

TUESDAY VESPERS, AUGUST 4, 2020
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY OF SACRAMENTO

Remembering History and Recommitting to Peace:
Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

- Hymns: “Come, Come, Whoever You Are” and “Amazing Grace,” led by Keith Atwater
Piano: “Memories in My Eyes” by Yiruma (2001); Adagio from String Quartet op. 11 by Samuel Barber (1936, piano transcription), played by Irina Tchantceva.
Video: Rep. John Lewis’s posthumous farewell essay, read by Morgan Freeman

Homily by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Seventy-five years ago this Saturday a U.S. military plane dropped a nuclear bomb on the adults, children, shops, temples, homes and schools of Hiroshima, Japan. The city was nearly destroyed. Three days later, the U.S. dropped another atom bomb on Nagasaki. In between those two bombings, the Soviet Union attacked Japan and declared war on it, reversing its earlier neutrality. Japan surrendered unconditionally a month later. This concluded four years of intense fighting with the Allied forces, nearly 15 years of Japan’s brutal occupation of Manchuria, and 35 years of Japan’s colonial occupation of Korea. Japan’s empire ended when the War ended.

My parents had been young American adults in the War, and I can barely imagine the relief they felt following its conclusion. When I was a child in the 1960s, my parents, history teachers, and schoolbooks taught me that the atomic bomb had ended the war. President Harry Truman defended his order for the bombings by saying he had saved a half million American soldiers from dying in an invasion of Japan.

In recent years, historical scholarship has challenged those conclusions. But much doubt about them was there all along. Several U.S. military leaders said privately at the time and spoke publicly in later years that the bombing played no decisive military role in ending the war. Japan had already been defeated, they said. These critics included General Dwight Eisenhower, who had commanded the Allied forces in Europe, Navy Admiral Chester Nimitz, Major General Curtis LeMay, and even Admiral William Leahy, who was President Truman’s chief of staff when the decision was made.

Whatever our opinions about what it took to end the war, what is true is that the bombings brought nuclear weapons into use as a military tool. And that initial use brought a threat of more use.¹ For 75 years we have been confronting this reality.

You may have heard of the famous Doomsday Clock, which appears in a magazine called *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Every year the *Bulletin* announces how close the clock is to striking midnight—how close we are to a global disaster from nuclear war. This year, it is one minute and 35 seconds to midnight. Pretty close. The *Bulletin* and the clock came into existence only a few months after the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings. In 1945, the *Bulletin* and the clock were established by a group of the same Allied scientists who had worked so hard to build those two bombs. They knew we must confront this reality to avoid uncontainable devastation.

In the Second World War, General Omar Bradley served overseas at the highest levels of the U.S Army. After the war he headed the Army, then the Veterans Administration, then the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Three years after the war, he gave a Veterans Day address at a cemetery near Boston, Massachusetts.

He did not let this country's relief at having the war behind us/ distract us from facing this new threat of nuclear weapons. On the contrary. Bradley said: "[Humanity] is stumbling blindly through a spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious secrets of life and death. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, [he said] power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living," he said. Unfortunately, since that speech, the Cold War, the arms race and the proliferation of nuclear weapons among nations large and small have made the danger worse. It can be tempting to despair over such dangerous developments.

Yet Omar Bradley pointed us away from catastrophe by pointing us toward the work of peace, justice and freedom. In that 1948 speech, he said: "The American people must demonstrate conclusively to all other peoples of the world that democracy not only guarantees [our] human freedom, but that it guarantees [our] economic dignity and progress as well." He said we must be involved in sustaining the values that protect human dignity. This is the work of peace, he said.

It saddens me to remember all that has been lost in the past and all that's being lost in these times. And it certainly scares me to consider all that threatens humanity in these times. However, it gives me strength to be reminded by wise and brave leaders that the work of justice is the work of peace. The cause of promoting human dignity is the cause of human survival—they are the same cause.

Bradley said: "Non-involvement in peace means certain involvement in war." So, our involvement in peace--in all its dimensions--is the best way to avoid war.

On this Sunday the Sacramento chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility will participate in a nationwide livestreaming commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the nuclear bombings of 1945. You can find out how to connect online by reading our Weekly Message email or checking the church [website](#).

Let this be a time of remembrance, not avoidance. And let it be a time of renewed commitments to the values that call us to see everyone, everywhere, as part of one human family. So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

Reflection by Frances Myers, Worship Associate

Math is exact and objective. History is the opposite because it is the collective stories of what happened and although there are some objective facts - dates and locations, the rest of the information is subjective. Stories by their very nature can't be unbiased, they reflect the perspective of the storyteller and the preconceived notions of those listening to the stories.

What we are told, whether it is our personal history, our family's history or our country's history, makes a huge difference in how we relate to the world.

What we are not told is just as important in how we relate to the world. Simply because we don't know about something, doesn't mean it didn't happen. And when an event occurs there is an impact. We can't learn from history if we are never taught.

I could not tell you exactly when I learned about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It must have been in high school. Unless reminded, I don't remember the dates. What I didn't hear and wished I had learned, were the stories from the survivors. I am going to read testimony from YASUJIRO TANAKA a survivor of Nagasaki. Please know that it is hard to hear, because the effects of the violence are terrible.

His words -

“I was three years old at the time of the bombing. I don't remember much, but I do recall that my surroundings turned blindingly white, like a million camera flashes going off at once. Then, pitch darkness.

I was buried alive under the house, I've been told. When my uncle finally found me and pulled my tiny three year old body out from under the debris, I was unconscious. My face was misshapen. He was certain that I was dead.

Thankfully, I survived. But since that day, mysterious scabs began to form all over my body. I lost hearing in my left ear, probably due to the air blast. More than a decade after the bombing, my mother began to notice glass shards growing out of her skin – debris from the day of the bombing, presumably. My younger sister suffers from chronic muscle cramps to this day, on top of kidney issues that has her on dialysis three times a week. ‘What did I do to the Americans?’ she would often say, ‘Why did they do this to me?’

I have seen a lot of pain in my long years, but truthfully, I have lived a good life. As a first-hand witness to this atrocity, my only desire is to live a full life, hopefully in a world where people are kind to each other, and to themselves.”

As we commemorate the 75th Anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki I have a point of reference because I was taught about it in school. Today as an adult with life experience and knowledge I am able to empathise and connect to how devastating the bombings were, not because they destroyed property, but because of the human toll.

In contrast, I was never taught about the specific horrific events when white Americans brutalized, terrorized and murdered black Americans. Sure I was taught that there was slavery and it was bad. I knew that there were lynchings and that was horrible. But no specific incidents were taught or discussed.

Recently, in my quest to become Anti-Racist, I am learning about historical events, like the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre when White mobs organized an attack on the prosperous Black business district in Tulsa and surrounding Black neighborhoods. In fact, until recently, that history was not even taught in schools in Tulsa. I was happy and proud to learn that the UU churches in Tulsa are providing leadership in the recovery of that history and it will be commemorated in its 100th anniversary year, 2021.

Here is a testimony from GENEVIEVE ELIZABETH TILLMAN JACKSON a survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre and again please know that it is hard to hear, because the effects of the violence are terrible.

Her words-

"I saw what I thought were little black birds dropping out of the sky over the Greenwood District. But those were no little birds; what was falling from the sky over the Negro district, as it was called in those days, were bullets and devices to set fires, and debris of all kinds. Mother, sensing the danger, ran out and got me and took me into the house. I saw a truckload of dead bodies being carried somewhere. I was just spellbound looking at those bodies - bodies that looked like they had just haphazardly been thrown onto that truck, with arms and legs just dangling. I got closer so I could see better and I noticed that the faces and arms were black but that when the arms dangled, a person could see white at the top of the arms. I asked about that. I learned later that those were white men who had painted their faces and arms black so they could get into the Greenwood community under false pretenses. But when they started shooting down the black people, their game was up and they, themselves, got shot down. Many other black riot victims told of white bosses who had cots, blankets, and food already in place at their homes and businesses just waiting for their black employees when the riot broke out. They had to know that the riot was coming."

When we commemorate an event as a society it forms our common, collective narrative - who we think we are as a society (or who we want to think we are) and what the storytellers think is important for us to remember. When we choose to highlight an American action that caused death and destruction and acknowledge some of our country's failures, like the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we do so, in the hope we can do better, and more importantly it let's those impacted by those failures know we accept responsibility for the pain and suffering.

When we choose as a society to not commemorate events like the Tulsa Race Massacre we are not accepting responsibility, we are not acknowledging the pain and suffering of the survivors and we are sending the clear message that Black Lives do not Matter.

History, the stories of the human race are never ending. The lessons we learn from the stories change when we revisit them with different perspectives based on knowledge and compassion. Events cannot be "re-written"; they happened. Only by honestly looking at the impact of these events and empathizing with the human suffering can we change ourselves, our families and our country.

Conclusion by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

To be sure, it is a challenge to engage in remembering history, and it can be painful. How can we engage in remembering violence, oppression, and the tragic folly of war without falling into despair?

In between the extremes of a self-righteous certainty and a paralyzing sense of shame—in between those extremes—is the honest and vulnerable place of reflection and re-commitment.

Reflecting with courage and facing the fullness of history are the first step away from the apathy of complacency and the apathy of despair.

Yet I think it's even more important for us to remember that history is always being made, and we are in the middle of it, always. For all the victories for human dignity, safety and equity, ordinary everyday people have come together to encourage one another, to lift our voices, and to put our bodies and our money where our values are.

In recent weeks we have been reminded of this by commemorations of the life and legacy of the Honorable John Lewis. He was a U.S. Representative when he died at age 80. As a young man entering college, he was a Black civil rights volunteer. He learned non-violent resistance principles and strategies, and then led organizations using that approach. He didn't do the work alone, but as part of a movement, part of organizations, institutions, and communities.

John Lewis's life shows us that we can play a role in shaping history. His deep conviction about this meant so much to Representative Lewis that he made it his final message to the world. Newspapers published his essay on the day of his funeral. Tonight we will hear his final words read by Morgan Freeman, an actor and friend of John Lewis. The video lasts about 5 minutes. After this video, Keith Atwater will lead us in our closing song, "Amazing Grace."

[Start video at 0:20]

<https://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/watch/morgan-freeman-reads-rep-john-lewis-last-words-89332293780>

ⁱ And it brought the reality of nuclear bomb testing over the decades, causing thousands of deaths and widespread illness. See this article in the August 5 *Washington Post*:

www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/hiroshima-anniversary-nuclear-testing/?itid=sf_world