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Accompanying the hibakusha to the birthplace of the atomic bomb

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last week, I returned to Los Alamos, N.M., the scene of our greatest crime, the birthplace of the atomic bomb, where preparations continue for bigger and better nuclear weapons. Even as the government is shut down and New Mexico has just been ranked worst in the nation for the well-being of children, plutonium bomb-making carries on at Los Alamos.

This time, I accompanied a delegation of 13 elderly Japanese peace activists from Hiroshima, Japan. Several of them were survivors and witnesses of the U.S. atomic bombing 68 years ago. They're known as hibakusha, a Japanese word that refers to all surviving victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It translates as "explosion-affected people."

It was one of the most moving experiences of my life.

The delegation was organized by the World Friendship Center out of Hiroshima. Their motto is "to foster peace, one friend at a time." Several retired directors hosted them in Seattle and Portland, Ore., for two weeks before bringing them to New Mexico, where they spoke in six elementary and high schools and to classes at the University of New Mexico.

In Santa Fe, Pax Christi hosted a potluck dinner in a church hall where they introduced themselves and several of us spoke of our work for disarmament. Among those I met with was Soh Horie, 73, who was 5 when the bomb went off. His sister and he were walking on a nearby hill on their way to school and were blown off their feet. If they had left for school a little earlier, he told me, they would have died. Soh has been a peace activist all his life.

Delegation members gave out copies of the recent Hiroshima Day message by Matsui Kazumi, mayor of Hiroshima.

"Indiscriminately stealing the lives of innocent people, permanently altering the lives of survivors, and stalking their minds and bodies to the end of their days, the atomic bomb is the ultimate inhumane weapon and an absolute evil," the mayor wrote Aug. 6, the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing. "The Hibakusha, who know the hell of an atomic bombing, have continuously fought that evil."

During the potluck, I sat next to 82-year-old Kono Kyomi. Her daughter sat beside her. Over dinner, Kono Koyomi told me her story. She was 14 when the U.S. dropped the bomb on her city. She and her mother survived, but their house on the edge of the city was destroyed. The next day, the two of them walked into the center of the city, right through all the smoking remains, in search of her two sisters. They walked for days through the ruins. Eventually, they learned that her sisters were not in the city center at the time and survived the blast.

But Kono Kyomi, at age 14, saw everything, including hundreds of people in the process of dying a horrific death.

"They were all dying," she said, "and there was no medicine, and there was nothing we could do." She looked me in the eye.

"I'm so sorry for what our country did, and like you, I will do everything I can to work for the abolition of nuclear weapons," I said.

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"Be sure to speak to young people," she said. "We need to tell them the stories, to tell them about these weapons, and to educate them to work to get rid of them. That's the most important thing we can do for the future."

Kazumi, in his speech, said: "Even as their average age surpasses 78, the Hibakusha continue to communicate their longing for peace. They still hope the people of the world will come to share that longing and choose the right path. In response to this desire of the many Hibakusha who have transcended such terrible pain and sorrow, the rest of us must become the force that drives the struggle to abolish nuclear weapons."

Jay Coghlan, director of nukewatch.org, spoke at the potluck about the ongoing work of the Los Alamos National Lab, which is dead set on creating new "smart" nukes. Bud Ryan of Pax Christi spoke about his film, "The Forgotten Bomb," and I told of our annual protests and prayer vigils.

Others in the delegation are adult children of hibakusha and carry on their parents' witness by telling their stories. A few work for the Hiroshima peace memorial. One woman, Shoko, has lived her whole life in Fukushima, right next to the nuclear power plant that exploded after the 2011 tsunami and that is now leaking radioactive material into the Pacific Ocean. She's not allowed back to Fukushima, so she resettled as a refugee in Hiroshima.

The morning after our dinner and sharing, we gathered in a Santa Fe park to lay flowers at a memorial that commemorates the 4,500 Japanese people who were interned there in our concentration camp -- the "Department of Justice World War II Internment Camp," it's called.

Then we all drove up the mountain to Los Alamos, where we gathered at Ashley Pond, site of the buildings where the Hiroshima bomb was built. We gathered under the small stone shelter on the edge of the pond for photos. The delegation brought with them 1,000 peace cranes, little birds made of folded color paper. We attached them to the wooden beams in the ceiling of the shelter, hoping they might be safe there.

Afterward, Joni Arends of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, pointed out in the distance the current buildings where the plutonium cores for every nuclear bomb are made and explained how the labs continue to work nonstop to improve nuclear destruction.

"How long will you remain imprisoned by distrust and animosity?" Kazumi said in his August statement. "Do you honestly believe you can continue to maintain national security by rattling your sabers? Please come to Hiroshima. Encounter the spirit of the Hibakusha. Look squarely at the future of the human family without being trapped in the past, and make the decision to shift to a system of security based on trust and dialogue."

It was moving and disturbing to welcome these suffering servants of peace to the birthplace of the atomic bomb and to explain how the labs continue to prepare to vaporize people. But it was also hopeful because our gathering brimmed with forgiveness, reconciliation, love and peace. The hibakusha were living bodhisattvas of peace and nonviolence. Spending time with them was a fulfillment of Jesus' commandment to "love our enemies." They loved us and show us how to make peace.

The mayor's closing words summed up our feelings: "Recalling once again the trials of our predecessors through these 68 years, we offer heartfelt consolation to the souls of the atomic bomb victims by pledging to do everything in our power to eliminate the absolute evil of nuclear weapons and achieve a peaceful world." Amen.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is now available at paceebene.org. This week, John will speak at St. Joan of Arc Church in Minneapolis. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or peace group, go to his website or contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.]

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