

May 2007

The Balm of Forgiveness

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Recommended Citation

Graf, William (2007) "The Balm of Forgiveness," *Verbum*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 12.
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol4/iss2/12>

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The Balm of Forgiveness

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The garden is an extended shrine. Water flowing around the cenotaph reminds the pensive pilgrim of the chorus cry of thousands of charred victims: "Water! Water!" Victims' names on the simple monument compose a litany for peace. "No more war! No more atomic bombs! No more nuclear threats!" A mound of dirt covered ashes tells the silent sojourner: this is what remains of thousands of mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. Off by itself there is a children's shrine filled with multi-colored paper cranes. They are a symbol of hope for a healing peace. "If I finish one thousand of these, I will not die." Unlike their doubting elders, children believe in miracles."

THE BALM OF FORGIVENESS

Dr. Rev. William Graf

The garden is an extended shrine. Water flowing around the cenotaph reminds the pensive pilgrim of the chorus cry of thousands of charred victims: “Water! Water!” Victims’ names on the simple monument compose a litany for peace. “No more war! No more atomic bombs! No more nuclear threats!” A mound of dirt covered ashes tells the silent sojourner: this is what remains of thousands of mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. Off by itself there is a children’s shrine filled with multi-colored paper cranes. They are a symbol of hope for a healing peace. “If I finish one thousand of these, I will not die.” Unlike their doubting elders, children believe in miracles.

Our pilgrimage group is at Hiroshima sitting in the ten acre Peace Park that memorializes the nearly 200,000 people who died from the effects of the first atomic bomb dropped on a populated area. Today it is warm and the sky is blue; a real sense of peace pervades the park. On August 6, 1945 people were going to work. Youngsters were toiling to widen the streets in case of a bombing attack. Soldiers were drilling in the courtyard of the barracks. Some inhabitants were relocating to the outlying hills. It was a beautiful morning when the Enola Gay dropped the bomb which destroyed an entire community and started the world on the gruesome race for nuclear supremacy. Today’s bombs possess many times the power of the one detonated at Hiroshima.

Others’ stories may be told in another forum. I recall my experience of the impassioned tale of a then thirty-nine year old, baby-carrying mother telling of her years

as a “Hiroshima-survivor.” That evening she would introduce our group to her father and mother. All three physically survived the horrors of August 6, 1945; no one survived emotionally.

We sat on cement benches in the Peace park as Koko held our attention with the gripping story of her childhood years. Koko blossomed into adolescence amidst demolished buildings twisted by hell-like heat of the atomic bomb. Some still stand to serve as wounded reminders. Many were pulled down to make room for a new city dedicated to peace. Survivors watched their friends and neighbors die slowly of radiation poisoning. As she matured Koko watched the older city die and the newer city come to life. She heard the stories of that terrible day and witnessed the city’s resurrection. An abiding hatred for those who flew the plane that dropped the bomb festered in her young heart. She bemoaned that there should exist such monsters who could drop a powerful bomb and fly away free of witnessing its effects on human lives. As she grew so did the natural resentment. Her story was a confession.

Thirteen years after the bomb was dropped, the Reverend Doctor Kiyoshi Tanimoto, her father and longtime pastor of the local Presbyterian community, was very busy bringing scarred victims to the United States for plastic surgery. He was to appear along with his family on the popular television program, *This Is Your Life*. The program brought people from the honored guest’s past to speak of the influence they had on the life of the surprised guest. Two other people would meet that day: his teen-age daughter and one of the crew members of the Enola Gay.

He had never met any of the victims; the crew member only lived with the tortured memory of his obedience to drop the bomb. The guest, too, had lived a tormented life. Victims appear in many guises not necessarily recognizable. The crew member-victim encountered the victim-child on a nationwide stage both baptizing the other with tears of remorse and forgiveness. "We met as enemies. Once we recognized each other as a victim we found a basis for reconciliation." The young child's hate, she confessed, was transformed into an adult forgiveness. Mercy triumphed over the injustice of justice. Both could continue their lives more freely; always aware of the deed, but equally aware of the need to build upon the destruction.

Tears gradually came to my eyes as I consumed a unfolding horror of those days and years which followed the mutilation of tens of thousands of people; the destruction of an enemy city in the cause of war. The enemies were real; the death came to the city randomly chosen as an experiment which would demonstrate the ominous power of a split atom. A survivor commented that the horror of that bomb made the movie, *The Day After*, to be more like a Walt Disney production. Who could imagine bodies serving as footstools to walk across a river? Who could imagine hundreds of teenage sons and daughters vanishing from their work assignment in the center of a city becoming no more than ashes or images flashed against a stone wall? Men without eyes stumbled over lifeless bodies searching for anything or anyone to relieve the languishing fire shooting through their blistered bodies. The echoing cry for water was the funeral hymn for many of the victims. Water gives life; the water of their bombed city only made death come more quickly.

In so many ways I wanted to turn away from the victim's story; or, let her story fall on deaf ears. I did not want to know how "we" could allow such unparalleled horror happen in the first place. Then, to be made aware that "we" continue to allow even more powerful bombs grow in the vineyards of our international arsenals. What horror! To sit, listen, and sense that in many ways "we" are still victims; "we" still remain the cause of future bombs and future tragedy.

Later, a small group accepted an invitation for tea with her father and mother. The home of the Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto and his wife was a simple one located just outside of the new city. The meeting was not so much a question and answer period as one of solidarity in suffering. When the Dr. Tanimoto spoke with us, an uncomfortable silence fell upon us and him. He described August 6, 1945 as if he were seeing for the first time the horror of dismembered bodies, smelling the burned flesh of friends and parishioners, listening to weakened cries for water and relief, running through the scarred bodies floating lifeless in the rivers, sensing a total helplessness, his eyes searching out his wife and baby daughter as he ran through the streets. He had been outside the city helping a parishioner move to safety. Once the devoted minister recovered from the blinding flash and rising cloud, he quickly made it back towards the city. The father and pastor had survived the bomb. Many did not.

The Dr. Tanimoto spoke of the horrors; then he spoke no more. His wife and daughter filled the poignant silence with their story of survival. In an almost apologetic way, they told us that most who survived the bomb spoke little or never about the day. They were guilty of survival. The horror was too much; words could never describe fully

the utter helplessness of those who lived through the nights and days of that August. Those who had been such an important part of their lives had died. Over 75% of Dr. Tanimoto's parish ceased to live. How could he speak of his life's work when so much of it disappeared in a split moment! Why was he not with his people caught in the burning city?

In a moment a deadening silence (I never knew what that expression meant until that night) tears flowed down the cheeks of this gentle man. He was reliving the terror of that day of desolate abandon still another time. Again he could do nothing but watch the people, hear the cries, and be helpless. At that precious, embarrassingly solemn moment, I noticed a woman in our group; tears were flowing down her cheeks also. They, too, seemed to be tears of helplessness. She spoke softly and with measured sentences about her family in New Jersey. They, too, cried and did not speak of the two grandfathers (husbands and fathers) who had died amidst the cunning bombs and embracing flames at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. She, too, had grown up aware that painful silence might hide the wounds of war, but never heals them. Her family hopelessly read of the terror of that fateful morning and experienced its treachery because precious lives lived no longer, but perished in steel tombs and pyre-like ships.

As her story unfolded, Dr. Tanimoto's head nodded assent to the tragedy of war and impersonal weapons which erase precious people. He raised his head; his hand gently took the hands of his friend-in-sorrow. Their tears became the tears of thousands who remembered silently the tragedies of those fateful days.

We sat each buried in our own thoughts, holding back our tears or letting them

flow in warm sympathy for the two sorrowing people who sat with joined hands and linked hearts looking beyond the East and the West to unspoken horrors. I am not sure what others were thinking. My heart was crying out: No more war! No more war! No more destruction of grandfathers and little children. No more tears of sorrow because of inability or unwillingness to find peaceful ways to justice. We sat together transforming an almost unforgiving sorrow into a journey together to wipe away each other's tears; to carry each other's sorrows; to heal each other's memories.

I looked again. They were still holding hands sharing the balm of forgiveness.