

2016 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – Honorable Mention]

“Imagine”: An Education that Fosters Hope

(Original)

Risa Sato

(Age 16, Japan)

International School of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo

President Obama visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial last month, 71 years after the first atomic bomb detonated in Hiroshima. The visit replayed over and over on the news and, at least for me, it was a flag of hope that marks how far we have come in rebuilding after World War II.

Growing up in Japan, I've listened to numerous accounts of the atomic bomb, each unimaginable and painful. Every year, on August 6th, I watch Japan come together as a nation to remember the tragedy. Even when I was too little to understand the meaning of this crime, I've still somehow known how profoundly scarring the event was for the Japanese people. Perhaps this was from my grandmother who, when I was eight years old, decided to carefully share her war experiences with me. I remember she spoke of such difficult experiences in the same, gentle way she used to lull me to sleep, as if remembering touched an old wound in her heart.

I imagine Earth as one big body; Hiroshima is healing, but halfway across the world, Afghanistan remains bleeding, hurt by man themselves. Though causes and players have varied throughout, Afghanistan has been at war since 1978 and for many of its people, the world around them has been tearing each other apart for as long as they can remember. My ignorance, however, left me distanced from this unfathomable fact until I recently met a boy from Afghanistan named Salim.

When I mentioned that I was from Japan, Salim furrowed his eyebrows and asked, “Japan? How is Hiroshima?”

Why Hiroshima? I wondered. “It’s nice... I’m planning to visit next year.”

Salim's eyes widened, "You are going there? But... There's nothing! The bomb! Don't you know about the bomb?"

I was confused. "But that was over 70 years ago. Hiroshima is a great city now." Salim, looking skeptical, refused to believe that a place like Hiroshima, completely incinerated by the atomic bomb, could become a fully functioning city. I quickly looked up a picture from my phone and handed it to Salim. What had made Salim think that it would be impossible for a city to recover from devastation?

The light from the lush green parks and serene cityscape displayed on my phone illuminated Salim's face in the night. His hands, holding my phone, shook slightly and his eyes grew wider. "Hiroshima? This is Hiroshima? It has recovered!" Salim started to laugh with joy. "I must visit Hiroshima one day. I must tell everyone! I must tell everyone that Hiroshima is a beautiful city now. Japan has rebuilt so quickly!" A boy from a wartorn country found out for the first time that a city, which too had been bombed and injured, had recovered and grew back stronger.

According to Salim, his school textbooks back in Afghanistan still showed the pictures of Hiroshima after the bombing as a picture of Hiroshima today, explaining why he was confused. Of course, our hope is that students around the world will have access to quality education materials. However, this was not the essence of what Salim had taught me. An education must inspire hope; In other words, a teacher must be able to teach her student how to imagine a world of peace and restoration.

President Obama, in his recent speech in Hiroshima, stated, "[We must] define our nations not by our capacity to destroy but by what we build." What can we build for the future? This question is what our universal curriculum must inspire. Every individual, each experiencing different outcomes of human history, has a responsibility to understand our mistakes and, as President Obama explains, "tell our children a different story, one that describes a common humanity, one that makes war less likely and cruelty less easily accepted." This story comes in different forms: a call for peace by President Obama, a gift of solemn remembrance from my grandmother, or a genuine cry of joy by Salim. In the same way it did to me, the stories must teach the future that the world knows how to heal and our ideal education has the responsibility to empower the future to imagine and create a more peaceful world.