

## LONGING TO BELONG

I am a third-generation Japanese-Canadian. That is, my grandparents immigrated to Canada in the early 1900s; my parents were born in Canada, and I was born in Taber, Alberta, after the forced removal of Japanese-Canadians from the West Coast during the Second World War.

It is with a heavy heart that I write this title: not just because it reflects a cry of anguish from deep within myself, but because I have borrowed the phrase, 'longing to belong' from my elder daughter's high school English essay in which she wrote: "It seems impossible for Japanese-Canadians to fit in—to feel that they belong—no matter what they do or where they go." These words were written by a beautiful, talented young woman who has never been aware of any overt teasing or been the victim of direct racism, and who has never been at a loss for friendship or companionship. In reviewing *Obasan*, a novel about racism against Japanese-Canadians during and after the Second World War in Canada, she wrote:

*The internment caused most Japanese Canadians to question whether they really did belong in Canada.... Some even chose to repatriate to Japan, at the onset of war; however they were not welcome there either. Many of them had never been to Japan and did not even speak Japanese. The Japanese did not see them as kin, but as Canadians. For most, their sense of belonging was depleted, as they were not readily accepted anywhere....*

For some reason Remembrance Day is the occasion that brings forth 'us and them' kinds of feelings for me. One year at an elementary school Remembrance Day assembly, the prin-

cipal made the remark that Canadian armed forces had gone to war 'to protect our race.' I found it almost incomprehensible that an educator in the year 1994 would not be aware that he was making a racist remark; however, no one else seemed to notice the offensiveness of this phraseology, adding insult to injury. It seems to me that this was clear evidence of the premise that Canada is a White nation. At another Remembrance Day assembly the following year, there was a guest speaker who was a member of the Royal Canadian Legion. He said he had 'an amusing story' about speaking to another group of elementary school students about himself having been a signalman who intercepted and decoded messages during World War II while fighting against the Japanese in Australia. A young boy had asked him afterward, "Which side were you on?" While most of the audience did find the story amusing, it again highlighted for me the underlying assumption that Canadians are, by definition, White, and therefore the telling of my own story becomes all the more important.

Few people are probably aware the Nisei—Canadian-born Japanese—were blocked from enlisting in the Canadian armed services during the Second World War, although toward the end, the government changed its policy when it succumbed to the pressure of a civil liberties group. A group of 150 Nisei volunteers were hastily recruited and sent to India on loan to the British. However, it was too little too late and they "gained little publicity and not tokens of gratitude" according to Ken Adachi in *The Enemy that Never Was*. "Canadian Nisei were denied the opportunity for combat and hence had no impressive evidence of loyalty

which they could use to convince a confused and sceptical public." However, the fact remains that there is such an entity as a Japanese - Canadian World War II veteran, although I rather doubt that they are members of the Canadian Legion. During the war, this organization "expressed regret that total expulsion (of the Japanese) from Canada was not being ordered," says Adachi. It strikes me as extremely ironic that a country would not allow its citizens to voluntarily risk their lives to 'protect its way of life,' a phrase often repeated by the Legion speaker I heard. This, of course, calls into question the whole idea of war and its atrocities, as well as the 'way of life' being preserved (that is, does it include racism?).

The Remembrance Day ritual seems to need reflection in terms of peace education and spirituality. How can it be made more peaceful and spiritual? Perhaps we need to address the common humanity that we share. At the Remembrance Day assembly described above, three children recited in turn a heart-rending poem about an old woman selling poppies for Remembrance day. She explained that they helped us remember those blameless young men who paid the supreme price in war, among them her own son. Rather than thinking about the nameless faces and bodies of countless men, women and children caught in wars, in times and places I could hardly imagine, the poem brought to mind the possibility of losing my only son in such a horrible way: the handsome young man of 15 of whom I was so proud, already taller than his father. Tears welled up in my eyes. Surely a mother's grief is universal.

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