

Sermon, August 8, 2010

## Prologue

What was I thinking? What made you think you could write a sermon that would adequately cover this topic of Hiroshima Day? You've taken on something bigger than you can manage. There are tons of books out there about what actually happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about the political situation at the time, and the need, or not, for dropping those bombs. Just last week I saw a great documentary about the talks in Rinjvek with Presidents Reagan and Gorbachov that could have moved us to total nuclear disarmament had Reagan not been so married to Star Wars. There are experts in this room who could talk about the current status of nuclear disarmament, and of other peace initiatives, like Doug Scott. When I think

about all that I don't know about this topic, I wonder where I got the chutzpah to say I would speak today.

I found out that our chalice lighter lives in Hiroshima, and Kevin, Jeffrey's partner, has also lived in Hiroshima.

Another member who was in Hiroshima offered to bring pictures, which I forgot to follow up on. Gail Rappolt, our service leader, has been involved in the Hamilton Coalition for Peace for a number of years and was published in the Spectator on Friday. Our visitors, Khursh and Barbara, have worked tirelessly for many years in Physicians for Global Survival, a Nobel Peace winning organization. And Pat Oertel sent me an email about, among other things, her father, who went to Bikini Island and worked on the bomb testing there.

.... How many people here today could add something to a conversation about nuclear weapons, about the history of WWII, about the peace movement?

So, now that we know where we're all at, I'll tell you my story, it is only one story. Take what you like, and leave the rest.

As we enjoy another peaceful, warm summer, full of greenery, fresh foods, friends, and for many of us, time off of work, and trips to beaches or other relaxing places, it's a bit of a disconnect to think about the nightmare of the nuclear bomb that hit Hiroshima 65 years ago on Friday, and the one dropped 65 years ago tomorrow on Nagasaki, Japan.

I know that I have trouble reading about the horrors of war anytime, anyplace. But like a moth to the flame, every year I am drawn back to the bombing of Hiroshima. I was born on its anniversary, in 1950, five years after it was dropped. So on Friday, I celebrated my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. Birth and death, the cycle of life. I'm very grateful to be alive and healthy.

Most things I read about the bombing talk about flesh falling off of bodies, and I often can't get much past that. If I do, then I read that people were jumping in rivers, they were so thirsty they drank anything. I read about the fact that people were evaporated, they were thrown in the air by the force of the bomb. People further out developed purple spots, which over a few days got worse before they died. Their organs were ruined from the inside out. What do we

do with such images? We don't forget them, that's what.

And we say Never Again.

Some of you may remember my story about my relationship with the bombing of Hiroshima, and I apologize for the repetition.

I think it may have begun with the timing of my birth, and my naming. In 1950 the Korean Conflict, as it was initially called, had just begun. It seems like a footnote in history now, but at the time, it had the potential to turn into the first war with nuclear weapons. In retrospect, it seems hard to believe that just five years after World War II ended the major powers of the world were again lining up on two sides of the divide, where another world war could have developed, this time with nuclear weapons. In this scenario, I was born. My mother, a devout Catholic and a follower of politics, named me Virginia Marie after the

Virgin Mary for world peace. I wonder what she was thinking about the significance of having a child, her sixth, born on such an auspicious date. I don't know how much her prayers had to do with it, but cooler heads prevailed, and the Korean War did not include nuclear bombs.

Growing up, I knew through a child's eyes about the original ban-the-bomb beat generation, and bomb shelters.

As I grew older, and had more of an understanding of what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I began to understand how powerful this weapon is.

It wasn't until about 1990 though that my attention really began to be drawn to what happened in World War II that culminated in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I'm embarrassed to admit that like many people from my generation, I didn't really think a lot about World War II because it was like a baseball score, we knew who won. In

1990 though, I started to twig into the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of battles, or ships that were sunk. The echo of the war had an impact on me that I'd never felt before. I realized that it was one thing for young men to go overseas to fight the good fight and possibly die, but I hadn't felt in my gut the additional fear that the Axis forces would win, it would all be for naught. I had never sensed the uncertainty of the outcome until it began to weigh on me as one 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary after another rolled on, year after year. As the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing approached, I felt called to action. I joined the local disarmament group, Burlington Association for Nuclear Disarmament, or BAND. I told them I was too busy to attend meetings, but that I could write letters. I'm proud to say that I was one of the people involved in a massive letter writing campaign to end the use of land mines, the issue that Princess Diana later joined.

I also decided that on my 45<sup>th</sup> birthday, which happened to coincide with our Megin family reunion on Cape Cod, I would run and dedicate myself to thinking about the bombing of Hiroshima. In retrospect, I'm not sure why that seemed like an appropriate thing to do, except that it felt right. I do a lot of my best thinking when I run. At the time, I knew I could go for about two hours and fifteen minutes, so I had my husband Tony clock the mileage out to a drop off point, and I ran back to the cottage. I was wearing a shirt I had made up, and as I ran, I didn't quite know what to think about. The warm fuzzy idea of imagining peace just didn't capture me. I decided to dedicate each footfall to a person who had died as a result of the bombing. That was a very sobering, powerful and spiritual experience. As I ran, sometimes through gridlock traffic on that Sunday morning, I wasn't sure if many

people who read my t shirt knew the connection. I hoped some of them did. I intentionally didn't put the year on the shirt, because I didn't know if I'd want to use it again. That run was the seed that planted the connection for me between running and peace. The next year, I again wore my tshirt, and thought about peace and nuclear disarmament as I ran. On my 47<sup>th</sup> birthday, I ran and had the idea of running 50 km on my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, in the year 2000.

Training for that was also a very spiritual experience. I'd trained and run over a dozen marathons over the years, and the psychological difference of an extra 8 km is greater than the physical one. As I ran and trained, I felt connected to the people who supported me, to everyone who hopes for an end to nuclear weapons, and to the people all over the world who are working for peace. Thanks mostly to many of you, the members of this church, we raised over \$3000

for BAND. Also, one of my closest friends, Carol Ward, made me 50 cranes, which moved me tremendously. For those of you who aren't familiar with the connection, cranes are a symbol of hope in Japan, and have become connected to the bombing of Hiroshima because of a young girl named Sadako who tried to make 1000 when she became ill from radiation poisoning. There are thousands of paper cranes on the Peace Monument in Hiroshima.

A lot of people asked me if I was going to run 60 km on my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I said no. Of course I said it because it seemed too daunting a challenge. In retrospect, in some ways, it's easier than what I'm attempting to do now. You see, although I'm proud of what I did, it was a one woman accomplishment. I realized that if we want to have nuclear disarmament, we need a community of voices speaking up. And training solo is something I had complete control over.

This community building stuff is messy and at time frustrating.

So here we are. My original idea was to have 60 of my “closest” friends each run 10 km, and pay \$100 for the privilege of doing so. Then I thought about expanding that to more people running shorter distances. Then I loosened it up completely, partly because some of my favourite people aren’t around here, and decided to invite people to do something physically active around the anniversary of the bombing, and to donate to Physicians for Global Survival, which is a part of the world wide Nobel Prize winning organization International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, advocating for the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Their premise is that nuclear bombs are bad for your health. (Pause.) I also thought it would be very appropriate and complementary to have a

blog where people can share their thoughts and reactions to whatever activity they did with others. I wanted to build community in as many ways as I could.

I've thought a lot about the concept of community over the last while. What does it mean? Historically, it was the people in your neighbourhood. I'll tell you a simple story though that has really impacted my understanding of the word community. As many of you know, I'm an elementary school teacher. Although I'm a runner, and love being out running, like most teachers, I always saw yard duty as drudgery, as a day when I don't get a break at recess, as a time when I feel like a cop, catching kids misbehaving, like a babysitter. It was a drain on my day. Then, years ago, I read in our teachers magazine something about how all across the country, teachers are providing supervision for students during recess. All of a sudden, I

realized that I was not alone on the cold fields, or hot pavement. I was, as thousands of other teachers, providing a safe environment for the millions of children who go outside to play, not to be bullied, and for those who get hurt and need an adult to come to. I felt a strong sense of community which I continue to feel every time I go out on yard duty. I feel a sense of community whenever I'm involved in any activity in this building, or in any activity that's a part of this denomination, like CUUL School, or being at the fundraising dinners, or meeting with someone at Tim Horton's to do some church work. I feel it when I look through the hymnbook or when we sing together. I feel a part of the running community, especially the Burlington Runners Club, who welcome me back when I've been away with welcome arms, who encourage me to write in our club newsletter. I talked to a member who

moved up north years ago, and she told me that she can hear my voice through the articles I write. She's part of my community, and I'm part of hers.

The shadow side of this is a part of who I am too, and a part of who we all are. When do I not feel a part of community? When I feel isolated, when I feel like I don't belong. That usually happens when I don't think I'm good enough, or that I don't deserve to be part of a community.

Here's an example of what I mean. I decided 10 years ago that I wanted to support Physicans for Global Survival for my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. In between then and now, I'd see Khursh or others at Hiroshima Day events, I would tell him of my plan, and he was excited about it. As the date got closer, we met, and he told me that the Hamilton chapter really doesn't need a lot of money, so we should fundraise for the national organization. That was pretty exciting. Then, as I

tried to create and publish the blog, I often got stuck. My enthusiasm withered. When I was emailing Khursh and Barbara, I realized that I had never asked for tech support from PGS headquarters. Here I was, committing to raising funds for them, they include me in their circle, put information about my plan in their newsletter, print posters, and encourage others in other cities to do something physically active around Hiroshima Day, and I didn't feel connected enough to this organization to ask for help. It was a very humbling experience. My own lack of trust, of a sense of belonging to this organization, of realizing that I could ask for help struck me intensely. How can I ask people to join me in a sense of community, when I so often don't recognize my own membership in a community? See what I mean by messy and frustrating?

The most spiritual learnings I've had from this journey so far are about how we really are one human family. That's the community we're a part of. This isn't a theory, or a warm fuzzy idea, it's a fundamental reality that some of us glimpse some of the time. Mostly, my ego gets in the way, and prevents me from seeing this larger reality. I get hung up on getting the kids to clean up, or worrying about my weight, or hoping this or that person likes me. Or worse yet, whether I like that person or not.

We are one human family, and if we don't continue to build on this truth, if we demonize other people or countries, and we have wars, we are killing ourselves. In the past, we could say that there were no winners in a war, only those who lose less than the other side. Now we have bombs that are 50 to 100 times more powerful than the ones dropped in Japan. What kind of insanity is that?

This has led me to finding out more about the peace movement. The reading that we had before the children left is really the truth. It begins with “If there is to be peace in the world”, and ends with “There must be peace in the heart.” Well, sure, but you go first.

That’s the rub. Who wants to change? My assumptions and attitudes have gotten me this far. What if I let my guard down, and you don’t? But of course, our imperfections do cause us to behave in ways that cause us pain. That’s the motivation to change, when the pain of staying the same is worse than the pain of moving forward. It isn’t a pretty picture sometimes, the truth that we all drag our feet into being better people.

We have one foot in the past, and one, I hope, in the future. The people of Hiroshima had to think about how they were going to carry on after this nightmare that didn’t go away.

Having been the epicentre, they have transformed their city into a place where they imagine peace. How do they do that? Maybe when a whole society has been forced to look at what we are capable of doing to each other, they see that it is only through finding that peace in the heart of each individual that we can actually change.

I am only one person, and nuclear weapons are only one of the many problems our world is facing. I spend my days getting through them the best that I can, and I do it very imperfectly every day. I will not give up though, because I have been given the opportunity, through the coincidence of my birthday, to be reminded of the importance of speaking up, of saying Never Again to nuclear weapons.

So this service is my birthday gift to myself, it's my way of giving my life meaning. I asked Carol if she would make 10 more cranes for me this year, and she has. When I told

her about how I'd like to give them away this morning, she enthusiastically agreed. If you would like to take a crane to remember the importance of not giving up, like Sadako, please take one, and let it remind you that peace begins within each of us, must ripple out to our closest circles, and to the farthest reaches of humankind. We are one family.