

The Legend of Sadako

BY LARRY JOHNSON & ELAINE WYNNE

IN JAPAN IT IS SAID THE CRANES will bring you long life and much good luck. When the cranes rise above the city and countryside, it looks as though 100 golden suns burst in the sky.

That morning, August 6, 1945, it looked like a million golden suns burst in the sky, but it was not the cranes. It was THUNDERBOLT . . . THUNDERBOLT!—the first atomic bomb to be dropped on a human city.

There was a bright light, and some who looked at it could never see again. Others looked away. Everywhere the city was crumbling. Bricks, boards, concrete and glass flew through the streets, and everywhere there were fires.

People said, "What is it?"

Those who knew told the ones who did not.

People ran, crying out, "Water, water." Anything to cool the burning, burning of their skin. The next day there were fires. Again, a strange thing happened. The rains came, and the rains were black.

People said, "What is it?"

Those who knew told the ones who did not. The radioactivity from the bomb had filled the rain with something terrible.

Doctors and nurses were killed by the bomb blast and hospitals were destroyed. People helped each other. Many were dying every day. Two weeks later a strange thing happened again. Flowers began to bloom. Pink, lavender and white flowers bloomed

where they had not bloomed before, bloomed in abundance, in the strangest mutation of life in the middle of all of that dying.

That day was so horrible. It just seemed that everyone died. Of course, many people in the center part of town did, but further out, in what might be called the suburbs, there were many survivors. One of those survivors was a little girl named Sadako Sasaki.

When the bomb fell on the city, she was only two years old. As she grew up, she remembered that terrible day mostly from the stories. When she drove into the center of town with her family and asked, "Why are they rebuilding those buildings?" they would tell her the story.

When she went to the Peace Park on the memorial day of the bombing, Sadako remembered her grandma. She had friends who would visit their grandmas in person, but hers was killed in the bomb blast. Sadako knew about her grandma only from the stories and memories of the others.

The hardest way to remember came when a friend or someone she knew got the disease called "radiation sickness" or atom bomb disease. It was a form of cancer people believed was caused by the excessive radiation in the air getting into people's bodies. Today, many people get well from leukemia, but in those days, all the doctors could do was to make the pain a little less. Getting the disease meant dying, and that was as hard for Sadako as it ever is when somebody close dies of anything.

Most of the time, Sadako didn't think about things like that. She was a healthy, ordinary girl, and the thing most important to her was running. She won her first foot race in grade school, then got the idea, "That's what I'd like to do. I want to get good at running. I want to get on the junior high team that runs against other

schools. Maybe I can get in the Olympics someday."

Sadako was a good runner. She ran to and from school, worked out, and won a lot of races. She got on a special school team.

One day Sadako was in the middle of a very important race, and she got a feeling that a runner would know.

"I didn't sleep enough," she thought, "I didn't eat right.

I'm going to pass those guys ahead of me, and then I'll deal with it."

But that day, Sadako didn't pass anyone.

Instead she passed out, and when she awoke, she found herself in that part of

the hospital where she knew people had gone to be treated for "atom bomb sickness."

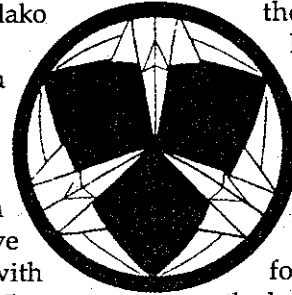
"I'm going to die," she thought. "I'll never get to run again."

They tried to cheer her up, but no one could do it. Sadako knew what had been happening. She had one friend who did pretty well, though. Chizuko knew how to visit in the hospital. She didn't get all muddled in her mind, thinking, "What do I say? This is my best friend and she's so sick."

She didn't worry like that and get so concerned that when she did say something, it was so awkward that a bad thing got worse. No, Chizuko just burst into the hospital room announcing, "Sadako, we heard a great story in school today. They told us how the golden crane lives to be a 1000 years old. They told us that if you fold 1000 paper cranes, it'll bring you good luck." She paused and stared intently at her friend, then she said, "It might even help you get well."

Sadako didn't feel well. She sat up with what strength she had and said, "That's dumb. How can folding paper birds help you get well from this?"

Chizuko backed off for just a second, then said, "It's a story. I know how to fold the cranes. Can I show you how?"



"I guess so," replied Sadako. So Chizuko took a square piece of paper and showed her friend how to make the folds to turn it into a paper crane.

Sadako started to fold, slowly at first, and then faster. Soon everyone in the hospital heard about the girl who was folding 1000 cranes. They brought paper for her. Sometimes they brought special origami paper, sometimes newspaper, candy wrappers, gum wrappers. Sadako folded with whatever she had. Soon the cranes began to pile up by the bed, all over the room.

Sadako hung cranes from the ceiling and a mobile by her bed. Every night Sadako watched the cranes float above her head as she drifted off to sleep.

Sadako folded 1000 cranes, then she started again—100, 200, 300—and still that girl was folding cranes. One day, Sadako woke up and she was too tired to fold the cranes. She held up a half-folded crane and said, "I'm going to write peace on your wings and send you around the world to remind people we should have peace."

The next day she was still too tired to fold, and a few days later, Sadako Sasaki died in her hospital room. Friends came and counted the cranes. Sadako was several hundred short of 2000 cranes, so her friends folded the rest, and they did not stop there.

They raised 5,395,000 yen and with it commissioned a statue to be built in

the Peace Park. It is still there today. Children from everywhere in the world send cranes to that place. Sometimes they send their pictures and wishes for peace. The cranes pile up at the statue until they are too high, then the park workers take them away. The next day, it starts over again.

At the bottom of the statue is the beautiful mountain of paradise. At the top, a girl stands with outstretched arms. She is holding a crane. These words are on the statue's base: "This is our cry, this is our prayer, to establish peace in the world." ❖

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More About "The Legend of Sadako"

WHEN ELAINE AND I WERE ASKED TO OPEN THE MARCH 1996 FOUNDING CONVENTION of the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) with a demonstration of storytelling, we chose to tell this story, "The Legend of Sadako." The CEM is an international coalition formed to encourage storytellers and media to heal the culture with stories that need to be told, not just those that can be sold.

We wanted to tell this story because we've been thrust into many wonderful places of healing and relationship since having developed the narrative in the '80s—along with having to deal with the harder issues of censorship, ownership, age appropriateness, and what gets chosen for telling in various venues. Every year since 1982, we have told "The Legend of Sadako" at the Hiroshima/Nagasaki Remembrance, an event that promotes world peace by commemorating the 1945 bombing of the two cities.

Today, the tale is best known as "Sadako and the 1000 Paper Cranes," due to a book and video by the same name written in 1978 by Eleanor Coerr, Santa Cruz, Calif. (800-827-0949). Elaine and I created our version of the story, based on various accounts we had obtained, one from a 1964 "Women's Strike for Peace" event and others from organizers of the Hiroshima-Nagasaki events in 1982 and from our friendship with Dr. Walter Erluo, former principal of Hiroshima International School.

"The Legend of Sadako" is based on the true story of a Japanese girl who contracts leukemia 10 years after the bombing of her city of Hiroshima. To bring about the fortune of recovery, Sadako calls on the legend of the golden crane and attempts the folding of 1000 paper cranes. Although Sadako does not succeed, her life and death challenged her classmates to think seriously about world peace. Today, her message has spread throughout the world.

Elaine and I have told this story in locations around the world. We believe the narrative needs to be told because it has become "a living legend." It needs to live every time a young person or group reads Eleanor Coerr's version or every time a storyteller relates the story the way he or she sees it.

—Larry Johnson

Key of See: Tellers, Teachers, Activists

Elaine Wynne and Larry Johnson work together as the Key of See Storytellers. Together, the duo won grand prize at the Tokyo Video Festival for helping children in St. Paul, Minnesota, and London, England, exchange dreams, stories, and their day-to-day lives via a children-made video exchange. Both have been active since the '60s as storytellers in peace and justice work, parenting, grandparenting, community organizing and teaching.

Founding members of Northlands Storytelling Network, they helped found the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) in 1991 and currently chair the organization's Storytelling Action Group and serve on its board of directors. Larry also writes a children's story-gardening column for *The Minnesota Horticulturalist* and teaches storytelling, video, and media literacy in the Minneapolis schools. Elaine is a teller and psychologist in independent practice.

For more information contact Key of See (CEM Storytelling Action Group), Box 27314, Minneapolis, Minn. 55427, 612-546-1074.