

Hiroshima
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My trip to Hiroshima began in 1936 when my father fell in love with chemistry. He was a junior at Dunbar High School in Washington D.C. and that was that. By 1942, he had earned his B.S. from Howard University and continued to work toward his M.S. Just before he was to graduate, the faculty called him in and asked, "What are you going to do? Shouldn't you be applying to medical school?" His response astonished them because the fact is that back then there were no opportunities for an African American with an M.S. except to go south and teach in a traditional Black college or go to medical school. Having no interest in teaching and having never taken biology he said, "I want to be a scientist."

In 1944, Dad graduated with a M.S. in organic chemistry and began looking for a job while waiting for his draft notice to arrive. A job offer arrived first. The Chairman of the Howard University Chemistry Department, a white guy, Prof. Leon Sherfsky, was working in New York at Columbia on the Special Alloy Metals project [SAM] and they hired Dad as a junior chemist.

Later Dad said, "My life story would be very different had not WW II intervened with the need to more fully utilize the entire nation's manpower and with the continued opening up of opportunities to all." The lab was housed in a big old warehouse off Broadway and they were purifying uranium. Dad insisted he was totally in the dark; he wasn't even supposed to talk to the people in the next lab. Later his brother,

who was serving as a GI in Italy, put the pieces together and wrote home, "The draft board will feel cheated with George having eluded them for three years. I told the fellows here that he was working on the atomic bomb up there at Columbia. For all I know he may have been. He never said what he was doing."

This is the way Dad explained it. "I was present during the development of the atomic bomb. I use the word "present" because although I worked on the Manhattan Project, I contributed nothing significant—this is not to say that, had I been a more senior or a more knowledgeable person, I would not have, I would have. I would also have opted for a demonstration of the bomb (as did most scientists in the know) rather than its use on civilian targets."

After the war was over his lab moved to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where everyone who wished to transfer was transferred. That is everyone except Dad. He was told, "A black scientist was not welcome down there." Instead, Dad enrolled in a PhD program at the University of Chicago and there developed a close friendship with a white student, Clair Patterson, whom we called Uncle Pud. They studied together and had children about the same ages, and he introduced my parents to Unitarianism. Like Dad, Clair Patterson had worked on the A-bomb, but unlike Dad, his participation in its creation weighed on him.

In 1981 when Uncle Pud confessed this to me, I was surprised, because Dad had never expressed any guilt at all. To the contrary, he answered my questions about it with a shrug before dismissing his role as peripheral. The conversation with Uncle Pud made me wonder about the difference between these two men, who except for the color of their skin, had so much in common. Dad doubted that he would have been employed at all had he not been hired during a moment of national

duress. In a country defending democratized racism from racist fascism, he still faced discrimination. In deed, while working on the bomb he was forbidden from enlisting, which was what all his colleagues were able to do. Later they received the benefits of the GI Bill and he did not. More telling than his shrug was the ambivalence he expressed on occasion, "Maybe [we feel] this country doesn't belong to us like it does to everyone else."

Nonetheless, Dad went on to have a successful career in geo-cosmic chemistry analyzing meteorites and lunar soil samples. His success opened up all kinds of opportunities for himself and for his children.

I grew up knowing about the bomb, seeing picture after picture of the mushroom cloud, knowing something terrible had happened and could happen again. Living, as we did in the 50s, with the anxiety of the cold war, and wondering about whether we should build a fall out shelter. Hearing the sirens wail every Tuesday morning at 10 a.m. huddling in the school corridor during air raid drills and vaguely knowing that my father had something to do with it. So, my anxiety strangely mingled with pride. What never occurred to me was that I was indebted to that horrible event. There was a double dark irony hidden in that explosion. The Second World War gave African-American men opportunities they would not otherwise have had. They returned with changed expectations and a new confidence forged at a terrible price but which gave momentum to the emerging Civil Rights movement. It's a legacy I never considered, until I began to reflect on the conversation I had with my uncle Pud.

That conversation would come to mind when while visiting Chicago I walked by the Henry Moore sculpture entitled "Nuclear Energy." In 1942 on the University of Chicago campus beneath the West Stand

overlooking Stagg Field the world's first controlled self-sustaining nuclear reaction took place. Now the sculpture stands near that spot; it is an eerie mélange of mind, skull and mushroom cloud, commemorating the beginning of the Atomic Age. In me it evokes memories of sirens, fallout shelters and something I could not name and these residual anxiety conflict with pleasant memories of ice-skating with my brother and father beneath the old West Stand.

What I knew without knowing it is if I had a chance to go to Japan I would go and part of that trip must be a pilgrimage to Hiroshima, something my father had not done when he visited Japan in 1973. That opportunity came in the spring of 2008 when I joined my colleague, Abhi Janamanchi, to spend nine days in retreat at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine in the Suzuka Mountains.

The Tsubaki Grand Shrine is a sacred place that exists in a time out side of ordinary time. As you walk toward it, your eyes are drawn upward following the soaring cypress that seem to reach up to the sky then down again as you follow the stream of sunlight earthward and to spots of sunlight - patches here and there. The crunching of gravel under foot brings you fully back to earth. The drum beat calling us to worship with the regularity of a pulse.

Once inside the Sacred Hall, the service begins (*ohorai no kotoba*), the priests guttural voices echo that first primordial moment as it daily re-invokes the beginning of time. In the background, a stream's constant gurgle, like blood coursing through our arteries. The drum beat, the deep voice, the rushing water recreates life in the womb and the visceral sweeps aside the rational and temporal.

On the fourth day, Abhi and I hiked up the mountain behind the shrine.

It was wild – a real hike - straight up the mountain, steep, and eventually snow. It was knee-deep. With the trail markers hidden beneath the snow we were lost, and then not. My soaking feet throbbed. Abhi's knee ached.

The next day, we performed Misogi, the Shinto act of purification. That requires standing by a mountain brook wearing nothing but a white loincloth and headband, then chanting while performing a ritualized set of motions, waiting in anticipation, then wading toward a cascading icy ablution.

Next, a struggle against something one can never overcome but rather must slip into. Finding ones balance is difficult until you accept the torrent. I chanted as the waters beat and caressed me, shook and surrounded me, cleansed and invigorated me. The water, which was once – just the day before - the snow we had struggled through, told me, in no uncertain terms, that I was alive. It was cold! It was also very relaxing. I kept laughing – laughing afterward until suddenly and inexplicably, I burst into tears and even then, I felt loose and at ease.

With the fervor of converts, Abhi and I performed Misogi four times during those nine days I was at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine.

The next stop was Kyoto then Hiroshima and a reckoning with unfinished business – the sin of my father.

Walking briskly through modern Hiroshima toward the Peace Memorial Museum and ground zero, I was struck by how remarkable it was to see how populated, built up and busy the city is – life goes on so emphatically and frenetically. Distracted by it all, I had no sense that I was approaching yet another sacred place.

I don't know what to say, I don't know how to convey what I felt, but I will try.

I wandered through the museum with an audio guide hanging around my neck, listening first to the historical background, Hiroshima's history, and the prelude to the war. Then about to the war itself, about the development of the bomb and the 129,000 people who worked on it, Uncle Pud and my father among them, the cost – 2 billion dollars, then how and why the decision to drop it on Hiroshima was made.

The background and the first half were informative, but then came the part that after the first display left me muttering, "I can't do this. I can't do this." Hearing and reading the stories of individual victims, about their agony, the pictures, seeing the school bags, the shoes, the frayed shirts, the broken eye glasses, then the photos of naked children whose skin had melted. I wept. I couldn't stop. I didn't try. Yet the exhibit ends hopefully by referring to how quickly the weeds returned. The exhibit at Dachau in Germany, which ends with the liberation of the camp, is not as hopeful as this memorial, which points to the tenaciousness and irrepressibility of life.

At one point, Abhi mused about whether it would have been better to visit Hiroshima first and then retreat as it were to the Tsubaki Grand Shrine and the purification of the Misogi. But, the way we did it was the right order. I needed to cleanse my self in order to bring my whole being to that moment and embrace what had happened. To stand before the spirits of the victims and to say "I am sorry". To grieve and then to re-commit to using my life to bring about peace and understanding. What I hadn't anticipated was that I would meet those who had died. But, that's what happened as I read their stories and looked at their singed

belongings.

Afterwards, Abhi and I walked through the Peace Memorial Park. We paused to look at the millions of paper cranes sent every year in honor of the little girl who'd begun it all at the Peace Memorial Park, Sadako Sasaki, who 10 years after the explosion died of leukemia.

Near the Children's Peace Monument are benches and this Indian from Hyderabad, India who had a bum knee and this African American from Chicago hobbled by a blood blister needed to sit down. I breathed in and stopped resisting - slipped into it and shuddered and began to sob. Abhi reached over and placed his hand on my shoulder. I knew then that the price of the opportunity my father, the grandson of slaves, had been miraculously given and the benefits that had accrued to me had come at a terrible cost.

I experienced the seamless continuity of my life and his – the sorrow and the thankfulness, tasted its irony and knew what he had spent his life avoiding. I knew and felt what he was never able to feel – a broken heart and I shed the tears my father would and could never shed, but needed to be and where shed.