Arriving in Hiroshima, Japan, is much like arriving in other Japanese cities. One is taken by the reduced size of everything from people to vehicles to portions of food and drink. Only the occasional Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple breaks the glitz and glitter of a modern city. But this city is different from most other cities in Japan. At 8:15 am on August 6th, 1945, Hiroshima was leveled by the first atomic bomb in history to be used as a weapon of war. It is nearly impossible to believe, as I walk through this beautiful, modern city bustling with people, that this is the site of such a catastrophe. A part of me wants to think that everything I’ve been taught in school is wrong. For a brief moment, it is a relief to pretend that it is all a mistake; that the hundreds of thousands of lives have not been lost, that there are not people still living with the effects of the radiation from the bomb. But this gleaming city hides an awful secret, one that is divulged only at a place directly below where the bomb was detonated, 580 meters above Hiroshima.

It is dark when we first glimpse the eerily lit atomic bomb dome in Hiroshima. This sole remaining skeletal hulk of a building, one of the few not leveled by the bomb, has been left untouched from that day. We walk around the memorial in a silence broken only by the occasional hushed questions, trying to stifle feelings of responsibility while nervously looking around hoping that no Japanese will come and point an accusing finger at us. It is the most uncomfortable feeling in my three-week visit, until the next day, and a visit to the atomic bomb museum. The images caught on film, the personal items displayed and the countless horrific stories printed in what seems like victims blood, disturb me to my core. The difficulty in viewing the evidence of what was done to a people and culture I’ve grown to love is indescribable. Reminding myself of the treachery that prompted this response, and the probable saved lives from a continuing war does little to loosen the knot that is steadily growing in my stomach.

When I don’t think I critically ill, I notice the group of um, in close proximity to me. In all prepared for the looks from the people, only to look up and imagine their confusion as they make the movies, jeans, hamburgers much, could be the same people how much they understand about they haven’t been told the story from the Americans. The Japanese call them “yellow men,” many images of horrifying deaths from their eyes; a look of fear, sadness pointed gaze. Fear of a person place. Sadness over the suffering of the American people they have long of them.

The Japanese are taught the decision to drop the bombs was to test the effectiveness of the atom and Nagasaki, had the best chance of all reasons to use these weapons these children are not given any given a model of a young school burned from his body: the text are given a scene of human whose skin hangs from their body. They are given the stories and the lucky as to be killed instantly, result of the radiation.
When I don’t think I can take much more without becoming physically ill, I notice the group of school children moving through the museum, in close proximity to me. While I am getting used to wide-eyed looks, especially from children, due to our being foreigners, I am not at all prepared for the looks from the children in this place. I can’t imagine what is going through their minds as they learn, through these sobering images, what happened to their country and citizens at the hands of the Americans, only to look up and see the perpetrator in their midst. I imagine their confusion as they try to understand how the people who make the movies, jeans, hamburgers and cartoon characters they love so much, could be the same people who did this to their country. I wonder how much they understand about why it happened, then remember, they haven’t been told the story from the same perspective we have. They are not taught about the atrocities of their country in places like Korea and China. They have never known their homeland to be anything but a demilitarized, peace loving country. They have been told that we Americans call them "yellow monkeys". Surrounded, on this day, by so many images of horrifying death and destruction, I understand the look in their eyes; a look of fear, sadness and anger rolled into one moist, disappointed gaze. Fear of a person who could do this, and then visit this place. Sadness over the suffering and loss of life. Anger because the American people they have long idolized have not lived up to their image of them.

The Japanese are taught through these displays and text that the decision to drop the bombs was in large part because the U.S. wanted to test the effectiveness of the atomic bomb, and these two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had the best characteristics to carry out that test. The best of all reasons to use these weapons falls flat to the floor in this place, and these children are not given anything close to a good reason. They are given a model of a young schoolboy in his uniform, which is mostly burned from his body: the text says he died on his way to school. They are given a scene of human wax figures in a nearly destroyed building, whose skin hangs from their bodies like wax from a burning candle. They are given the stories and testimony from people who were not so lucky as to be killed instantly, but who suffered long painful deaths as a result of the radiation.
There is no look I can give these children that will explain why it happened. It would be a mistake to try to talk to them, to explain that it wasn’t me who made the decision: they wouldn’t understand me if I did. What about the older people here today; the ones who probably lost a relative or friend in the bombing? What do they think when they look at me here, in this place, which seems so holy, so sacred a place that I shouldn’t be here? Some have smiled as they passed. I struggle to determine if it’s a friendly smile or one that says, "you tried to wipe us out, but we’re still here and stronger than ever". My chest is heavy and my palms are sweaty as I push open the exit door and spill out onto the plaza that surrounds the museum. Walking in the Peace Park, I notice there are countless colorful origami cranes, folded mostly by school children, hanging from a tree. This is in honor of Sadako Sasaki, a young girl who developed leukemia as a result of the radiation from the blast. There is a Japanese belief that if a person folds one thousand origami paper cranes, they will have good fortune and health. Sadako’s mother instructed her to fold cranes to take her mind off of her pain. She didn’t quite make it to nine hundred cranes before she died. Ever since, school children from all over Japan fold cranes in her honor and to promote peace.

Overall, I find the people of Japan to be giving, warm and accepting of foreigners. I believe my experience in the atomic bomb museum is due largely to my preconceived notions of how I thought the Japanese people would react to an American in that place. There is no doubt that one cannot walk through the museum without being moved. Having seen the effects of nuclear weapons from both sides, I have a much stronger opposition to their existence than I did before visiting Hiroshima. While in the Peace Park, I am approached by a Japanese for my signature on a petition to ban nuclear weapons from the earth. In spite of all I’ve just experienced, and my newly strengthened stance against these weapons, I stopped for a moment to consider whether, as an American, I should sign such a petition in a place such as this. Somehow it smacks of Jane Fonda in Viet Nam, though I know it is not the same. I sign the petition, not because I don’t support my country’s decisions in world war two, but because of all the people I’ve come to know and love in this place.

Meeting the grandparents was truly a wonderful experience. To enter the home on her knees with respect. I was more concerned with younger people because I war, and I wondered how they were. Further exaggerating my fear was the visit in the presence of these folk have been more unfounded. We were these kind folks. I pleaded with them, which she finally did, with hours of learning and growing regret.

I believe these cultural differences between nations and cultures, between whom you haven’t met. One difference is the false belief that, just by understanding the other cultures, we can know and understand the other person. It is much more possible to understand the heart of another person, than it is to know the taste of another country we were once at war with. The Mukai family, the Fujita family, the I know and love, and of people I hate me for what happened a long time ago.
Meeting the grandparents of Misa, our exchange student, was a truly wonderful experience. The first time they arrived, the grandmother entered the home on her knees bowing deeply to show us her ultimate respect. I was more concerned about meeting these "old" Japanese than I was younger people because I knew these people had lived through the war, and I wondered how they would feel about us as Americans. Further exaggerating my fear was the fact that we were on their turf, in their home court, which, for some reason, felt like a trespass more than a visit in the presence of these elder Japanese. My fears couldn’t have been more unfounded. We were respected, honored and truly loved by these kind folks. I pleaded with Grandmother to stand at that first meeting, which she finally did, with apologies, and we shared food, tea and hours of learning and growing without the slightest hint of mistrust or regret.

I believe these cultural exchanges are crucial to promoting peace between nations and cultures, because there is no way to know someone whom you haven’t met. One danger of the "information age" that we’re in is the false belief that, just by reading some text and viewing some pictures, we can know and understand anything or anyone. It is no more possible to understand the heart of someone by reading about him on the web, than it is to know the taste of a food by looking at its picture in the cookbook. When I think of Japan now, I don’t think of a people and a country we were once at war with, I think of the Takemoto family, the Mukai family, the Fujita family and the Uchida family. I think of people I know and love, and of people who love me for who I am, and don’t hate me for what happened a long time ago.