

# **“Making Peace In a Time Of War”**

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**The 39<sup>th</sup> Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony**

**June 14, 2022**

“LET US BE MIDWIVES!

Night in the basement of a concrete structure now in ruins.  
Victims of the atomic bomb  
jammed the room;  
it was dark — not even a single candle.  
The smell of fresh blood, the stench of death,  
the closeness of sweaty people, the moans.  
From out of all that, lo and behold, a voice:  
“The baby’s coming!”  
In that hellish basement, at that very moment,  
a young woman had gone into labor.  
In the dark, without a single match, what to do?  
People forgot their own pains, worried about her.  
And then: “I’m a midwife. I’ll help with the birth.”  
The speaker, seriously injured herself,  
had been moaning only moments before.  
And so new life was born in the dark of that pit of hell.  
And so the midwife died before dawn, still bathed in blood.  
Let us be midwives!  
Let us be midwives!  
Even if we lay down our own lives to do so”.  
—SEPTEMBER 1945

An untold story of the atomic bombing  
Sadako Kurihara  
Translated by Richard Minear (1)

Thank you to my friend Professor Tomoko Nakamura from Hiroshima for suggesting this poem to me

I wish to dedicate my words to the end of war and to all those who have died in war, and the soldiers who remain haunted by what they have done.

dear Friends,

I wish to begin by honouring Nikkyo Niwano, the Founder of the Niwano Peace Foundation. Today's event is just one example of how his legacy lives on. The previous 38 recipients reflect a rich tapestry of peace building and interreligious collaboration involving countless people across space and time.

The great Catholic theologian Hans Kung, who also received this prize, is quoted as saying

“No peace among the nations

without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions

without dialogue between the religions

No dialogue between the religions

without investigation of the foundation of the religions”

I am deeply humbled to be the recipient of the 39th Niwano Peace Prize today. The prize equally belongs to all those connected to the Institute for Healing of Memories and its Global Network. There have been many companions on the way.

Healing of Memories focusses on the pressing issue of healing the wounds of history. How can we acknowledge the past and not be its prisoner? How do we break the cycle that turns victims into victimisers?

Healing of memories is about processes of detoxification especially the poison of hatred, revenge and bitterness

I like to think of the facilitators of healing of memories as “midwives”, supporting the storyteller, creating a safe space and making the birth easier

Many have pointed out that trauma that is not transformed is transmitted from one generation to another. This is true of individuals, communities and nations. Eventually political violence comes to an end as family; domestic and sexual violence escalates.

The announcement of this Prize happened in the same week that Russia invaded Ukraine. Many millions of refugees have fled their homes, unleashing untold suffering, and creating the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War.

The world is understandably focusing on Ukraine.

As South Africans, we recall that people from every corner of the globe supported us during the struggle against apartheid. We experienced international solidarity on a massive scale. We were very fortunate.

There are many other current, long lasting conflicts and wars which do not receive the same attention that they deserve.

I am thinking of Yemen, Tigray and Myanmar to name a few.

There seems to be moral blindness when it comes in particular to the struggle of the Palestinians against Israeli Apartheid.

In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 2022 it is apparent that the fundamental human rights of some people are respected and given more weight than others.

In the early days of the Ukraine-Russia war, as millions fled, many Africans experienced racism at the Ukrainian border. Black lives were not as valued as white lives.

Following the murder of George Floyd in the US after so many other deaths of mainly black men, at the hands of the police, we saw the meteoric rise of Black Lives Matter.

The movement found echoes across the world not least in the Mother continent as it resonated with the lived experience of enduring racism, through the ages till today.

Even as demands for reparation and restitution for slavery and colonialism get stronger, and more insistent, there are the beginnings of important conversations about white privilege. When will the talk bring about transformative justice? As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

In the work of healing of memories across the world during the last 20 years, there have been two common themes: gender based violence and childhood trauma.

Is not gender based violence the oldest wound in human history? Many of our faith communities are more patriarchal than the mainstream of our societies. We often like to mystify how we, as men, oppress women in the name of culture, tradition and religion.

In our Institute we have a media campaign called the "Hands of Men" which focusses on our role as perpetrators and our power to stop the violence. Toxic masculinity stops us as men from giving ourselves permission to be vulnerable and deal with our own woundedness.

Many of our faith communities have stumbled and have been the most oppressive when it comes to human sexuality. This has caused deep woundedness among sexual minorities. Science has taught us that the kaleidoscope of sexual orientation is a matter of genetics.

Not choice. I have long harboured a dream, that I would live long enough to see the leaders of all the great faith traditions, making a public apology to the LGBTQIA+ community, for our part in their oppression.

In the announcement of this award to me, specific mention was made of my role as a founder of the Friends of Cuba Society in South Africa. Whilst living under an illegal and immoral US blockade for more than 60 years, Cuba taught the world the meaning of human solidarity....especially to the poorest countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In Cuba, quality health care for all is not a slogan, it is a reality. When Covid spread across the world, the weapons of mass destruction were of no use. Doctors and nurses were the heroes. Cuba's Henry Reeves Brigade saved countless lives including in South Africa and even in wealthy countries like Italy.

During our relentless struggle against apartheid, one of the fronts was the campaign to end the death penalty. Every Thursday morning in Pretoria, there were executions, up to seven at a time, mostly black and poor. Today in South Africa we have abolished the death penalty. I am praying that I will live long enough to see all countries in the world, choosing life and abolishing the death penalty. I hope the Niwano Peace Foundation will support that campaign.

The Russian Ukrainian war is a tragedy It's not just for the people of Ukraine but for Russia too. It has been encouraging to see people of faith in Russia especially rank and file clergy coming out against the war. Russian citizens in cities across the country, despite the risk of long imprisonment have been saying No to war and Yes to peace.

Psychologists speak of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a consequence of war and other traumas. People are beginning to speak more about the moral and spiritual injuries that come as a

consequence of people violating their consciences. Many of our faith traditions assert that there is something of the divine in all of us so when we attack another human being, we are attacking the divine in that person as well as in ourselves

The antidotes to moral and spiritual injury are not a tablet, but rather confession, remorse and lives of reparation and restitution.

You can be sure that Russian soldiers, and Ukrainian soldiers as well will be suffering from moral and spiritual injury for decades to come and will haunt subsequent generations too.

Of course this is no less true for South Africans and Japanese people as it is for the rest of humanity.

Once more we are facing the specter of a nuclear war. The founder of the Niwano Peace Foundation spoke in favour of Nuclear Disarmament.

As the only country in the world that has not only experienced militarism, but carries in its soul the deep wounds of the atomic bombs, Japan is uniquely placed to champion a new worldwide movement for nuclear disarmament.

Is this not something that could be championed by the Niwano foundation together with the Japanese government?

The climate crisis is also telling us that we humans have declared war on Mother Earth and she is crying out in pain. Mother Earth would survive without us but we cannot survive without her. Perhaps we should follow the example of Bolivia.

"Mother Earth has the following rights: **To life, to the diversity of life, to water, to clean air, to equilibrium, to restoration, and to pollution-free living.**" So states the Law of Mother Earth, a Bolivian law passed in December 2010 as a binding societal duty.(2)

As a person of faith, I often ask myself what is God's dream for all of us? What can I do to cooperate with God's dream?

With the eye of faith, I try to see the divine in all people and to experience all of creation as part of the divine.

I believe that we are all called to be midwives helping build peace through Healing the wounds of history and working for Transformative Justice.

As I mentioned when the announcement of this prize was made, my father was a soldier in the war against Japan. My mother once said to me that the man who went to war was not the one who returned.

From the next life I believe that today he is smiling at me and at all of you.

"Let us be midwives!

Let us be midwives!

Even if we lay down our own lives to do so".

I thank you.

1.

This poem appeared first in the inaugural issue of Chūgoku bunka (the special issue on the atomic bomb, March 1946). The cellar in the poem was the cellar of the old post office in Senda-machi.

**【Source】**

Black Eggs. Poems by Kurihara Sadako

translated with an Introduction and Notes by Richard H. Minear

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Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1994

2.

Google

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