

Hiroshima Notes: The Friendship of Thomas Merton and Hiromu Morishita

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In the year 1945 an Original Child was born.
Thomas Merton

Here, something happened that shouldn't have.
Hiromu Morishita

Introduction

At Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 at 8:15 in the morning, the world changed forever. One Bomb destroyed a whole city. Hiromu Morishita, a survivor of the Bomb and a friend of Thomas Merton, has written, 'Here, something happened that shouldn't have.'¹ *Pika-don* is what the Japanese called it: 'flash-boom.' A blinding light, an intense heat, a tremendous wind, and a relentless fire consumed the city. The nuclear genie had been let out of the bottle. A new era in human history had begun.

In his prose-poem 'Original Child Bomb', published in 1962, Merton writes:

The bomb exploded within 100 feet of the aiming point [city-center]. The fireball was 18,000 feet across. The temperature at the center of the fireball was 100,000,000 degrees. The people who were near the center became nothing. The whole city was blown to bits and the ruins all caught fire instantly everywhere, burning briskly. 70,000 people were killed right away or died within a few hours. Those who did not die at once suffered great pain. Few of those were soldiers.²

This paper is the story of one who survived the Bomb. He is Hiromu Morishita. It is a story of suffering and death, a story of healing and new life. It is also a story of Morishita's friendship of peace with Thomas Merton. The friendship did not begin until 27 May 1964. Yet their friendship cannot be understood apart from the A-Bomb and the events of 6 August 1945. It can rightfully be said that this remarkable friendship of peace literally arose from the ashes of Hiroshima. In this sense, it is a story of crucifixion and resurrection.

The primary source of this article comes from eleven hours of interviews with Hiromu Morishita at the age of 84.³ These interviews were completed over the course of three days in Hiroshima during April of 2013 and were conducted with the help of a Japanese translator, although Morishita and I did talk at times with one another in English. We sat on the floor (Japanese style) with Morishita's many notes and old photographs spread out before us. Included in the materials was a photo of Merton from 1964 and a first edition of *Seeds of Destruction* which Merton had given Morishita as a gift. These meetings with Morishita had a luminous quality about them. I have no adequate words for what I experienced. Something special happened in those meetings.

Morishita and the Bomb

Morishita was 14 years old when the A-Bomb was dropped. Before that time, he had lived a happy childhood with a loving family. He was born in an area of the inland sea not far from Hiroshima, and he moved to his new city home at the age of five. His father, a high school teacher, valued Hiroshima as an intellectual center with its two universities. His mother found Hiroshima to be a pleasant place to raise Morishita and his two younger sisters. Its natural beauty surrounded by hills on three sides, its lovely parks and major river tributaries flowing throughout the city, made for a beautiful harbour city.

The times, however, were not so beautiful. Japan, led by its imperial military, was waging an aggressive and expansionist war in East Asia. Young men began to leave Hiroshima for military service. Then came the onset of the American war. By 1945, American B-29s were bombing one Japanese city after another. With their air defenses crippled, ultimate defeat for Japan was close at hand. Morishita remembers that the Japanese public was repeatedly told Japan was winning the war.

In looking back, Morishita laments his unswerving patriotism. He said he admired men in uniform and felt great loyalty to the Emperor.⁴ Therefore, he was pleased to join the work force after public education

was suspended in 1945. Although he loved school, he was excited to have a chance to help the war effort. He was as patriotic as a youthful and innocent schoolboy could be.

Morishita and his middle school classmates remained together as a class even though there was no school. Instead of attending school he was given daily work assignments throughout the city. He worked in factories and helped clear fire-lanes, by broadening city streets in anticipation of American bombings. He remembers using large ropes attached to buildings (mostly wooden structured homes), to pull over the structures as part of the clearing efforts. But while cities around Hiroshima were being bombed, Hiroshima was left alone. Its citizens could only wonder why.

On 6 August 1945, Morishita set out for his daily work assignment. He can recall looking back at his home and noticing the sad look on his mother's face, as her only son continued on his way. He had forgotten that he had a new assignment and set out in the wrong direction. He quickly realized his mistake, turned around and rushed to his new assignment closer to the city centre, which was to become the Bomb's epicentre. He made it to his new assignment just in time to line up in the warm morning sun with his classmates. He listened to instructions for the day's work.

Then, without warning, at precisely 8:15 a.m., hell descended upon Hiroshima.⁵ There was a tremendous flash of light, and a shattering blast which threw Morishita to the ground. He said it was like being thrown into a large fiery furnace. Suddenly, there was no air, no light, no anything. A forceful wind blew in every direction. Everything burst into flames. When Morishita finally got back to his feet, he recognized nothing. The city was gone. There was only smoke and rubble. No buildings, no classmates, only a disturbing silence. Next, he began to hear cries for help. His own pain was unbearable. He realized parts of his body had been badly burned; especially his left-side, which had been turned toward the city centre. His head was bloated and his skin sagged over his face, completely covering his left eye.

Not knowing what to do, Morishita began walking as best he could. He hoped there might be a way out of this nightmare. He said he must have looked like a ghost. He walked with his arms extended. The pain was too great for his arms to touch his body. If they did, they would stick to his gelatin-like burnt skin. Among the 'walking dead' he too sought cooling relief for his burns. He stepped over and around mangled debris and bodies. His destination was the nearest river tributary. Morishita,

however, had to stop short of the river's bank. The river had already filled with burn victims and floating corpses. Unable to enter the cooling waters, Morishita continued to walk, not knowing where to go next. Walking, wandering, looking... this searching for sense became a metaphor for his terrifying new life.

One of Morishita's earliest poems is about his dreadful experience of the Bomb and the deep despair he felt in its aftermath. The poem, entitled 'The First Aid Station', was written from Morishita's perspective as he looked back on August 6 from what he thought to be his death pallet.

The First Aid Station

The woman fearing a shock might come upon me
Due to my monster-like changed features
Would not let me have a mirror.
Unable to go through the streets too hot from
Embers after burning
Crossed I over an iron bridge
Feeling uneasiness at each cross tie – smoldering.

Following advice on how to reach the first-aid station
Which, in reality, is a bank-building
I just caught sight of numberless corpses behind the pillars.
Bewildered to stand in front of my home-site
I found nothing reminding me of the house
Which I left only this morning.
Auntie is said to have died vomiting a black sort
Of foam
Just a few days after
She had come to see my suffering from
A burn.

The last stanza of the poem speaks specifically of Morishita's despair and sense of doom. He identified with the burnt corpses that he witnessed being cremated:

In desperation of self-scorn and self abandonment
I have been doing nothing but to wait for the
nearing death.
Watching the burning corpses on the river
beach almost every day.⁷

Morishita fully expected to die, and much did die within him. He hated his grotesque appearance; he was ashamed and embarrassed to appear in public. He wondered why he lived whilst others died – especially his classmates and his beloved mother. Morishita's mother had been the only one at home when the blast occurred. The house collapsed with his mother trapped beneath; she could not escape the fire that followed. Morishita's father and two sisters, however, did survive. They were not at home that morning and were a greater distance from the blast. In fact, the entire family was in the process of moving beyond the city for greater safety.

The 14 year-old boy was no more. He had survived but what did survival mean? Like his future friend Thomas Merton, Morishita as a young man found himself adrift in a meaningless world. Whereas Merton had lost both parents, Morishita had lost an entire world. Morishita's pain was so great he was unable to speak of his experience for more than a decade. He remained silent; he said nothing about the day that changed his life forever. Like many survivors, he bore his scars in silence. His left ear had fallen off; the left side of his torso had many burn marks, and keloids had begun to appear on various parts of his body.⁸ The psychological and spiritual damage was even greater.

The Hibakusha Come to Gethsemani

Morishita was one of tens of thousands called *hibakusha* ('blast affected people'). He, along with other *hibakusha*, became the 'lepers' of post-war Japan. Japanese society wanted to move forward, and the *hibakusha* were physical reminders of the war people wanted to forget. Many arranged marriages were cancelled if one of the parties was *hibakusha*. There was much fear of radiation effects. People, often quite literally, avoided physical contact with the *hibakusha*. These forms of social prejudice were somewhat mitigated in Morishita's case, due to his father's influence and his connection with the education system in Hiroshima. Morishita was able to graduate from university. He became a teacher himself, married, and had children.⁸ But his father could not protect his son from almost daily assaults on his dignity and his many self-doubts.

It was not until the early 1960s, when Morishita met the America Quaker, Barbara Reynolds, that things began to change for him. He had found someone who accepted and affirmed him and other *hibakusha* as equals. Reynolds, believing in the worth and dignity of every human being as a child of God, opened her home in Hiroshima to many *hibakusha*. They could gather there and begin to tell their stories to one

another without recrimination. There Morishita began to meet with other *hibakusha*. For him it was the beginning of a new day – a day which was soon to find its further dawning in friendship with Thomas Merton.

In 1963-64, Reynolds arranged for a delegation of *hibakusha* to go on a world tour as 'Ambassadors for Peace'. They were to visit all the countries that possessed nuclear weapons. The purpose of the Peace Ambassadors was to listen and learn from their host nations, and to witness against war and for the elimination of nuclear weapons, by telling their stories. Reynolds asked Morishita to be a part of the delegation. He can recall saying that he was in no way ready for such a trip, but in the end could not say no to the loving persistence of Barbara Reynolds.⁹ The group was to consist of *hibakusha* from both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, representing various walks of life. Morishita, then in his early thirties, was an ideal candidate in that he could represent several vocations: he was a teacher, a poet, and a calligrapher. His one limitation was that he knew no English, and had to rely on translators. The Ambassadors for Peace arrived in the U.S. during the Spring of 1964, and split into three smaller groups in order to visit as many cities as possible during their six week stay. Morishita was assigned to the group with Louisville on its itinerary. From there it was a short trip to the Abbey of Gethsemani, where Merton lived.

In 1962, Merton had published 'Original Child Bomb'. This prose poem declared his opposition to war and his call to eliminate all nuclear weapons. This placed Merton in solidarity with the peace pilgrims from Japan, and they wanted to meet this kindred spirit. Morishita, unlike some of his companions, had never heard of this 'holy man'. He thought Merton must be something like the Buddhist monks he had known in Japan. However, he was soon to discover that Merton was no ordinary monk, and to use William Shannon's phrase he was 'something of a rebel'.¹⁰ Morishita and Merton met for their one and only time at Gethsemani on the afternoon of 16 May 1964. They met as total strangers, but after this one brief encounter they formed a lasting friendship. Although from different cultures and life experiences, they soon discovered themselves to be of one heart, a heart of peace.

Morishita's memory of first seeing Gethsemani was one that many visitors have had over the years. A corner is turned on a small country road, and suddenly the Abbey appears almost like magic. Its beautiful green surroundings brought Morishita an instant sense of peace, reminding him of one of Japan's ancient castles. He quickly sketched a picture of the Abbey in his travel notebook. Later, in the same notebook,

Morishita recorded the words from the talk Merton gave to his honored guests. Morishita carefully recorded Merton's words in Japanese as they were relayed to him by the translator. After greeting his visitors, Merton invited them to walk up the hill to the hermitage. Morishita remembers the 'little cottage' as being behind the Abbey about a mile away, and located in a delightful forested setting. The walk alone inspired Morishita. His artistic and spiritual sensitivities were deeply awakened. He also heard the ringing of bells which deepened his sense of peace. He felt he was indeed on holy ground. The *hibakusha* soon gathered in the small hermitage and were joined by a few other monks from the Abbey. Merton offered his guests something to drink and then began to speak. He longed to communicate heart-to-heart with his guests, and according to Morishita he did just that.

I was surprised when Morishita handed me a copy of his Japanese notes of Merton's speech. I was even more surprised, and deeply moved, when he tore the original sketch of Gethsemani from his notebook and gave it to me as a gift.

'A Friendship of Peace'

We know from Merton's journal entry of 17 May 1964, that he included in his talk to the *hibakusha* a reading from his poem 'Paper Cranes'.¹¹ In the poem, Merton shows a close identification with all those whose lives were destroyed by the A-Bomb. The poem's background is a well-known story about Sadako, a young Japanese girl, dying of the 'A-Bomb' disease. She spent her last days making hundreds of paper cranes, symbols of healing and peace. She hoped to complete a thousand cranes, but died before her goal was reached. Subsequently, tens of thousands of children and adults from around the globe have folded paper cranes in her honor so that the thousandth crane might be completed, and peace finally achieved.

Before the *hibakusha* departed from Gethsemani, a young woman in the group placed a paper crane in Merton's hands. Morishita handed Merton one of his poems. It may have been 'The First Aid Station', included above. In his encounter with Merton, Morishita realized that something was stirred deep within him, and he wanted to express appreciation. Morishita had 'seen' in Merton a wholeness he truly admired. He said to me with a wry smile, 'perhaps Merton was a Buddha.' He discovered in Merton someone who seemed to understand suffering, someone who had suffered deeply himself and identified with the suffering of others. Morishita noted, however, that Merton refused to

permit himself to be defined by suffering. Merton had an inner peace, a compassion, an openness towards others that seemed to carry him beyond suffering. This inner peace and compassion spoke directly to Morishita. It was not so much what Merton said and did that impressed him; it was who he was.

Morishita recalled the respect Merton had for the *hibakusha*, complimenting them for not focusing upon themselves and the disaster that had befallen them. He understood their desire to share their story so that nobody would ever have to experience what they did. Morishita said it was so very good to be accepted and have one's intentions affirmed. In his journal entry of 17 May, Merton was careful to mention each of his guests by name and say something to help identify each of the *hibakusha* as individuals. They had been twice dehumanized; first by the Americans A-bomb and secondly by the Japanese people themselves. Merton refused to allow for this to happen in his presence. He was mindful of each guest as a valued son or daughter of God's love.

All this had a profound effect upon Morishita. Like Merton, he knew he had to rediscover his true self, to truly love himself and others without the restraint of what Merton called the 'surface self' or the 'ego self'. He resolved to be a person of peace, living for others, and no longer a prisoner of the past which had haunted him so much. He determined not to be defined by his physical appearance with its 'marks of the A-bomb'. As he told me, he no longer concerned himself with being a beautiful person (as the world defined it) but rather, a person of beautiful actions. For the remainder of his life, Morishita was to live the life of awakening, a man of peace. He would visit over thirty nations as a witness for peace; meeting with world leaders like the Secretary General of the United Nations and the American President Harry S. Truman who had ordered the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. He would develop a peace curriculum for high schools used first in Hiroshima and then throughout Japan. He would use his poetry and calligraphy in the service of peace, and would serve as the director of the World Friendship Center in Hiroshima for a quarter of a century.¹²

Merton was also graced in a special way through his encounter and friendship with Morishita and the *hibakusha*. He had now met men and women who had been the ultimate victims of modern warfare. After meeting Morishita and the *hibakusha*, Merton wrote about the ravages of war upon civilian populations with greater specificity. In his journal he described the *hibakusha* as a people who had been 'signed and marked by the cruelty of the age'.¹³ Merton had seen the 'marks' for himself. Indeed,

men and women 'signed by the cruelty of the age' had been to his hermitage. He had 'touched' their wounds.

After his return to Japan from Gethsemani, Morishita initiated a correspondence with Merton which was to last until Merton's death in December 1968.¹⁴ In a letter written to Morishita dated 6 August 1967, Merton told his friend that 'it is good to have your poems with me, even though I do not know what they say.' He continued, 'I still have the little card and other calligraphies you sent, and keep the card especially present with me in my book of prayers [the breviary].'¹⁵ This helped Merton never to forget his dear friend Morishita, and what had happened at Hiroshima. After Merton's death in Bangkok, his breviary was among the items that were returned to Gethsemani. I would suspect Morishita's calligraphy card was still within its pages. Morishita's calligraphy may also have been a constant reminder to Merton to remain diligent in his prophetic opposition to war and nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

In a letter to Morishita on August 3rd, 1965, Merton speaks of 'the great problem' confronting those who work for peace in his day:

The great problem, it seems to me, is that those in power do not think in terms of human beings and living persons, but in terms of political abstractions which tend to be more and more unrelated to human reality...¹⁶

Merton could just as easily be writing those same words to peacemakers today. Almost forty years after Merton's letter to Morishita, and nearly seventy years after the Bomb at Hiroshima, wars continue to be waged and nuclear weapons are possessed by numerous nations.¹⁷ The world seems a more dangerous place than ever. As 'those in power' continue to think in terms of 'political abstractions' rather than in terms of 'human beings and living persons', dehumanization continues unabated. Merton is gone, but his passion for peace remains alive, and friends for peace continue to gather around the world, among them Hiromu Morishita. They seek to remain faithful to the cause of peace, to choose life rather than death. By the grace of God, we too will make that choice.

Notes

1. Hiromu Morishita, 'The First Aid Station' (privately-printed booklet, mainly in Japanese but with a few sections in English). No page numbers or date given.
2. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb* (New York, New Directions, 1962). This prose-poem has 41 sections, of which the extract is section 32.
3. Interviews with Hiromu Morishita, April 6-8, 2013. These 11 hours of interviews were arranged by Ann and Larry Sims, good friends, and directors of the World Friendship Center in Hiroshima in April of 2013. Hereafter referenced as 'Interview/HM.'
4. Interview/HM.
5. For a detailed account of the events of that day and their immediate aftermath see: Andrew J. Rotter, *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 145-202.
6. Interview/HM.
7. Morishita, 'The First Aid Station', no page number.
8. Interview/HM.
9. Interview/HM.
10. William H. Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton His Life and Works* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Press, 1997) p. xi.
11. Robert Daggy, ed., *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journal of Thomas Merton*, Volume 5 (New York: Harper Collins, 1997) pp. 104-105.
12. Interview/HM.
13. Robert Daggy, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 104.
14. The Thomas Merton Centre at Bellarmine University holds 23 items relating to the Merton-Morishita correspondence, 6 of which are personal letters from Merton to Morishita. All 6 are included in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (London: Collins Flame, 1990) pp. 458-461.
15. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 461
16. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 460
17. By 1963 four countries (USA, Russia, UK and France) had nuclear weapons. That number is now seven, including China, India & Pakistan. In addition it is believed that Israel also has them; and there is much international concern that North Korea and Iran are actively developing a nuclear capability.

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