

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
September 26, 2021
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My Grandmother's Neighbor
Luke 10:25-37, Eph 2:14-15

Readings

Luke 10: 25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Ephesians 2:14-15

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.

Message

History is often recorded in accounts of events that involve large numbers of people. But as the years pass, I realize that many of the most profound stories come from personal, very individual memories. These sorts of memories give depth and texture to the larger historical context and are every bit as important. They show a personal side that teaches us how to be better people. This is a story about rising above fences, walls, and borders.

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Mitzi Ojiri and my grandmother first met over a backyard fence that divided our two yards. This was nearly forty years ago. Mrs. Ojiri generously offered to share the fruits of her fig tree whose big green leaves overhung our fence, and across this fence a true friendship developed. I remember them having a conversation about the shiny green fig beetles that the tree attracted. Both Mitzi and my grandmother seemed in tune with nature and interested in each other's gardens. I'm sure that they also talked about their children, grandchildren, and neighbors, but honestly, I didn't pay too much attention at the time. After their first encounter, my grandmother told me in her soft Arkansas drawl, "Our neighbor across the fence *sure* is a nice lady."

My grandmother's accent had softened over the years, having come to California in the mid-Nineteen Thirties. She made the trek across the country with her widowed mother and two fatherless children, trying to escape the grip of poverty in rural Arkansas during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. They shared a ride with cousins in a crowded car. I'm sure that they pooled nickels along the way to buy gas, searching for a better life, much as many do today. I have since learned that the Los Angeles Police Department at one time set up stations at the Arizona border to discourage the flow of Dust Bowl refugees into the state, but I don't know if my own family encountered any of these. One cousin recently told

me that when she arrived in California, she was separated into a classroom with other “Dust Bowl” children.

We later moved to a house down the street from Mitzi, but still within walking distance. My grandmother was in her eighties and Mitzi was about ten years younger. Mitzi would bring flowers from her garden, and my grandma would send me up the hill to Mitzi’s house with a bag of homegrown tomatoes or other such goodies. But the true gift was not the flowers or tomatoes, it was the friendship. As it grew, we learned in time that Mitzi and her husband, Bill, had been imprisoned during World War II at Jerome, Arkansas, solely because of their Japanese ancestry. (I think that most people here today know about the “camps” that were set up during the war, but just in case, my grandmother’s neighbor, Mitzi, was in one of these ‘camps.’) It always seemed ironic to me that these two women, one, *born in Arkansas*, and the other, *once imprisoned in Arkansas*, had become such friends. Their friendship, as it grew, gave me faith in humanity. Here were two women who overpowered the prejudice and ignorance of their time and simply embraced each other’s humanity and kindness.

On my grandmother’s ninetieth birthday, Mitzi was not only there with her flowers, but she helped me plan a party, which was a great neighborhood success. Both my grandmother and Mrs. Ojiri loved to socialize, and both usually seemed to

know what the other neighbors were up to. It was fun to watch them share the latest news over slices of chocolate birthday cake!

Some months later, my grandmother's health began its decline. Mrs. Ojiri came more often, not only visiting my grandma but also encouraging me as I struggled to juggle my job, college, and my grandmother's care. I didn't get too much sleep in those days. But Mrs. Ojiri's words of encouragement lifted my spirits and strengthened me through a very rough time. I could not help but believe that some of Mitzi's capacity for empathy came from her own difficult years of captivity, during which time I know that people both willingly and freely helped each other.

My grandmother died as she neared her ninety-first birthday. She had lived a good life. Like Mitzi, she had helped many along the way. The Ojiri family came to her funeral. Mr. Ojiri by then was a very old man, well into his eighties. But he gently and very intentionally took me aside and told me about his own father's Buddhist funeral rites in Japan when Mr. Ojiri himself was a very young man. There was something deeply touching and kind in his story. It was his way of letting me know he shared my sadness. This is a big memory for me, one that I treasure. At that moment, we joined together, simply as human beings, stripping

away all manner of socially imposed and distorted barriers that artificially separate people from each other.

After my grandmother's death, I imagined that Mitzi's visits would become less, but she continued to stop by my empty house to support me and give me strength as I went through our family's belongings. My father had also died within the same year. I needed to move, but after I did, Mrs. Ojiri continued to write and tell me how things were going in the old neighborhood. She also still encouraged me with her kind words, and I would stop by her house from time to time to see how my old neighbors were doing. But over time the cards ultimately stopped. I learned later that she, too, had passed, but my memory of the Ojiri family endured.

A few years ago, as many of you know, I joined a civil rights group dedicated to the education and raising of public awareness about the forced removal and incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry during World War II. This group also stands with all people, regardless of ethnicity, whose Constitutional rights are threatened. I had thought of Mr. and Mrs. Ojiri many times over the ensuing years, often telling their story to my students after I had later become a teacher. But work with this group had again brought the Ojiri's memory to the forefront. There was something about it that felt like unfinished business.

Through a bit of searching and a lot of good luck, I came across an article that mentioned a “Tsugio” and “Mitzuko” Ojiri who had been imprisoned in Arkansas. Wondering if there were any connection or if this might be a related family, I tried to contact the author. It felt a little like throwing a message-in-a-bottle into the open ocean! But the article’s author, Cathlin Goulding, soon wrote back, and she was, amazingly, the granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ojiri! I also learned that *Tsugio* and *Mitzuko* were the true given names of my dear neighbors who I knew as “Bill” and “Mitzi.” I could not help but think that some eternal force of the universe had reunited our families. In my mind, finding any such connection after nearly forty years later seemed unlikely.

Mrs. Ojiri’s granddaughter, Cathlin, graciously met twice with me online from across the country through the miracle of *Zoom*. Although I’m sure that she heard the emotion shake my voice when I spoke about how her family had touched the lives of my own, like a good teacher, she asked me, “Why is writing this story important to you?” We both agreed that history shapes the present, often on an intensely personal level. You can’t throw stones into a pond and expect no waves to ripple out from the center. What happened to Cathlin’s family in World War II and what my family experienced during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression still endures within us, too.

As a teacher of many immigrant children myself over the years, I see commonality and recurring themes in all of this. I think of Mr. Ojiri at my grandmother's funeral, knocking down all of the false walls that could have separated his family from my own, breaking through artificially fabricated barriers that, indeed, are a lie: that somehow one group of human beings is so different from another. Cultures may vary in shape and shade but not in substance. Human beings are just *that*, human beings. And we all laugh, love, and grieve in a common way. When Mrs. Ojiri and my grandmother befriended one another over our backyard fence, both cut through these false borders that separate us, but still sadly plague our lives in this new century.

It is important for me to tell this story because, yet again, it is time to “call out” these lies and listen to the truth. Although I'm sure that the Ojiri family with its proclivity towards kindness helped others during their imprisonment, but even beyond their own devastating loss, how much did we cheat ourselves as a country and as a world by confining them? What ultimate price do we pay when we disregard our own Constitution? Out of fear, prejudice, and ignorance, we wrote our own tragedy that led to my good neighbors' imprisonment, and to the birth of my friend Cathlin's mother as a young child into a state-sanctioned prison. Moreover, how much do we now lose as a society with the racial inequality that

exists in our lives *today*? What could children of all ethnicities do for the world when given an equal opportunity at an education? What is the toll upon the truth if an unfairly weighted system of justice deals with people of color differently? It's time to break down these walls that wrongly separate us.

Cathlin described her grandmother as a "live wire." I smiled when I heard this characterization, fondly remembering Mitzi. I am very grateful to have known these people, and to tell a part of their story.

And Mr. and Mrs. Ojiri are still my grandmother's neighbors, buried not far from her in the same cemetery.