



The Half-Life of Memory

Derek Duncan

Area Executive for East Asia and the Pacific

God will thank you they told us

yea
as if God Himself
ordained
those powdered flakes
to drift
onto our skin hair eyes
to seep into our bones

We mistook radioactive fallout
For snow

– excerpt from “History Project” in *Iep J Itok: Poems
from a Marshallese Daughter*, by Kathy Jetn il-Kijiner

In her writing, the poet Kathy Jetn il-Kijiner reflects on what it means to be Marshallese. Woven into the texture of daily life she discovers deep memories that have shaped her people. Beside the ancestral narratives that inform Marshallese identity, these deep memories include the profound impact that U.S. nuclear testing has had not just on the bodies but on the psyche of the Marshallese community.

March 1 is Nuclear Remembrance Day in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. On that date in 1954, the United States exploded a nuclear bomb 1,000 times stronger than Little Boy—the bomb dropped on Hiroshima—on Bikini Atoll, a group of outer islands in what was then a U.S. Trust Territory. Between 1946 and 1958, the United States detonated a total of 67 nuclear bombs around the Bikini and Enewetak Atolls. While Bikinians were relocated to other islands, the radioactive fallout from the Castle Bravo explosion spread widely throughout the Marshall Islands.

Over the years since, Marshallese have suffered miscarriages, birth defects, and cancer due to radiation poisoning from the tests. Bikinians still cannot safely return to their homeland, despite being told their relocation was temporary and for “the good of mankind.” As part of the Compact of Free Association the U.S. signed with the Republic of the Marshall Islands after its independence in 1979, a Nuclear Claims Tribunal was established that awarded the islanders significant compensation for medical relief and clean-up. However, the United States has so far failed to apologize for the harm it caused.

Significant tragedies can create trauma that affects a whole community and can be passed down through generations. Extreme stress, grief, and despair can not only be transmitted through the narratives that hold a people’s collective memory, but the science of epigenetics says it can also influence the development of individuals born into that community. An assault to our psyche can “seep into our bones” as surely as radiation can damage the body.

The prophet Ezekiel challenged the traditional moral logic that the “sin of the parents” would be passed “to the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 20:5). “What do you mean by ... ‘The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children’s teeth are set on edge?’” he writes. “The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity” (Ezekiel 18:2, 20).

But if the guilt of personal sin is not passed generationally, can generational trauma be the consequence of sin? Was U.S. nuclear testing not a sin against God’s people and creation, which the Marshallese have suffered for 75 years? The traumatic effect of this sin will be perpetuated as long as the relationship of the Marshall Islands with the United States is primarily defined by the memory of this atrocity.

Many Marshallese believe an apology from the United States will help heal this communal trauma. Healing does not mean forgetting an injury or the pain it caused, but healing generational trauma requires reshaping the memories and rewriting the stories we tell about who we are and the relationships that define us. An apology for U.S. nuclear testing is essential to healing our nation’s relationship with the Marshallese.

The legacy of U.S. engagement in the Pacific reveals other communal traumas that persist in the memories and narratives of people we have colonized, militarized, and exploited commercially. Creating healthy relationships with these communities requires acknowledging and confessing past sins we have committed against them. Through our global partnerships our churches must seek ways our nation can speak and enact apologies that are culturally meaningful and do justice to Pacific communities we have harmed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Derek Duncan is the Area Executive for East Asia and the Pacific for Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ.

LEARN ucc.org/justice

DONATE ucc.org/donate

ARCHIVE
 bit.ly/witness4justice

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.