

First Place: 2018 Greenfield Peace Writing Scholarship
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I stood rooted to the ground, not a muscle moved. Every fiber of my being was acutely and intensely focused on the man in front of me. He was about sixty, his face was crisscrossed with a mixture of worry lines and wrinkles. His eyes seemed to bore into my soul. He stood in a garden like setting near the Aioi Bridge in Hiroshima and spoke from his heart. Several locals had gathered around him and many were crying. Some hugged each other, while others gently collapsed onto the soft dirt their legs giving way, overcome by the weight of their grief. I was the only foreigner among this Japanese group who was discussing the single worst event in their history. The sorrow and suffering were like an open wound calling my attention. I could speak and understand Japanese. Unexpectedly I found myself asking the lady next to me if I could hug her. We hugged and wept tears of sorrow and shared understanding. Listening to the pain in the man's voice as he described the events of that fateful day in August of 1945 left me emotionally spent and afraid.

I had arrived in Hiroshima with hundreds of paper cranes made by my classmates. Paper cranes are a symbol of peace and I carried them with me all the way from Oregon as a sign of hope and a commitment to protect the world from nuclear weapons. As I gently placed them at the Peace memorial I vowed to do my part to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

There are no easy answers. In a world filled with angry rhetoric and fear of the unfamiliar we are uncomfortably close to war. How then, can one young girl make a difference when the problem itself seems to be growing at an alarming rate? I found the answer in Theodore Roosevelt's quote "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

Yes, all I needed was to do the best I could and if we all did the same we would be able to eliminate nuclear weapons. We won't need to have the weapons of war if we understand and respect one another. Most wars are caused by a rapid escalation of back and forth between people who do not understand each other. If we could get to know one another and become culturally literate thus learning to celebrate each country and culture's uniqueness that would naturally lead to respect and understanding. An open mind takes us to the discussion table, a closed mind takes us to war.

All I had to do was help make the unfamiliar familiar and help people understand one another. I was already fluent in Mandarin, proficient in Japanese and Spanish. I realized that I could use my gift for languages to build bridges between cultures and people. I studied Russian and Hindi. We opened our homes to students from all over the world and engaged in dialogue with them taking the time to listen and understand. I set up the Chinese language and culture club to help create an appreciation of this ancient culture. I have not solved the world's nuclear problem but I believe I know the answer. Support the nuclear non-proliferation movement, openly and honestly discuss the consequences of nuclear war and take the time to get to know those who are different from us. Listen to them, learn to understand their point of view and that will lead all of us to a world free of nuclear weapons and the threat of war.