

Thinking About Hiroshima Nagasaki

By Steven Okazaki

In 2005, out of the blue, an executive at HBO Documentary Films phoned and asked me if I would be interested in making a film about Hiroshima Nagasaki. I agreed to come to New York to discuss details and put the phone down. I was stunned. This is the film I'd been thinking about making for twenty-five years.

In 1980, I was a young filmmaker. I'd directed some children's films and done crew work on television commercials, but mostly I was unemployed. I didn't mind. I had a cheap apartment, an understanding girlfriend and lots of movies I needed to see. My great fear was that I would slowly but surely move up the ladder making television commercials, gradually making more and more money, then one day find myself stuck doing something I didn't care about. I feared my selfishness and apathy.

On December 8, 1980, I changed direction and decided to become a documentary filmmaker. I know the date because, driving home early in the morning after quitting my job on a particularly difficult shoot of a particularly pointless television commercial, I turned on the radio and heard that John Lennon had been killed.

For several months, I'd been considering making a documentary film about atomic bomb survivors. I'd met a man named Kanji Kuramoto, the president of the Committee of Atomic Bomb Survivors in the U.S.A. which represented 700 Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors living in the United States. They were mostly women, fifty to sixty years old, teenagers in 1945. Many of them had married American soldiers stationed in Japan during the occupation, then moved to the United States. They had names like Kuniko Jenkins and Mariko Lindsay. Several of them were suffering from illnesses linked to radiation exposure - thyroid cancer, lung cancer, respiratory problems and blood disorders.

They were the nicest group of people I'd ever met. I'm not saying that all Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors are nice people. I know there must be many unpleasant, grouchy, bitter hibakusha. Of course there are. But they don't join the groups who march for peace, visit classrooms and share their stories with high school students.

Mr. Kuramoto was abrasive and aggressive, but totally committed to his cause - gaining attention for the plight of the hibakusha and abolishing nuclear weapons. When I told him I was interested in making a film about Hiroshima

Nagasaki he opened the door and pulled me in. This is what happens to people who say they are interested in Hiroshima Nagasaki. The peace activists and the hibakusha are so used to being ignored and excluded, if you express any interest they go overboard with kindness and encouragement, making you feel (in a polite Japanese way) obligated.

I didn't mind. I had never felt so much support and appreciation. When Mr. Kuramoto and the *hibakusha* women encouraged me to make my film (because I was the only filmmaker who was interested), I understood that I was making a commitment (in an old-fashioned Japanese way) that I had to fulfill.

So in 1982, I produced a documentary called **Survivors** for PBS in the United States. It was the first nationally broadcast English language film in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors spoke for themselves. It got a lot of attention and media coverage. Unfortunately, it wasn't a good film. It was well meaning, but it exposed my inexperience as a filmmaker and my intimidation with the subject.

My failure pushed me to be a better filmmaker, to be unafraid, to be open, to dig into the subject as deeply as I could, and use the language of filmmaking as fully and as creatively as possible.

I moved on with my career, but continued to think about the hibakusha. I visited Hiroshima many times -- meeting more hibakusha, getting to know them without my camera, talking with journalists and peace activists, going to the city's peace museum over and over to grasp some new piece of the larger story, walking through the Hondori thinking "the bomb was dropped on a day like today." I sat in the peace park reading Kenzaburo Oe's **Hiroshima Notes**, watching people pause to say their prayers at the various memorials. Oe's book guided and inspired me. I was shocked when he invited me to his home and spoke to me as if I was a colleague sharing an artistic and intellectual mission. I became friends with a second-generation hibakusha named Tomoko Watanabe who told me she would help when I was ready to make another film.

So when I started production on **White Light/Black Rain** in 2005, I had been thinking about it for twenty-five years. I knew what to do -- just let the hibakusha tell their stories and present them as honestly, directly and artfully as I could, without politics or sentimentality.

The film is not about the people who died, it is about the people who survived. It's about people on their way to school or work, riding on the trolley, tying their shoes,

delivering the mail, eating breakfast, hanging clothes, going about their lives. Then in an instant their lives were forever changed. I wanted the audience to think about what it would be like if it happened to them.

It's easy to give up on the future when it looks so bleak, so incredibly messed up and hopeless. But then you think about Hiroshima Nagasaki. What could be more horrible? The hibakusha experienced a nightmare beyond comprehension. How do you still believe in humanity and in the future after that?

I sat in a restaurant in Nagasaki with Sakue Shimohira. She still grieves for her mother and her younger sister who killed herself after the bombing. She has known with sorrow beyond sorrow. She was as poor as the poorest people in postwar Japan. She lived with her father and several other hibakusha in a makeshift shack in the middle of the devastation, not for a few months but for more than a decade. She has that remarkable resilience and perseverance that some Japanese have, that you saw on the faces of some of the tsunami victims. Her body is small and weak, but she radiates strength. We sat and talked. She felt the warmth of her tea cup and smiled. She said it took courage for her sister to die. And it took courage for her to live.

It starts with the little things - the taste of an apple, the view from the window of a train, watching your child sleep - and you accept that life is precious and there's really no choice. You have to rebuild, move forward, contribute, find a way to be part of something positive. I made **White Light/Black Rain** for completely selfish reasons. I wanted to be around people like Mr. Kuramoto and Mrs. Shimohira. I wanted to believe in humanity the way they do. I wanted to care.

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ART WORK BY AKIKO TAKAKURA



photo of sakue shimohira from white light/black rain.