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End Note

Seeing Nagasaki: A Tale

Fumiki Narita as interpreted and translated by Wallace Gray

This essay is remarkable for its range. It covers ground all the way from the commonplaces of travel to the extremes of cruelty and destruction. Fumiki-san exposes us to heroic witnesses to faith and compassion shown by the martyrs of Japanese history. However, he also discloses a continuum stretching from war and hatred to dreams of peace.

In between is some of the history of urban change in Nagasaki plus the recognition of a cabdriver’s kindness and helpfulness. Throughout is a poetic appreciation of the area and its people and history.

Fumiki is a victim of Muscular Dystrophy with parents knowledgeable and compassionate enough to slow down the transformation of his musculature into mush. (The whole family was featured in a series on Japanese national television to spread the word and vision of an enlightened approach to the dread disease.) His life expectancy was about 20 and he is 41 now, as I recall. His essay on the trip to Nagasaki is the 30th in his collected volume named Unlimited Imagination.

His father, now deceased, taught him PC skills when he was losing the hand control necessary for writing the complex characters. His mother became a female Samson or Goliath; she can slip the adult (smaller than average because of deterred growth but nevertheless a weight) on her back in difficult situations. When you try to stop her, she ignores you with a smile and proud words, emphasized with a fist in the air, “I am a strong woman!”

(Wallace Gray’s comments throughout are in italics.)

[Fumiki is beginning his essay with something probably drawn from folklore or literary culture. It goes like this. . . .]

“Were the fall colors and foliage already beginning to appear in Nagasaki?”

Except on Mt. Unzen,¹ the warm weather had not yet yielded to the very cold.

¹ A volcano in Nagasaki prefecture. Off and on it has been very dangerous. “In 1792, the collapse of one of its several lava domes triggered a megatsunami that killed about 15,000 people in Japan’s worst-ever
Our trip was a matter of sudden resolve. Mother and I were able on short notice to acquire tickets and on November 1, 2000, to board an early-morning limited express train operated by Japan Railways. It departed from a station in historic Hakata near our home in Kitakyushu. This latest-style white rolling-stock named Kamome debuted around February of this same year. The JR officials spoke proudly of it when they said, “Nowhere else has such a comfortable train been built.”

We stepped down into the neat–as-home Nagasaki Station a little after 10 a.m. From our rental car window we glimpsed heavy clouds hanging low, but luckily, just as we entered the city, they dissipated. At a kiosk we bought a guidebook and soon got into an owner-operated taxi ready to do some sightseeing.

First, at Nagasaki’s very edges, outside the district of Nishisonogi (population about 72,000), on mountain roads that wound around and around, our drive took us eventually to the building that was our destination, and the building was open. The sun was setting in the open sea, and we were observing this from a hill or knoll when we spotted from there the Literary Building named after Shusaku Endo, the famed 20th century Catholic novelist 遠藤周作 (Endo Shusaku in Japanese order.)

It seems as though, when we speak of this area as containing “deep-sea towns and streets” in comparison to “interior oceanic towns and streets” we are speaking, in this instance, of what we see when our eye turns in the direction of mountains. [The grammar here was too complex for me, but I believe it refers to a similar distinction concerning the Hawaiian Island of Oahu where local people think of their four-million-year old geological area as containing mountains, seas, winds and beaches divided roughly into windward and leeward Oahu.--wg]

We were driven up mountain roads for about 30 kilometers (19 miles) while our driver described events in the area at the time of World War Two. He vividly described Nagasaki’s having an atomic bomb dropped on it; he spelled out for us what made the bombing such a disgraceful event.

volcanic-related disaster. The volcano was most recently active from 1990 to 1995, and a large eruption in 1991 generated a pyroclastic flow that killed 43 people, including three volcanologists.”—Wikipedia the free encyclopedia.

2 The distances on the Island of Kyushu to Nagasaki come to about 100 miles from Fumiki’s home in Kitakyushu or about 75 from the historic port area of Hakata in the city of Fukuoka.
3 Often compared to Graham Greene in the West, Endo was a Roman Catholic writer, and a member of a group known simply as “The Third Generation.” This refers to a generation of post-World War Two writers. One after another these writers won the Akutagawa Prize, an esteemed Japanese literary prize. Yet, of this it is reported that Endo said, “In those days hardly did anyone expect that we would become great writers.”
At the top of a steep path is the Literary Building named after the writer Endo, as mentioned above. Some time earlier, the building was introduced to Japanese viewers by an NHK (National TV) program. The building is so placed as to expose a superb view, with fine positioning for both the sea and the mountains. From the observation platform we were able to see the ocean shining with golden brilliance.

Also visible were various-sized Catholic churches in a little village. When the sun sinks to the horizon, the sea is dyed a deep red, and until night’s curtain falls, I feel as if a full display of the shoreline is exposed. No matter in which of the four seasons the visitor comes, the scenic impression lingers and rings like a bell in the heart. I took a commemorative photo of a mini-cosmos blossoming at water’s edge.

We took our time sauntering around and examining the wealth of materials acquired and arranged for the exhibition room inside the “Endo” building. The collection contains autographed books, handwritten manuscripts including photocopies of children from tender ages up. A small display area had been sandwiched between other items but, in that area, a particular picture caught my eye. A pine-covered hill was visible in the foreground of the painting, and in the far distance, the blue-green ocean seemed to frame the islands that dotted the scene. I remembered a poetic quotation from an eight-volume collection of joyful, auspicious poetry. Here’s the quotation:

\[
\text{Toward the interior of this brightness there is a simplicity,}  \\
\text{an artlessness as the koto is played.}  \\
\text{The sound must emulate Autumn’s beauty.}  \\
\text{In such stillness the koto seems to tingle.}
\]

I enjoyed this stillness while it lasted.

\[\text{[Since there are fewer Japanese characters than usual in this poem and more Japanese phonetic symbols, we may infer that the poet was a woman. Only men were supposed to be educated enough to use Chinese characters. Some ladies knew quite a few but were demure or canny enough not to “go public” about their achievement. We should add that the wording of the poems is so difficult and archaic as to suggest a quite early date in the evolution of written Japanese.]}\]

\[\text{To the Peace Park on our return to the City. . . .}\]

\[\text{[To a non-native this line looks less like a sentence than a kind of topical announcement. Japanese is sometimes surprisingly concise because it may omit both verbs and subjects. Though Western influence continues to modify modern Japanese, pronouns are still often omitted. In order to express oneself more precisely and personally, an English speaker might write, “I’d like to tell you some things about the city of Nagasaki.”]}\]
When I looked up at the Peace-Prayer-Statue built on a high knoll, I saw how solidly it was accentuated by the deep blue of its celestial backdrop. This bronze statue, said to be the world’s largest (it is 33 ft. tall), points with the right hand skyward thus underlining the threat from atomic bombs. The left hand is extended toward the sea and beyond, thus symbolizing the world peace that can ensue from successful confrontation with nuclear dangers, both in terms of civilian energy-sourcing and military threats. There is also the subtle hint of prayer for all martyrs (even if burned or buried alive) that they may rest in peace. In addition, the city is reminding viewers—by means of a scarf hanging over the statue’s left shoulder—of those wounded by the bombing.

While some details of my translation become interpretive in a 2012 post-Fukushima context, I am sure the original text was written to convey the powerful impression the Peace Park made on Fumiki Narita when he wrote his reflections in 2000.

The park was thronged by crowds of sightseers. While some sought water from the Peace Fountains, others were already lifting their cups in dedication, thus offering up repose for the souls of those who died searching for drinkable water. It was already past 3 p.m. and powerful rays of sunshine poured in from the west creating a splendid rainbow in the jet of water spouting from the fountain.

We passed by a place we were familiar with from The Bells of Nagasaki by Takashi Nagai, whose important 118-page essay Nagasaki no Kane describes his experiences, thoughts, and feelings as an A-bomb victim; though once a best seller, the book is regrettably almost unknown to many Japanese and American readers today. Published originally in Japanese in 1949 (Hibiya Shuppan) and in English in 1994 (Kodansha International), it has been the basis of a song by Takashi Nagai. . . . We passed in front of the Nagai residence (not the hut he used after the bombing) and moved on to the ruins of an historic Catholic Church in the Urakami district. . . . We wandered into a walled area in the corner of which were preserved statues, figures, and portraits of Holy Ones. The statues were now only heads and body parts.

In the hall that houses information about the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, we learned details of the course of events resulting in the use of the second nuclear weapon as well as the circumstances surrounding its first use on Hiroshima. By means of the items on display and the history given explaining them, one easily grasps both how nuclear weapons were developed and the whole subsequent story right up to the present. Included, of course, is an explanation of Nagasaki’s restoration after the tragic time of

4 The Peace Park is located in the Urakami River area at the very point of detonation, the Roman Catholic Cathedral. The church’s remains from the bombing of 1945, and perhaps from earlier deterioration, were restored in 1959. The restoration overlooks the Glover Garden. Although I have visited there, I am a little uncertain about the precise details of its history.--wg
mayhem. I, who am living in the present moment, will never forget the sight of exhibits showing nuclear destruction in such displays as those of tin roofs and glass containers transformed, actually deformed, beyond imagination. The misery caused by an atomic bombing stands forth as a monstrous model of horror. I shudder at the prospect of any renewal of nuclear warfare.

[The Urakami Catholic Cathedral was destroyed at 11:02 a.m. on August 9, 1945.] Its most recent predecessor was destroyed by the bomb, except for parts of its wall. It had been completed, I understand, in 1914 after Catholic believers had sweat over its construction brick by brick over a period of 30 years. After the bombing it was rebuilt in 1959, then remodeled with brick tiles in 1980 to restore its original appearance. These facts have been difficult for me to dig out; I believe they are generally accurate. Now I turn to a significant matter of recent history. On February 25, 1981 the pope delivered a remarkable peace appeal in Nagasaki. It was clearly intended to turn Japanese Catholics away from a rather passive martyr complex that had arisen from horrible persecutions endured over the centuries in this very area where he was speaking. Many Nagasaki Christians felt that all they could do was pray for peace. The Pope even appealed to members of large Buddhist sects to become more active in promoting peace. In defense of his appeal he said, “War is the work of human beings,” then added, “If war is a human activity, peace can be too.”

There is only one misunderstanding that I feel must be cleared up. Some of the cause for passivity is blamed on Nagai’s attitude and book, The Bells of Nagasaki. Just because he felt that God had a part in a wind diversion to where the bomb fell does not mean he felt Christians could only be passive and prayerful, like sacrificial offerings – sheep being led to the slaughter. On the contrary, he and those he led through the humongous crisis rendered superhuman help to the victims, thereby saving many lives and rendering deeds of mercy and love to those who were hopeless and dying. . .]

About five the following morning, we first rode by car from the hotel to visit a “Dutch trading house” — perhaps part of the foreign merchant’s plaza. [The word “Dutch” had been stretched to include all Europeans.] Afterwards, our car passed by the statue of a “living-water girl” representing the children who suffered and died from a lack of drinking or living water.\(^5\) Walking beside Dutch Hill we approached the Glover Garden open-air museum. There were many things to see on the steep incline to the garden, which was located on a slightly elevated hill.

The guards gave me a hand with my wheelchair, in fact they pulled me up the slope. Stepping inside the garden we happened upon a bustling, just-arrived group of

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\(^5\) People died from drinking water they knew to be dangerously polluted. A girl is quoted on the black stone plaque commemorating her and others like her. The girl said, “There was something oily on the surface of the water, but I wanted water so badly that I drank it just as it was.” Their choice was: thirst or poison, death in either case.--wg
senior high school students on a field trip. Also conspicuous were the foreign tourists. From the observation platform we had a good look at three diamond-shaped ship-docking places. We next toured Nagasaki’s Public Hall for Traditional Arts and Crafts and visited such seeing favorites as Sofuku, a historic Zen Buddhist Temple founded by Eisai. (We also smiled about the popular two-humped bridge that resembled the top rim of a pair of eye-glasses.)

[Buddhism has a long history in Japan dating back to its introduction from Korea in 552, but this Sofuku temple is the first Zen Temple in Japan (now a national treasure).] For its founding we can thank scholar Eisai, who imported from China a great mass of data to benefit his Japanese compatriots in 1195. This process resulted in a new version of Zen known as Rinzai Buddhism. The history of Buddhism generally is as convoluted and mind-boggling as a Zen koan, but one summary of Eisai’s approach by another Zen philosopher Dōgen (1200-1253) must ring true around our globe.

On one occasion Abbott Eisai used the gold from his monastery’s statue of the Buddha to enable a poor man to feed his starving family. A disciple reprimanded him for giving away the halo from the sacred statue: “That’s a crime, isn’t it?” to which Eisai responded, “You are right, but just consider the will of Buddha. He sacrificed his very flesh and limbs for the sake of all mankind. If some men are about to die of starvation, would he not want us to give the whole Buddha figure to save them? Even if I should go to Hell for this crime, I would want to save people from starvation.”

By afternoon we had managed to reach the railroad station with plenty of time before our train departed, so we again flagged down a cab and decided to head for the seaboard museum which was a memorial hall at a place dedicated to the martyrdom of 26 Japanese martyrs; a nearby waterfall sounded like a tolling bell or even someone weeping. There is a statue dedicated to a twelve-year old boy who suffered during the oppression of Christians. He was charged with the crime of refusing to trample on and break into pieces a tablet bearing the image of Christ (probably a crucifix). For his “crime,” they cut off his left ear as an example and warning to all Christians young and old.

Nagasaki is an inconvenient city for a wheelchair. Due to the helpful placement of an elevator at each end of the train bridge leading to the station; those of us dependent on wheelchairs were spared the difficulty of reaching the elevated crossover road. But a remaining difficulty was that the road from one shore to the other had nearly impossible shoulders, either too high or too low relative to the road. Needless to say, this feature did not make the shoulders easily accessible by wheelchair. [Somehow the Naritas surmounted this obstacle, probably by the expedient of Fumiki’s mother physically lifting or lowering the wheelchair and Fumiki!] Fairly recently, three distinguished guests of Nagasaki each made his own separate sightseeing excursion through Nagasaki.
The guests were President Gorbachev of Russia, our own Japanese Emperor, and the Pope of Rome. All three visited the inner district of the city by automobile. They may not have enjoyed some of the “strolling pleasures” that we two Naritas did. On the seaside the elevator for the the Memorial Hall displayed beautiful decorations, handsomely applied. Sightseeing, in the most interior part of the city, seems to have been dominated by automobiles. The road-width in that district had been reduced because of buildings that “invaded” the streets. Roads here have become too narrow for normal automotive traffic. To further “modernize” would have defaced or destroyed historic neighborhoods.

It is scary to have taxis meet each other on the streets! They either block each other or else veer off the right of way, impinging on national treasures. The taxi-driver on our two-day tour served us in a very kind way. The hotel in which we were lodged was right in the heart of the city; and so we could go on short strolls at night in neon-lighted quarters, and we could stop for “tea”; this involved a simple but delicious meal at a first-rate restaurant. My parents had been discouraged from visiting Nagasaki by all the radical changes in the traditional city; I may have been a little hesitant to tackle Nagasaki myself. However, Mother and I decided the time was ripe for us to risk it. It turned out that this trip inside our own country became as memorable as any of our previous domestic journeying.

November 2000

By now the reader may understand some of Fumiki’s and my esthetic interests as well as global ethical concerns, or as the America idiom puts it, where Fumiki and I are coming from.

Some of the deepest peace insights are suggested by Fumiki’s mention of Dr. Nagai’s heartbreaking and yet hope-building classic (The Bells of Nagasaki). Eminent in medicine and nuclear science before the American A-bombs were dropped, Nagai became a theologian and Catholic holy person as well, choosing to live his remaining days in a hut or small socially-open hermitage, which he named after the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. He lived and died during this period as a kind of Christian meditative saint, author, and conversationalist. When he was mortally wounded in 1995, he was 37 years old. He miraculously survived for 6 more years.

The bomb intended for Nagasaki was accurately aimed at what Nagai calls the “munitions area” of Nagasaki (perhaps more aptly described as the port for building, launching and servicing military ships), but the bomb was blown a little north to this Urakami river area by unexpected winds so that it fell on a hospital and medical university where many Christians and persons dedicated to the healing arts worked, studied and healed — nurses, doctors and experienced first-aid personnel who alleviated much suffering and, as circumstances allowed, performed respectful burial of
the dead. Nagai writes that if what he heard was true, then “the American pilots did not aim at Urakami. It was the providence of God that carried the bomb to that destination.” (p. 107)

The bells of Nagasaki had fallen 50 meters from the ruined cathedral. On Christmas night several individuals dug the bells out of the ruins and hoisted them back in place where they rang them morning, noon, and night.

“Bong! . . . Bong! . . . Bong!”—“a message of peace and its blessings.” (p. 117) On the last page of his book (118), Nagai summarizes the people’s prayers:

Grant that Nagasaki may be the last atomic wilderness in the history of the world. . . . The bells continue to ring. . . . “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”

Some of the ones who prayed crossed themselves as they finished their prayers.

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We have sought to create a generally faithful account of the man Nagai and his chaotic times. There is rich material available on the internet. Understandably, that body of material is both inspiring and confusing. Nagai moved from atheism to profound Christian faith and philosophy and from almost blind patriotism to a world peace perspective that caught even the Pope’s attention. Profiles of him drawn from the quite different periods of his life might confuse any potential biographer because they are so varied they might produce contradictory images of the “real man”. . . .

Even what brought on Dr. Nagai’s death seems to be a matter of dispute. I assumed it was the terrible trauma he went through in saving lives while nearly bleeding to death himself, but perhaps it was from the leukemia from which he suffered after doctoring his patients with radiation. He was a pioneer in the medical science and treatment techniques of radiation therapy. But the radiation he had to use on his patients was primitive enough that it may ultimately have proved fatal for him. We may never know. There is the possibility his death may have been due to a combination of factors. Neither our living nor our dying can be definitively reduced to any simplistic explanation.

Wallace Gray