Hiroshima and What We Can Learn Today: The Story of Koko Kondo

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Letter from Evelin to the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network:

Dear All!
Yesterday I met with Koko Kondo, who survived the atomic bomb blast of August 6, 1945, less than a mile away from the hypocenter of the explosion, as an 8-months-old baby in the arms of her mother.
It was mind-boggling to listen to Koko's vivid account of her inner development in the aftermath of this horrible event, a journey from hatred to wisdom. I urged Koko, now 60 years old, to make this development accessible to more people than just her nearest environment. I urged her to start writing about the lessons she has learned in a book and, perhaps even more importantly, make a film, since she is such an authentic and impressive speaker.
Her account teaches us so many lessons. After utter destruction and humiliation, national as well as personal, through atomic bombs and their aftermath, what should the victims do? Should they hate? If yes, whom? Should they be ashamed, disengage and pretend that they were not there? Should they develop a worldview of exclusion? Or of inclusion? If yes, include whom? Should they forgive?
After our meeting, I asked Koko to help me buy the following book in the bookshop: Hiroshima by John Hersey (1985, New York, NY: Vintage). In this book, her father's faring is described, among others, and also Koko figures peripherally. She told me that Columbia University had made a list of those books worth taking into the 21st century, with Hiroshima taking the first place.
Back home, after our meeting, I read the book from a-z in a few hours.
Further down I have transcribed for you two articles that Koko gave me, depicting her life, both from 1991.
Koko needs encouragement (and a PC!). I would like to invite everybody who could provide support to her, to extend it to her. She is now leading the life of a wife of a minister, caring for the parish, and does not see how exactly she could make room for activities that concern her own life.
Most warmly!
Evelin
PS: I very much thank Diane Cornish for having brought me together with Koko.

Remembering Hiroshima's legacy

By Lorna Moon
The Japan Times, Sunday, August 4, 1991
"We dropped in, and then we flew away as fast as we could go. I looked back and saw the mushroom cloud forming. I saw the whole city being destroyed and I wrote in my log 'Oh, God. What have we done.'" [Captain Lewis, co-pilot in the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945]

It's hard.
"I've been here over 20 years and have never gone to Hiroshima," admitted one member of the audience.
Another said that she was once compelled to take her family there when they came to visit from the States. "Halfway through the museum, I just kept my eyes glued to the floor and walked on blindly. I couldn't look any more."
But she came to listen.
Of the 15 or so expatriate women present, only a few could claim to have "experienced" war, and yet none were detached from war's realities.
"When I was 20 years old, I met a man who had been a medical corpsman in Vietnam," a young woman explained as the group waited for their speaker to arrive. "He told me once about a little village in Cambodia. The medical unit had won the trust of the people there by treating them, and had offered to vaccinate their children. Word traveled fast, and when the day came there were mothers with children from miles around, from neighboring villages forming a long line outside the tent where the vaccinations were being administered."
In a faltering voice, she went on to say that word had gotten to other ears as well. On the morning after vaccination day, the medics awoke to see that they had been rewarded for their efforts with a pile of arm. The arms of all the children who had been vaccinated had been cruelly hacked off by some unseen force and left as a warning that their kind of help was not welcome there.
Sympathetic nods and exclamations showed that these women all held poignant images of war in their minds' eye. A woman came in and fiddled with the air condition. It was a sultry June evening, and the banquet facility of the downtown Osaka restaurant could hardly accommodate the crowd.
She is tiny and haggard looking. Although she describes herself as a housewife "like most of you here tonight," it becomes apparent that she is altogether extraordinary. Her voice carried the kind of authority and passion possible only from having been there.

Bomb survivor

Her name is Koko Kondo, and she was an 8-month-old baby in her mother's arms when the house caved in on them in the split-second it took for the bomb to fell the entire city. Radiation sickness made it impossible for Kondo to give birth. She has two adopted children and has placed 19 adoptive children to parents overseas. Adoption is virtually nonexistent in Japan.

Koko Kondo is the international adviser to an organization called “Children As the Peacemakers,” for whose cause she had toured the U.S. on three separate occasions. In Moscow, her group personally presented a crystal glove to Mikhail Gorbachev as a symbol of our fragile Earth, asking him to “please help keep it.”
In December, she was called again to bring eight members of the group to Baghdad. While touring an elementary school there, they observed drawings that the schoolchildren had made: the American flag destroyed; Bush being hanged with Saddam Hussein standing triumphantly above. Class commended with the teacher shouting, “Long live Hussein! Death to Bush!” and the children echoing.
“This is just how Japan was in the 1940s during the war,” Kondo pointed out to the multinational gathering of women. “Perhaps the experiences of my childhood have driven me to work for peace.” She went on with her won life story.
Kondo’s mother regained consciousness to the sound of her baby crying in the darkness. Another beam collapsed, and in came a small sliver of light. She dug her way through the rubble toward it until she had freed herself and little Koko from the wreckage. Then the house burned.
Even before the bombing, the war had wrought terrible devastation on her family. Her father, the Reverend Tanimoto, was a minister who had been educated in the United States before the war. He was treated as a spy and shunned.
After the war was over, Kondo’s father had launched two great projects. One was called the Hiroshima Maiden Project, formed to help young girls who had been disfigured by the bomb. The other was called the Moral Adoption project, and its purpose was to give moral support to war orphans by sending them letters and Christmas cards.

Conquering hatred

Kondo had always looked people in the eye. Growing up among the victims, she learned to look at young girls whose eyes were crooked, who se mouths didn’t close completely, and she said to herself, “Some day in the future I’m going to something about this.” Whom should she hate for the terrible injustice? In her young mind, she thought she should hate the man in the plane who had dropped the bomb, so she made up her mind to one day meet him and set things straight.
When Kondo was 10 years old, in 1955, her father made a trip to the U.S. with 25 of the “maidens” so that they could obtain corrective plastic surgery at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York. A television station got wind of the project and contacted Reverend Tanimoto, asking him to appear as a guest on “This is Your Life.”
Arrangements were made without his knowledge, to bring the rest of his family and a core of others. Kondo clung timidly to her mother and looked around. Several of the people she recognized; one, she didn’t. “Who is that man?” she asked her mother. It was Captain Lewis, co-pilot on the B-29 Bomber that had set the Hiroshima blast.
Yes, she had wanted to meet him, but it was a shock that it should happen so soon. She glared at him with intense hatred. That wasn’t enough, so she walked right up to him with the intent of confronting him directly, but Ralph Edward, the show’s host, beat her to it. “How did you feel after you dropped the bomb?” he asked. Captain Lewis looked down at the frail little Japanese girl who had just marched up so boldly and he spoke directly to

her. “We dropped it, and then we flew away as fast as we could go. I looked back and saw the mushroom cloud forming. I saw the whole city being destroyed and I wrote in my log, ‘Oh, God. What have we done?”
He had said it with tears in his eyes. Kondo thought of all the years she had carried such hatred for this man, but at that moment she couldn’t hate him. The thing to hate, she realized with surprising wisdom, is war itself. She put her little hand in his, and held it tightly throughout the remainder of the show.
That experience changed Kondo’s whole attitude. Years later, as a college student in the States, it occurred to her that if he hadn’t said what he did, she would have been carrying this hate around with her all her life. So she tried to find him to thank him. She learned that after appearing on that show, he had been called in by the Pentagon and given hell, after which he had died in a mental hospital. She learned from his psychotherapist there that he had once sculptured a statue of a mushroom cloud, with a tear drop running down its side.
The young adult kept all her experiences to herself. Every powerful feelings and painful memory was too difficult to bring out into the open at that point.
As a child, Kondo spent six months in the home of Peal Buck. She was very perplexed to see that this women had so many children, all different looking. Same were black, some Asian, some Caucasian.” She asked her mother, “How can they all be hers?”
Her mother then explained about adoption, and Kondo was very impressed. Pearl Buck gave birth to only one child, who was mentally disabled. Needing money to send her child to a special doctor, she decided to write a book. “People told me that mentally retarded children can’t do anything for society,” Pearl Buck had said to Kondo one day, “but I started writing to help my daughter, so she made me a Nobel Prize winner. Every child who is born has a purpose.”
Kondo resolved to emulate Pearl Buck.

Painful legacy

The next memorable experience was a very painful one. Since Kondo had been less than a mile away from the hypocenter of the explosion as a baby, studies were being made on her body. Every year, she was sent to an atom-bomb clinic for a day of testing. In postwar times of very little food, Kondo really hadn’t minded that day off from school and the free lunch, but as adolescence advanced she became squeamish.
It never occurred to her to object. A young girl in that era in Japan just didn’t’ voice her feelings. Period. As usual, Kondo was instructed to go from room to room clothes in a hospital gown tied flimsily at the sides, under which she had to wear a strip of cotton cloth held with a drawstring, to cover her privates. When the testing was finished, she went to put on her clothes. A man stopped her. “Go into that door over there,” he said with ho further explanation, and Kondo obeyed.
It was an auditorium. She was suddenly confronted with glaring floodlights, beyond which she could hear the sounds of foreign voices in many languages. Then a voice in her own language said, “Pleaws eremove your goen.”
Why? Because she just happned to have been there on Aug. 6, 1945.
Subjected to the words humiliation imaginable for a modest, old-fashioned Japanese girl

at puberty, kondo let her tears fall unchecked over her naked, quivering body and prayed, "God, get me out of there. I don't want to have anything to do with Hiroshima again for as long as I live."

When she finally got out, it was to attend college. Kondo never let on to her dorm-mates and peers that she was a survivor from Hiroshima. The first person she divulged that information to was her fiancé, a third-generation Chinese-American. The marriage was promptly called off, for the suitor's uncle happened to be a physician who specialized in radiation sickness. "She can't have children," he warned.

Hiroshima would not be denied. It would follow her forever. She turned her back on her family's church, for if there is a God, she thought, why did he let this happen to me? She didn't want to have anything to do with that kind of God. It took several years, but eventually she got over her broken engagement. At age 30, she met and married an atheist, a rich documentary filmmaker. She was as far away from Hiroshima and God as she thought she ever wanted to be.

One day she said to her husband, "I was an 8-months-old baby in Hiroshima when it was bombed. If I don't do anything for Hiroshima, then my life is meaningless."

Her husband agreed to move there. Kondo couldn't quit her job as easily as he could move his, so he went on ahead to her father's house while she tied up loose ends in Tokyo. Months later, she arrived in Hiroshima to find that her atheist husband had become a Christian and was preparing to go into the ministry.

"So, I'm stuck with the church," she jokingly said to the visibly moved group of women. The women silently brushed tears away as Kondo told of her experiences in placing adoptive children. To be sure, some things that happen are horrible! She spoke of placing the child of a 10year old rape victim; of caring for and placing an abused child who had been burned with cigarettes, who was afraid of taking a bath because her abusive parent had tried to drown her.

To be sure, there are some things that are so horrible that it seems we cannot even bear to know about them. On the other hand, people like Koko Kondo come out of the rubble of Hiroshima.

Hiroshima Baby: An Interview with Kondo Koko

By Winnie Inui
Kansai Time Out, August 1991

(a fuller account of this appears on the book Hiroshima, by John Hersey)

At 8:15 a.m. on August 6, 1945, Koko was an eight-month-old baby, in her mother's arms, when the atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima. Early that morning her father, Reverend Tanimoto Kiyoshi, pastor of the Nagaregawa church, had gone out of town to help a friend move some furniture. Mrs. Tanimoto was talking with one of the parish women at the time of the blast and the parsonage collapse on them. It was Koko's cries that brought her mother back to consciousness and frantic efforts to dig them all out before flames consumed the wreckage of their home. They were less than one mile from ground zero.

The events of that day eventually led to Koko Kondo's appearances on the American TV

show, 'This is Your Life,' to meet the pilot of the plane that dropped the bomb. Winnie Inui interviewed her about this somewhat questionable confrontation, under the guise of entertainment, and other aspects of her remarkable life as a 'survivor.'

Koko, you were a babe in arms when the bomb was dropped. What do you remember of how it affected you and your family?
Of course, I don't remember the actual bombing but it affected my father's whole life from then on. He spent the next days trying to relieve some of the horrible suffering around us; but much later I realized he'd felt guilty because, even though he was a clergyman, his first concern had been for his own safety and that of his family. This, and the haunting memories of all those he couldn't help, led him to dedicate himself to working for peace. He coined the world-famous slogan 'No more Hiroshimas!" (a fuller account of this appears on the book Hiroshima, by John Hersey)
One of the programs he started, with Norman Cousins [editor of Saturday Review] was Hiroshima Maidens, which arranged for terribly disfigured victims of both bombs to be taken to New York for corrective surgery. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of meeting orphans my parents were trying to find support of and these grotesquely scarred young girls who came to the church for help.

Growing up among the horrors and aftermath of atomic war, how did you feel about it?
When you are young, you have very strong convictions and I felt that whoever dropped that bomb on Hiroshima was to be hated forever. I thought, if I ever met him, I would punch him in the face. But my father was preaching love, healing and forgiveness and carrying it out in his daily life so I couldn't tell anyone about my 'evil' desire for revenge.

How did the eventual meeting with the pilot come about?
It was spring, 1955; my father was in America with a group of 25 Hiroshima Maidens when my mother received a request from NBC TV for us all to appear on This is Your Life a popular weekly program, hosted by Ralph Edwards. We were to leave for Los Angeles next day., I was only 10 and it was tremendously exiting: the night train to Tokyo, passports from the Foreign Office, my first plane ride and very mysterious. Absolute secrecy was crucial to the success of the show, in order to surprise the main 'star' my father!
What happened really changed my life: I met Captain Robert Lewis, the co-pilot of the Enola Gay, which had dropped the bomb. At first, I was completely stunned, then I remember trying to stare at hm really fiercely. His turn came to describe his own impression of the bombing. As they flew over the horrendous destruction a second time, he said he wrote in his log, "Oh God, what have we done!" He was almost overcome with teas and could hardly speak and I too was in tears and very moved. So I went over to him and held his hand tight. I realized at that moment that hating people was not the way; it's war itself that's evil. The relief was enormous as though a great burden had been lifted from my heart.

What happened after the show?
My father left on a lecture tour of U.S. churches to raise funds for the Hiroshima Maidens. My mother and the rest of us had a wonderful time, staying with Pearl Buck on her farm in Pennsylvania. She had eight adopted children, as well as her own daughter, and her love and devotion to all of them really impressed us. So when, four years later, we discovered a baby girl on the altar in our Church, my parents adopted her as their fifth child.

How about your own life, back in Hiroshima?
I was officially recognized as a bomb victim and had to undergo annual examinations so that doctors and scientists could study the effects of rational on the human body. As I reached puberty, I began to feel like a guinea pig and found the examinations more and more humiliating. After one very unpleasant visit, I vowed to give up the identity of a bomb victim. I never went back.
I wanted to get away from Hiroshima altogether and start a brand new life. Through my father's friends, I was able to go to high school in America and eventually graduated from American University, Washington D.C. But Hiroshima still overshadowed my life. I feel in love with a Chinese American and was going to get married; but his uncle turned out to be a doctor, specializing in research on radiation. He realized I must have been affected by the atomic bomb and wouldn't accept me as his nephew's wife.
I was no longer interested in a God who let such cruel things happen so I decided to go back to Tokyo and find a rich man who was not a Christian. I finally met my husband, a documentary film maker, and we got married. But things were difficult in the film business and I persuaded him to return with me to Hiroshima, where my father could help us find work.

So then the story came full circle?
Yes! After spending some time with my father, my husband decided he wanted to be baptized. Not long after, even though I opposed it, my husband began studying for the ministry. He's now pastor of Kita-Senri Church.
We have two adopted daughters and I am also 'following in father's footsteps', working for peace through an organization called Children as the Peacemakers, which was started in 1982 in San Francisco by Patricia Montandon. We arrange for women and children from all over to travel to the word's trouble spots, meet government leaders and communicate our message of global harmony. I've been to Belfast, Moscow and, last December, to Baghdad. I am ready to go anywhere next, wherever the need is, as soon as the phone call comes.

Then I read about Koko's father in John Hersey (1985). *Hiroshima*. New York, NY: Vintage. p. 140:

In midsummer of 1950, Cousins invited Tanimoto to return to the United States for a second tour, to raise money for the World Federalists, for moral adoption, and for the peace center, and late in August Tanimoto was off again. Marvin Green arranged things, as before. This time, Tanimoto visited two hundred and one cities, in twenty-four states,

over eight months. The high point of the trip (and possibly his life) was a visit to Washington, arranged by Cousins, where on February 5, 1951, after having lunch with members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, he gave the opening prayer for the afternoon session of the Senate:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the great blessing Thou has granted America in enabling her to build in this last decade the greatest civilization in human history…. We thank Thee, God, that Japan has been permitted to the one of the fortunate recipients of American generosity. We thank Thee that our people have been given the gift of freedom, enabling them to rise from the ashes of ruin and be reborn…. God bless all members of this Senate….

Virginia's Senator A. Willis Robertson rose and declared himself "dumbfounded and inspired" that a man "whom we tried to kill with an atomic bomb came to the Senate floor and , offering up thanks to the same God we worship, thanked Him for America's great spiritual heritage, and then asked God to bless every member of the Senate."