into a war that ended over 60 years ago. The external conflict is over; the internal one might never end. I don't know where this journey will end, I don't know if it will, but I'll always have the beautiful memories I've happened upon along the way.

And I'll always have a place to return to when my feet weary from walking, when my mind wearies from deciding, when the journey becomes too long. Because along with everything else that comes with it, Oak Ridge will always be my home.

There you are folks! Now you have it all. Emily has bared her soul for us. She has allowed us to experience a once-in-a-lifetime journey to Japan and back to Oak Ridge through the eyes of the next generation. Stop and think. Don't judge her. Don't expect her to think as you do. Realize she is representative of many others who will come after her.

Realize the importance of our heritage! History is IMPORTANT. It must be remembered. It must be recalled. It must be retold and retold and retold. We as a collective people forget, oh, how soon we forget.

I can't help but think of Myra Kimmelman's poignant message..."It can happen again," speaking of the holocaust.

Emily Mitchell has given us a gift of insight. We are blessed because we know her. Thank you Emily! Now, go on and do your best. Blow the University of South Carolina's Honors College on its heels with your Major Project – your "Journey of Discovery."

Emily, take life and live it to the fullest. We, Oak Ridge, give you that opportunity. We, Oak Ridge, helped win that awful war with our atomic bomb so young ladies such as you could live in freedom and could choose your path with full expectations that you can do anything you desire.

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You and other generations of free Americans are the winners in the war for freedom that was called "the greatest war ever!" Pray that the time never comes when we have to again use an atomic bomb to end conflict. Pray that peace rules, but be prepared to do what is needed to preserve freedom regardless of the cost. Your heritage is strong, you are an Oak Ridger!



Emily Mitchell with the Oak Ridge's International Friendship Bell at sunset

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Hiroshima's Bell of Peace, similar to the Oak Ridge Friendship Bell