

# A “SAFE CONTAINER” FOR PASSING DOWN A PRAYER TO FUTURE GENERATIONS: My Experience with the Hiroshima Peace Museum

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## I. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HIROSHIMA?

Hiroshima City is situated in the western part of Japan and is known worldwide as one of only two places — the other one is Nagasaki — where atomic bombs were dropped during World War II. It was at 8:15 in the morning of August 6, 1945 that the world’s first atomic bombing occurred. Many people died and were injured; we still do not have accurate statistics, but it is estimated that approximately 140,000 people died by the end of that year. According to a survey of the Atomic Bomb Survivor Movement, by 1998 more than 300,000 people had died — all victims of the atomic bombing.

Because Japan is the only nation which has experienced a nuclear attack, “peace study” is mandatory in public education for Japanese children. All of us have either visited Hiroshima or Nagasaki on a school excursion, or at least have learned about the disastrous consequences of the war. All Japanese have read stories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; seen educational movies illustrating people’s fearful experiences in the atomic bombing; and learned how crazy, cruel and stupid human beings can be in war situations. Every year on August 6, we pray in silence, and the Japanese mass media repeatedly write about the tragedies that happened in Hiroshima and also about the wars and conflicts still occurring in other countries. The hope is that we will not reiterate such tragic experiences anywhere in the world.

## II. MY “DREADFUL” EXPERIENCE IN THE NAGASAKI ATOMIC BOMB MUSEUM 25 YEARS AGO.

As a typical child in the Japanese public school system, I studied about Hiroshima and Nagasaki many times in classes. However, I did not like to hear the stories, nor did I like to see the photos or pictures showing the disastrous scenes of the atomic bombing and its consequences. I knew it was necessary for us to understand what happened in the two cities so that we should not repeat the foolish acts that lead to wars and conflicts, but they were all too much for me: too scary and dreadful even to have a glimpse of. I closed my mind so as not to be invaded by those scary stories and just waited for the teacher’s words to finish passing through the classroom.

However, my destiny as a Japanese child did not allow me to be exempted from visiting one of the two cities. When I was a junior high school student, I had to visit the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum as part of our school trip.

The Museum then was a very old, dark, large brown building. I remember it was a very fine day; however, I felt the atmosphere around the museum was cloudy and deadly quiet as

if the museum were covered by the shadows of death. The museum seemed to stand in a blank, dark spot against the bright peaceful sunlight of the day. I did not want to enter the building, for I already knew what was there waiting for me. However, there was no escape; I had to go into the building because that was one of the highlights of the school trip.

I took a deep breath and entered with my friends. Inside the building, it was very dark and silent. There were few windows so almost no sunlight could come in. There were a number of items displayed in the dead silence: I saw melted metal, burnt clothing, the shadow of people imprinted on walls by the heat of the bombing, and much more. From the first exhibited item, I felt very scared. It was as if I were re-experiencing the cries of the dead people. I started to walk faster; then I found myself running through the corridors. I ran and ran until I reached the end of the exhibits. I did not even catch a glimpse of the remaining displayed materials. That was too much. My body refused to watch all the details of the reminiscence and aftermath of the tragedy even though my head ordered me to see the actual items taken from the bombing site.

Since then, I carefully avoided any contact with sites or materials associated with the atomic bombing. I never watched movies set in wartime; I never read atomic-bombing related books – until August 2004, when Kevin McEvenue and Paul Huschilt came to Japan to give workshops on Wholebody Focusing.

### **III. MY VISIT TO HIROSHIMA**

I had participated in Kevin and Paul's Wholebody Focusing workshop in France in 2003, and on the last night of the workshop, we (Kevin, Paul, Teruko and I) had dinner together in Paris and discussed the details of our plan to bring Kevin and Paul to Japan for workshops. To my surprise, they were very interested in visiting Hiroshima to witness what human beings can do in war. They told me that in North America, the atomic bombing was sort of a taboo subject and that almost no one was willing to talk about it. Teruko and I were touched and moved by their words; we did not expect North Americans to be interested in the atomic bombing from a neutral point of view. So this was how the tour to Hiroshima came to be included in the workshop tour in Japan.

Although I was so impressed and grateful to them for visiting Hiroshima, I was still worried about going there. I was not sure if I could stand to look around a museum full of dreadful exhibits. However, the plan had already started. The die was cast, and we went to Hiroshima on a very sunny, hot day.

It was my first visit to that city, and I was surprised to find that the Hiroshima Peace Museum was very different from the museum in Nagasaki. In contrast to the dark atmosphere that surrounded the Nagasaki Museum, the Hiroshima Peace Museum was new, bright, peaceful, and full of light.

There were many volunteers in the museum, and one of them told me that the museum had recently been renovated. Before the renovation, the Hiroshima Museum was also dark and scary like the old Nagasaki Museum. The designers of the new museum planned to change the atmosphere because the old one was too shocking and scary for children to look

at the displayed materials. Many children were afraid to even enter the museum, and many refused to look at the displays or try to read the description of how the atomic bombing occurred. This meant that the old museum did not function as intended; it was meant to pass down the memories and facts of the atomic bombing to the younger generation and to stimulate them to think about what they could do to promote world peace. Taking all this into consideration, the museum was renovated in 1994 to bring in light from outside, with the walls painted white, and now inviting children. As it was bright and not scary, for the first time in my life, I could actually look at all the displayed materials, read all the descriptions, and watch short movies with Kevin and Paul without being caught up by fear.

#### **IV. HOW WE USUALLY FACE FEAR**

When we face fear, we tend to think we need a lot of courage. It is common to consider that “courage” is a prerequisite for facing fear. However, we all, and especially children, do not have enough courage to face fear that is so strong that it seems it might damage our daily life. Therefore, if the atomic-bombing museums were too scary or dreadful for children to even enter, the children would fail to learn anything about the tragedies and foolish acts of human beings. And we adults would have failed to pass down the memories or experiences that should be communicated to the next generation so that the tragedies will never be repeated.

#### **V. NEED FOR A SAFE CONTAINER TO FACE FEAR: FOCUSING SETTINGS**

The renovators of the Hiroshima Peace Museum were wise enough to know that they did not need to require us to have enough courage to confront tragic displays. Instead, they created a safe container that allows us to stay with what happened in Hiroshima in 1945. The Hiroshima Peace Museum is special not only because it is designed to be full of light but also because it provides a safe environment. The renovators of the museum, probably without knowing anything about Focusing, used a Focusing-friendly setting with better conditions to allow visitors to face their fears.

In Wholebody Focusing, we use our bodies as “safe containers” to step back a little from intense emotions (McEvenue, 2002; McEvenue & Doi, 2004). The Hiroshima Peace Museum offers a peaceful space for people to step back. The museum is situated in a beautiful park and surrounded by a quiet river. It looks like a small green island floating in the river.

After looking around the museum, Kevin, Paul and I walked along the river, and Kevin and I talked about what we had just seen. I told him that I could sense the sadness and anger of people more in those peaceful settings. Then he responded that without the sense of safety, we could not look at disastrous materials. We need more safety when we hold fearful or dreadful experiences; otherwise the fear takes us over. Peaceful settings make it possible for us to step back and feel safe. The more fearful the thing we are facing, the more safety we need within ourselves. We can face fear only after we have a safe place to step back to, only as we feel the whole body as a safe container.

For me, Kevin and Paul also made a wonderful contribution to the museum as a Focusing-setting. Even though they were very tired after traveling all the way to Japan and offering workshops, they showed calm but enthusiastic eagerness to look around all the displays. They did not complain how they were tired. They listened carefully to me — they did not lecture me about the lessons to be learned. They did not demand courage from me. Instead, they were calm, patient, kind, and supportive of my need for safety. I felt really connected with them and that sense of connectedness also contributed to my feeling safer in the museum. I was not alone and we seemed to share the same feelings. I was especially touched and felt supported when I saw Paul sitting in the museum hall. He was there, taking time to take in what he had just seen — he was there like a prayer. We exchanged no words; however, we seemed to share the same felt sense, which also helped me to find enough space inside of me to anchor myself and feel safe.

Kevin also told me that maybe it was Hiroshima's innate wisdom that led them to renovate the museum as it is now. Maybe they do not know anything about Focusing, but their bodily wisdom knew that they needed to provide more safety for people to look at and take in fearful experiences. This fact clearly indicates that Focusing is not a very special, professional attitude that can only be obtained through training by gifted people. Focusing is our innate wisdom. As Gendlin points out, "your body knows much that you don't know, much that you cannot possibly figure out" (Gendlin, 1981, p. 39). The renovators of the Museum "knew" that when it is safe enough, we can have space in ourselves to see dreadful tragic displays and re-experience sadness and anger.

It is not "courage" that is required to pass down tragic experiences; it is a "safe container" that enables us to contemplate what human beings have done to each other. The Focusing attitude of using one's body as a safe place to step back to is also applicable to such memorial buildings. We need a safety margin for us to step back. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum provides conditions supporting the safety required for and emphasized in Focusing – it shows how Focusing principles can be applied to hand down the past to the future generations for world peace.

## **VI. CHANGES THAT HAPPENED TO ME, AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES**

After the visit to Hiroshima, my process was carried forward. Hiroshima is no longer a place too scary to visit; now it is a place of peace, a place for prayer. This change was brought about by experiencing the safe surroundings of the museum in the company of two other focusers: all of which created good focusing attitudes for me.

Looking back on the experience in Hiroshima, I am aware that something more is happening within me. In January 1995, I experienced the Great Hanshin Earthquake. Fortunately, our family was safe and our house did not collapse (though it was considerably damaged), but we experienced a shock that was far beyond our imagination. Strangely, I do not remember the some of the time during which the earthquake occurred. I remember the first big shake, but for the subsequent 60 seconds, my memory is lost. I suspect I dissociated from the experience, and I have been afraid that I might experience flashbacks.

Yet coming back from Hiroshima, I am convinced that if I can find a safe container in which to step back (maybe with the help of Wholebody Focusing), my experience with the earthquake may be carried forward and the experience that might have been frozen can instead be integrated into myself.

My visit to Hiroshima brought a new step to me. Now I feel more safety when I think of, read, and watch atomic-bombing related materials. I am very much impressed with how experiencing the Museum as a Focusing setting worked, and with the wisdom of Focusing which is innate to human beings even if they do not consciously realize it.

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