6 July, 2013

Yamaguchi Senji was among the most courageous, committed and inspiring people I have been privileged to meet and learn from. Exposed to 3,000 degree heat and horrors of the Nagasaki A-bombing, he suffered excruciating physical and emotional pain and discrimination. Yet, with the encouragement of the first World Conference Against A- & H-Bombs following the 1954 Bikini H-Bomb “test” – at a time when many people feared those exposed to the A-bombs’ radiation and discriminated against them – this terribly scarred but courageous man came forward with vision and courage to co-found Nihon Hidankyo, the Japan Confederation of A- & H-Bomb Survivors’ Organizations, and for many years he also played leading roles with Gensuikyo.

Throughout his lifetime, which included at least 20 A-bomb-related hospitalizations, Yamaguchi-sensei’s testimonies and commitments were among the strongest forces pressing for a nuclear weapons-free world. His speeches, autobiography and countless interviews helped us to understand nuclear Hell and illuminated the unimaginable:  the deaths, suffering and destruction wrought by the world’s first two atomic bombs. His words shattered the antiseptic but deadly abstractions of nuclearists and arms control advocates and of the governments and societies that create and threaten to use them. This, in addition to what he personally suffered and his exceptional courage simply to live, explain why it was Yamaguchi-sensi who addressed the U.N. General Assembly in 1982 and why he is featured in the Nagasaki A-bomb Museum.

On more than one occasion, against doctors’ orders, Senji escaped from his hospital bed to educate people – from high school and college students to the world’s leading peace advocates and diplomats – about the imperative of nuclear weapons abolition. When he implored “No More Hiroshimas, No More Nagasakis, No More Hibakusha,” his voice rang with the most essential truths, anger and compassion that survived the nuclear holocausts.

Through the example of his life, he showed us that Hibakusha must be central to our understandings of the meaning of nuclear weapons, and in the struggle to eliminate them.

In large measure we have Yamaguchi-sensei and other courageous Hibakusha and Japanese activists of his generation to thank for the inspiration that assembled leaders from 127 nations gathered in Oslo last year to explore the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. He courage and that of other Hibakusha played central roles in putting the possibility of a nuclear free world on the world’s agenda.

There is a saying that the spirit of a person who has died is present when they are remembered. Yamaguchi-sensei’s courage and the ways that he transformed what he experienced and suffered into lessons for us all was a gift of love and a force for human survival that will continue to reverberate across the planet that he traveled. When we finally achieve a nuclear weapons free world, it will be in no small part due to the vision and courage of Yamaguchi-sensei.

Yamaguchi Senji, Presente!

Domo Arrigato for the life you lived and for the gifts you gave us.

Joseph Gerson