

Thanksgiving in America: Returning to Manzanar

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I love America's nonsecular holidays and celebrate them. In fact, during the American Holiday of Thanksgiving I returned home to spend time with my family. At Thanksgiving, we had Inari Sushi for an appetizer and then we had some of the most kicking Turkey and the best Sweet Potato Pie in town for dinner. In addition to eating over Thanksgiving, I met with family members, some that I hadn't seen for years. This Thanksgiving was a little different from past years because this year we spent a long time listening to my grandfather tell us stories about World War II. There is one story in particular that I would like to share with you.

Typically my grandfather remained very silent about World War II because during the war my grandparents, my uncle and my mother were interned in a Japanese Internment Camp. This year the war was frequently talked about however because three days before the holiday my mother and grandfather presented a lecture on the internment camps at the University of Illinois, Springfield. When I was younger I wasn't able to relate with my grandparents' experiences and I felt the discrimination they faced was removed from modern day dynamics of race in America. Yet as I relistened again this November I realized there were a lot of details that are relevant to the experiences of Americans today.

On December 7, 1941 at 7:55 A.M. America's local time, Pearl Harbor was bombed. Late that same night, the FBI came to my great grandfather's house in Los Angeles, CA and told him that he needed to come down to the police station. My great grandmother and grandfather didn't hear from him for several months after that and they didn't see him for another two years after that night. If you have studied the holocaust you can observe that the Nazis would round up members many older members and leaders of the Jewish population as a way to disrupt the community. Although my great grandfather wasn't an activist the American FBI took this same pattern and were rounding up all 1st generation Japanese many of whom were elders and the leaders of the Japanese American community. This left many 20 year olds to suddenly come to grips with understanding and making decisions politically about what was happening to the rest of the Japanese American community.

Executive Order 9066 signed by then President Theodore Roosevelt was issued on February 19th and soon after the organization for the detainment of all Japanese living in America began. Although my grandparents had both been born in the USA and were legally American citizens they, amongst all other American Japanese, were regarded as Japanese, and possible threats to national security. Therefore they were sent orders of their detainment.

There were 10 camps located throughout the US. Each of the 126,000 Japanese citizens registered as living in the US at this time were ordered to be detained. It is interesting to note that the Japanese Americans in Hawaii, however were not interned. Pearl Harbor is located in Hawaii. However, given the fact that the island's population consisted of a large population of Asian American residents, the island's infrastructure probably would have collapsed.

In Canada, Canadian Japanese and a small population of Alooq Indians were put into camps. In addition, nationals from the American Government developed a policy with Latin America whereby Latin American Japanese from particularly Lima, Peru and Panama were taken to an internment camp in Crystal, Texas.

Meanwhile in LA, during this time, my grandmother considered herself very lucky because she was given two weeks to prepare herself to get ready, to get rid of her property and sell her store before she was taken to Manzanar. My grandmother received two offers from buyers for the store that she owned. The first one she considered an insult. The second one, which she took, offered to give her the

price of the stock in the store. She again considered herself lucky and took that money to pay off all of her debts. Although she was being treated unjustly compensated herself, she continued to be just to others. "It was a remarkable and sterling example of her character," comments my mother. So my grandparents and their first born son, my uncle Hajime, packed what they could carry and then left for the train station.

At the train station, there were soldiers standing over them with rifles and people were dismayed and confused about where they were being sent. When they boarded the train the curtains were pulled down so that they couldn't see where the way that they were being taken from Los Angeles to Manzanar, an internment camp where they would reside in detention for three years with other Japanese Americans.

Manzanar was in the middle of the desert and a little North of San Francisco. When my grandparents departed from the train they were amongst strangers, the only known commonality was that they were of Japanese descent. Soldiers ordered all of the passengers to depart from the train and enter an area that was enclosed by barbed wire. My mother once asked my grandmother what she was thinking at that moment and my grandmother responded, "I trusted in American democracy."

Essentially while my grandparents were in the camps they were passing time. Although they once had a past, that was completely disrupted. My grandmother took classes in the camps and my grandfather was posted a duty to overlook the distribution of meat coming into the camps. But overall, they weren't sure of what kind of future to plan for.

Towards the end of the war, as the government started making plans to release the interned Japanese Americans, my grandfather was allowed to look for opportunities for work in Chicago, IL. After spending three tiring months relentlessly looking for a place to live and work he returned to Manzanar to help release the rest of my family. By that time my mother who had been born in the camps, was a few months old. Together, each member was issued a one-way train ticket and \$25.00 to start a new life outside of detention in Chicago, IL.

This story is not in criticism of American's democracy but is important to be told first of all, because it is not taught much in American history. The history of Japanese Americans is only a brief paragraph that is many times skipped in history classes, considerably more so in the Midwest where the population of Asian Americans is few.

There are instances worldwide however when history has been written only to show the side of the winners. My mother commented on this point, "History is written from the standpoint of those who win and education policy is written by those in charge." Even Japan today is in the process of rewriting its history with South Korea, China and Taiwan and there is much concern and tension about the issue.

But second of all it is important to note that this story exists and it is relevant for sharing today because as America and other countries move into full fledged war on terrorism there is an important need for us to be cautious on how we view other people. In our quest for security, we should not allow ourselves to brand a group of people and begin labeling personalities upon race or religion. For example we need to carefully examine the Homeland Civil Liberties Bill and other policies that are in the process of being enacted. If we begin to detain many people that are of Middle Eastern background, we need to be 100% certain that each person is responsible for a crime.

This is not a lesson for only Americans. It holds people worldwide accountable. And it is a call for each person to view each other individually, to understand and be educated about the people making policies, and to vote for people that are educated and respect the rights of every individual. If our only identifiers for other people is that they're of a certain ethnic racial background and then we start our investigations, we have a long way to freedom. In protection and utmost praise of democracy as Americans we have the responsibility and the right to educate ourselves about multiculturalism and then vote.