

Watching Nagasaki blow

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To my mother-in-law, the atomic bomb looked a lot closer than it was.

Setsuko Sonoda was a girl of 13 on August 9, 1945. She lived on the same land she does today at age 80. The family farm is outside Yatsushiro on Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu, just across the bay from Nagasaki.

She was out in the garden at 11:01 a.m. that morning when she heard a thunderous reverberation. She knew it was a bomb because she had heard

plenty of them. Every factory and railroad station in the country had been taken out by that time.

She looked up from weeding the lettuce. The bone-rattling roar brought everyone out of their homes. Over the rooftops of her neighborhood, she saw a mushroom-shaped cloud climb, higher and higher and higher. They were a few miles inland from the bay, and because the cloud was so huge, it had to be the next town over. And yet there was something that didn't add up; the perspective was off. This was way too big to be that close, and the rumbling was too distant.

Could this be happening all the way over across the bay? Nagasaki?

The cloud from the Fat Man's mere 14 pounds of plutonium continued climbing and spreading. A solid wall of black dirt, running from horizon to horizon, began to rise up as well, the contradiction of a beast brighter than the sun that eats daylight.

This blog is not about blaming the U.S. for dropping the bomb, or about blaming the Japanese for Pearl Harbor. It happened. Brief sermon: In a war everybody kills everybody until one side stops fighting. Nothing even remotely compares to how much war sucks. The prize for winning is freedom, and that the bodies of most of your dead young men are identifiable. The prize for losing is that you get to rebuild your entire infrastructure. We will have peace when we all love our children more than we hate our enemies. But don't hold your breath. End of sermon.

Now fast-forward forty-four years from that morning in the garden.

I am in Setsuko Sonoda's garden, marrying her daughter in a Shinto wedding.

Meet Taeko Sonoda of Yatsushiro, daughter of Setsuko and Suelo Sonoda. We are at her parents' home, surrounded by all the relatives and most of the neighbors in the small farming community village.

My father and mother are there. My father had been a Navy pilot long ago, who had just finished flight training and was preparing to invade Japan when the war ended. The village is far removed from tourist destinations, so although the elders had seen Americans on TV and in the movies, some had not seen one in the flesh since the early post-war years. When Taeko and I strolled along the road next to a rural school, little children rushed over to walk along with us as far as the end of the playground, looking me over and peppering her with questions. They asked her if I came from television.

Like all weddings should be, this was joyous. There was lots of singing, and the Sonoda women did their locally famous chopstick dance. The men approached me one by one to toast our marriage with sake. We each drank, and turned our cups upside down to demonstrate we had drained it. Problem was, there were sixty of them, and only one of me, but my mother-in-law secretly kept my own sake flask filled with warm water, which saved me from having to be carried from the room. They marveled at my capacity, but I think some knew what was going on.

At some point, her father spoke, saying nice things about me.

Then my father spoke, saying nice things about Taeko.

It's not an easy or particularly pleasant task for a young Japanese woman to translate effusive praise about herself, but she was the only one there who could handle both languages, and she got through it with a minimum of blushing and seizing up.

Then it was my turn. With Taeko beside me, we sang a Japanese song call "Homeland." Every Japanese has a lifetime familiarity with the song, but it seemed particularly moving for them to hear it coming out of a western mouth in their language. Taeko sings beautiful harmonies, which made it even more special.

After the song, which I filled with a way cool harmonica bridge in the middle, I said a few words about things I had noticed about our two cultures. These are things Taeko and I had talked about during our engagement, and also that Reverend Moon had expounded on numerous times. He had spent a lot of time on both sides of the Pacific and was a keen observer of people.

I told them the East and West fit naturally well together. You could even say they need each other, as two halves of a sphere. The Japanese have a culture of family and filial piety. Americans excel in pragmatic realities. The Japanese tradition (Confucian and Buddhist) is vertical, with a strong connection to the past. The American character is horizontal (Christian), looking to the future. Each completes gaps in the other. We make each other better and should never have fought. The greatest tragedy for all of us is that we never knew each other very well. I told them I didn't come to Japan to steal their daughter, but came to join their family and to ask them to be part of mine.

Neither Taeko nor I had expected our remarks to have anywhere near the impact they did.

The sweetest girl in their tiny town had gone off to the U.S. and come back with a pink and white American. There was also the historical backdrop. To people of a certain age, regarding certain events, forty years ago was last week. The presence of my parents served to remind them of the last time they had seen Americans, as enemies across a battlefield and later, as occupying troops. And now everyone was older, no longer menacing. Much water and passed under the bridge and they saw each other differently. When we finished, all the women in the room had tears, and even the men were dabbing at their eyes.

Our speech concluded the "formal" part of the reception. As people mingled, Taeko was drafted for translation duties when several of the old men approached my father. As they touched their glasses to his, the Japanese farmers expressed their deep regret that there had been hostilities between the men of their generation. My father, his eyes moist, echoed that regret on his part.

I don't want to make more of it than there was, but it was as quietly profound a moment as I have ever witnessed. If there is such a thing as trains of spirit that can merge onto one set of rails from parallel tracks, unfasten and refasten their couplets together and then move out as one long, unified, ancestral train, I think that's what happened.

If life searches for ways to make things come together to be healed, then what better place to do that than in a village on the other side of Nagasaki Bay? I didn't know at the time that Taeko was my soulmate and would be the one love of my life. But I suspected so even then. And hoped.