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The Hiroshima challenge

by David Krieger



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Hiroshima, as the first city attacked by an atomic weapon, was transformed to a city of ashes and death. From this devastation, it would be reborn to challenge humanity to a higher destiny.

Hiroshima became more than a place; it became a symbol of the terrifying threat of a new age of virtually unlimited destructive power. One bomb could destroy one city. By implication, a few bombs could destroy countries and a few dozen bombs could reduce civilization to ruins. As the nuclear arms race gained momentum, the future of life on the planet was placed at risk. Eventually tens of thousands of nuclear weapons would be created and deployed. We humans, by our own scientific and technological cleverness, had created the tools of our own annihilation. Hiroshima was the opening chapter of the Nuclear Age.

Hiroshima was destroyed on Aug. 6, 1945 and by the spring of the next year blades of grass and even flowers had returned. The city engaged in the arduous task of rebuilding. But Hiroshima could never again be just a city. It became something deeper, rooted in the human psyche: a symbol of devastation and potential extinction, but also a symbol of hope and rebirth.

The power of Hiroshima as symbol is to awaken humanity to the threat of its own demise. The survivors

of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the hibakusha, tell us, "We must eliminate nuclear weapons before they eliminate us." And by "us," they mean all of us. The hibakusha have been courageous in confronting and revealing their personal tragedies. They have faced their fears and vulnerability and have spoken publicly in an effort to prevent their past from becoming the collective future of humanity. The hibakusha are modern prophets. They have looked into the abyss and returned to sound a warning.

Like other American children, I learned in school the lesson that the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were needed to end the war and save the lives of American soldiers. What I didn't learn was that the use of the atomic bombs violated the laws of warfare as weapons that were indiscriminate and caused unnecessary suffering. Nor did I learn that the victims of the bombs were mostly civilians. The emphasis was on the scientific and technological achievement of creating the bombs. The use of the atomic bombs was not challenged, but celebrated. The US perspective was from above the bomb. We dropped the bomb. We saw it fall and fulfill its purpose of massive destruction, and we justified its use.

When I visited the Peace Memorial Museums at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I gained a very different perspective. The lesson was one of human suffering and death. The bomb killed men, women and children. It could not discriminate. It subjected the survivors of the bomb's blast and fire to radiation and lingering illness and death. The radiation exposure would take tens of thousands of additional lives and would affect future generations. The bomb kept killing.

In Japan, the bomb was witnessed not from above as a technological achievement, but from below as a fiery hell on earth. More than 200,000 died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but there were survivors who lived to tell their stories. These were stories from the inferno, fierce cautionary tales of what the future portended for humanity should this technology be allowed to go unchecked and uncontrolled.

The Hiroshima challenge is to put the nuclear genie back in its bottle, protecting all humanity, including future generations, by regaining human control over its most deadly tools of destruction. To meet the Hiroshima challenge, the perspective of those who were beneath the bomb must be shared and understood. The best teachers are the survivors, those who experienced the bomb firsthand. But the survivors are growing elderly and they cannot be the only teachers. Others must step up and join them in their quest to abolish nuclear weapons.

It has been more than six decades since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and most people cannot imagine what it was like to experience the bomb. The challenge of Hiroshima requires igniting the global imagination. If we can imagine the terror of the bomb and the silence of extinction, we can respond to it with political action. If we allow ourselves to be lulled into complacency and fail to imagine nuclear weapons erupting in global conflagration, it will be unlikely that sufficient numbers of people will stand up to demand an end to the nuclear era.

In the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima, Albert Camus, the great French novelist and existentialist philosopher, wrote, "Peace is the only battle worth waging." Humanity must stand in solidarity against nuclearism and against the militarism in which it is embedded. We must choose: to wage peace and seek an end to the nuclear era, or to be docile in the face of this existential threat.

Some of the greatest scientists of the 20th century signed the 1955 Russell-Einstein Manifesto, in which they stated, "There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death."

In 1982, I was a founder of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. The meaning of the Foundation's name is

that peace is an imperative of the Nuclear Age. The Foundation was created at a time when the leaders of the two most heavily nuclear-armed countries in the world, the United States and Soviet Union, were not speaking to one another. We were founded in the belief that citizens, all of us, can and must make a difference. Our goal has been to meet the Hiroshima challenge, to awaken humanity to the necessity of abolishing nuclear weapons. We have strived to educate and advocate for a world free of nuclear weapons, to strengthen international law and to empower new peace leaders.

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In recent years, we have focused on attaining US leadership for a nuclear weapons-free world. Earlier this year we delivered more than 70,000 signatures to the White House urging President Obama to demonstrate that leadership. We have been encouraged by the President's statements, particularly his speech in Prague in April 2009, in which he said, "I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." In his speech, he stated that America, as the only country to have used nuclear weapons, has a "moral responsibility" to act and to lead. This is an entirely new tone from an American president, and one that has been welcomed throughout the world. But it is not sufficient.

It is not enough for President Obama or other leaders to call for action. These leaders must actually take action, and this will require the support of the people in their countries and throughout the world. The goal of a world free of nuclear weapons will be met with opposition that can only be overcome by a strong and sustained demand from the people of the world. Too often leaders speak of a world without nuclear weapons as the "ultimate goal," meaning a goal to be achieved in the far distant future or perhaps not at all. We must work now to see that the word "ultimate" is replaced by the word "urgent," and that this change is converted to action.

We live in an astonishingly beautiful world and we share the miracle of life. As citizens of our unique, life-sustaining planet, we also share a responsibility to pass our world on intact to the next generation. To succeed in doing so, we must meet the Hiroshima challenge. We must accept the struggle of this challenge, and never give up until our world has been freed from the nuclear threat to humanity first revealed at Hiroshima.

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