

Japan: Peace Cranes and Memory

by Dan Turner

Having traveled so many miles in so many countries, we had now come to the final places of Pilgrimage: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Here where World War II ended and a terrifying new power was born, we walked and prayed as so many times before. These places of unimaginable suffering were now cities that stood as beacons of peace.

On August 3rd in Hiroshima, we were joined by walkers from the Tokyo-Hiroshima Peace Walk, sponsored also by Nipponzan Myohoji, and the Korean Peace Walkers (among whom was Brian Willson, the noted American Vietnam Veteran and peace activist). We also met Kumiko Magome who acted as our translator, guide and invaluable friend during our Pilgrimage in Japan. Each day, the group grew larger, eventually swelling to over one hundred walkers. Tents sprouted on the grounds outside the hall where we stayed, to accommodate the increasing numbers of people, and those of us inside slept side-by-side on the large floor. Our Japanese hosts, with the help of many of the



Photo: Skip Schiel

**Peace cranes at base of
Sadako Statue at
Hiroshima Peace Park**

international walkers, prepared excellent meals. There was a spirit of camaraderie that carried us through the inconveniences of the crowded conditions and energized us as we walked under the hot August sun.

We initiated our peace walking at the Fuchu Municipal Hall where we met with the town officials. Accompanied by a police escort, we walked to the Hiroshima Memorial Peace Park where we laid wreaths of peace cranes and held an interfaith prayer ceremony. We then crossed the Honkawa Bridge to a small park with a beautiful sculpture dedicated to the 10,000 Koreans who died in the atomic

bomb blast. Walkers offered spontaneous statements and prayers for the spirits of the dead. Then, drumming and chanting, we walked back to the center of the Peace Park.

Some of us paid reverence to the Sadako Statue at which one of the pilgrims would later lay a wreath of one thousand peace cranes in honor of all the children who had suffered as victims of the atomic blast and as victims of all wars. It was Sadako's story that we told in every village and town in which we stayed on our long walk across the eastern half of the Earth:

Sadako was an infant when the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, where she lived. Despite the terrible devastation, she seemed to have escaped any effects of the blast and grew into a strong, athletic young girl.

However, about the age of twelve, she began to feel listless and was diagnosed as having leukemia from the effects of atomic radiation. She was hospitalized. Remembering an old Japanese legend that if you folded a thousand paper cranes you would be granted a wish, she began to fold them in hopes of recovering her health. As she observed others, both young and old, suffering from atomic radiation, she changed her wish to include them all. She hoped that no one, especially children, would ever have to suffer from war again. Sadako died after she had folded only 644 cranes. Her classmates, knowing of her wish, finished folding a thousand peace cranes and began to tell her story around Hiroshima. People began to bring peace cranes in her honor to a park in the city. Soon enough a memorial and a beautiful statue were dedicated to her in the heart of the city. Today millions of paper cranes are laid at her statue every year as symbols of the universal hope for peace.

In the afternoon, we walked to the Nipponzan Myohoji Temple and Peace Pagoda set on a hill above the city. The Pagoda and the view it affords are striking in their beauty and offer a site conducive to prayer and meditation.

We fasted and prayed all day at the Atomic Bomb Dome. It was the only building near the epicenter of the atomic bomb blast left mostly intact. The dome, a skeletal structure of steel ribs, has become a symbol of death and resurgent life for the city of Hiroshima. This was the symbolic magnet that kept drawing us back to commemorate in prayer once more those who had suffered from the terrible explosion. We walked to a meeting with the mayor of Hiroshima and then gave a press conference. Each night we returned to the hall to sleep.

Pilgrims walking in
Hiroshima



Photo: Skip Schiel

We started our day, on August 5th, praying at the Atomic Bomb Dome and then made a pilgrimage to the YMCA International Hall where we met up with the members of the Sacred Run led by Native American leader, Dennis Banks, who had given us a spirited send-off from Auschwitz. This group had run the length of Japan and some of the Interfaith pilgrims had joined them in July. Representatives of the runners and the Interfaith pilgrims made statements and prayers for peace. This was a joyful gathering of old friends and new acquaintances. Later that evening, there was a moving peace ceremony at the Nipponzan Peace Pagoda, which was illuminated by the flames of over a hundred candles that each of us brought to the monks who placed them on different levels of the pagoda. The night was lit with the fire of peace. There followed a performance by a single dancer who seemed to capture the essence of pain and sadness and hope that filled these days of remembering. Late that night, while some of us returned to the hall to sleep, others attended the peace vigil near the atomic bomb Dome where paper lanterns were floated down the Motoyasu River and all the rivers of Hiroshima in remembrance of the spirits of the dead: a moving spectacle for deep reflection.

August 6th was Hiroshima Day, the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of the city by the U.S. Early in the morning, we went to the Peace Park again. A large number of us pilgrims began drumming and chanting at the atomic bomb Dome, and the rest went to the city-sponsored Peace Ceremony attended by over 60,000 people from all over the world. Television monitors had been placed throughout the park so that no one was denied the opportunity to view the ceremonies.

Representatives from many nations and many faiths spoke and prayed for a future of peace and spoke of the human responsibility to make it so. In his Peace Declaration, Takashi Hiraoka, the Mayor of Hiroshima said:

At this 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, it is important to look at the stark reality of war in terms of both aggrieved and aggriever so as to develop a common understanding of history. The suffering of all the war's victims indelibly etched in our hearts, we want to apologize for the unbearable suffering that Japanese colonial domination and war inflicted on so many people. Memory is where past and future meet. Respectfully learning the lessons of the past, we want to impress the misery of war and the atomic bombing on the generations of younger people who will be tomorrow's leaders. Similarly, we also need to emphasize the human aspects of education as the basis for peace. Only when life and human rights are accorded the highest priority can young people enjoy lives of boundless hope.

This ceremony was one of two culminations of our historic Pilgrimage, Nagasaki being the other. All of the hopes of the peoples we had engaged with throughout our journey were brought here at this time and in this city and made sacred by the fellowship that was generated by so many, not just in Hiroshima but across the world.

In the evening, back at the Nipponzan Temple, we commemorated the birthday anniversary of the Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii Guruji, founder of Nipponzan Myohoji. There was a great feast and gifts were distributed to all who attended. The joyous spirit of this celebration was in contrast to the deeper, more solemn emotions experienced at the Peace Park earlier, but not in contradiction because joy and celebration are always signs of hope, especially when honoring one whose life was committed to peace.

The Peace Pagoda was illuminated by the flames of over a hundred candles that each of us brought to the monks who placed them on different levels of the pagoda. The night was lit with the fire of peace.



Atomic Bomb Dome
Hiroshima Peace Park

profoundly moving.

On August 9th, Nagasaki Day, we walked through the city on a bright, hot, sunny morning, drumming and chanting to the Peace Park and the Atomic Bomb Memorial. We continued drumming and praying near the hypo-center of the blast. A group of indigenous Philippine people had brought a peace bell from their country made of bomb casings. All who wished to

The next day we traveled to Nagasaki by bullet train through a landscape of bright green rice paddies, small villages and mountains. The Nagasaki Nakamachi Catholic Church provided us with comfortable space and cooking facilities where we could prepare our meals.

The following morning we took part in an elaborate prayer ceremony at the Nipponzan Nagasaki Dojo. In the afternoon we met with *Habakusha*, survivors of the atomic blast. We heard the dramatic testimony of their experiences as the only people in the world who have experienced the effects of an atomic bomb. Their kindness and humanity was

were invited to ring it. Some of the pilgrims gave short speeches and then, at 11:02 a.m. the exact time of the A-bomb blast, young people fell down in a semblance of death and the lone, haunting cry of a woman wailed over the loudspeaker. The people did not appear so much somber as very conscious, alert—perhaps determined. There was hope, there was the future present here.

In the days following, there were more walks for peace, a visit to Mt. Aso where Fujii Guruji was born, peace forums in Ohita City and Tokyo. On August 16th we celebrated the end of our Pilgrimage with a farewell feast at Shibuya Dojo. Speeches and songs mixed with joy and sadness. It was the end, finally, of over eight months of pilgrimage.

Along the way, we had been saying goodbye to pilgrims in ones and twos. There were tears sometimes, especially with those with whom one had shared so much. The discomforts of the journey brought us close together: heat and cold, crowded sleeping quarters, fear, danger. Thousands of miles of road had passed beneath us. Reverend Sasamori led us through the greatest adventure of our lives. The monks and nuns of Nipponzan Myohoji who walked with us and hosted us gave an example of the spiritual life lived without ostentation. Each of us has been changed by the pilgrimage experience. Now we are to continue the Pilgrimage in our own ways in the different corners of the world in which we live.