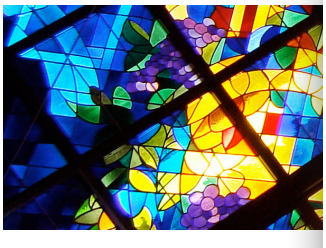
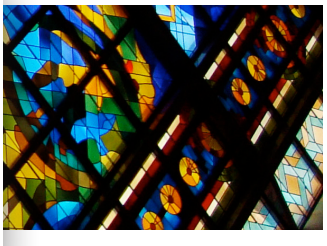


40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on Anti-Racism



Reflecting on My Family's Internment Experiences

DAY 25

Michiko Bown-Kai

Learning

Michiko Bown-Kai

One of the formative experiences that helped me understand my identity as a Japanese Canadian and the impacts of racism was learning about my family's experience of being interned in camps during World War II. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, all people of Japanese descent living on the west coast of British Columbia were relocated to either work camps, internment camps, or farms for the duration of the war.

My grandmother's family was relocated from Vancouver to Kaslo, BC, an abandoned mining town in the interior of the province. When I asked my *Bachan* (grandmother) about what it was like to live with an entire family in a small, hastily constructed shack, she responded: "It was okay. We had running water and bathrooms." Some Japanese Canadians were interned for a period of time in horse stalls at Hastings Park, and she knew that many families had suffered the horror of being separated from one another while living in cramped and unsanitary conditions.

I remember sitting in class reading the one-page section of the textbook that was dedicated to the internment of Japanese Canadians. This certainly did not help me understand the depths of the injustice my family experienced.

I consider myself fortunate to have had a *Bachan* who was willing to share parts of her experience. I'm aware that for many Japanese Canadians the shame and pain caused by the experience of being interned made speaking about their experiences very difficult. As I learn more about intergenerational trauma, I understand the ways in which traumatic events are not just moments in the past. Who I am, how my family has been impacted, reflects the ways in which my *Bachan* and *Jichan* (grandfather) carried their experiences with them after they left the camps. Acts of racist violence are not just singular moments; they change who we are and remain with us with a haunting presence. This haunting is something that I am still uncovering as I continue to learn more about Japanese internment from sources beyond my own family.

> While I was taught about the internment of Japanese Canadians in my Grade 10 history class, there are many people who don't know this history.

When all people of Japanese descent (including those born in Canada) were evacuated, they were told they could only bring what they could carry—often two suitcases per person. As Japanese people left for the camps, their homes were looted and claimed by others without any compensation. I grieve the fact that many were forced to leave behind items that had cultural and ancestral significance.

In my own family, my great grandmother had to leave behind

a *koto*, a stringed musical instrument. I wonder if it was carelessly thrown out as people took over their home. A few years ago I came across a White street performer playing a *koto*. When she told me that she started playing the instrument because she had found it in a pawn shop, I wondered about all the ways that displacement and loss led to her having that instrument. Was that what happened to my family's *koto*?

As I continue to do the work of uncovering a story that dominant Canadian culture would rather forget or erase, a story that can become lost in the silences created by shame and fear of further pain, I find hope in knowing that this work helps connect me to my ancestors. The wisdom I find is a gift that I can pass on to the generations to follow.

Faith Reflection

Michiko Bown-Kai

My father, David Kai, a retired minister in The United Church of Canada, composed the hymn "Our God Goes With Us" as a way of honouring the history the former Centennial-Japanese United Church (his home congregation) as well as its future hopes.

My father shares the following thoughts about the hymn: "The chorus is an affirmation that no matter where we go and whatever the future holds, we need not fear, for God goes with us. Just as God's presence, symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant, traveled with the people of Israel through their years of wandering in the wilderness, so God moves with us."

My father named the tune composed for the hymn "LEMON CREEK." It is his custom to name hymn tunes after camps and ghost towns where Japanese-Canadians were interned, so that these names and places are not forgotten.

OUR GOD GOES WITH US

Chorus:
Our God goes with us wherever we may roam,
Our God goes with us, makes each new place our home,
As God goes with us we live by faith, not fear,
Thanks be to God, ever 'fore us, ever near.

The Spirit moved, blew boats across the sea,
brooded in hearts that struggled to be free,
New life, new faith, new challenges to dare,
through blood, sweat, toil, bitter tears, our God was there. (Chorus)

The Spirit wept as hatred's flames were fanned,
as trains of tears streamed from the promised land,
In lonely mountain paths our God was found,
Faith, hope and love making ghost towns holy ground. (Chorus)

The Spirit urged, go forth and start anew,
rebuild my church, a sanctuary true,
Welcomed by friends, their paths entwined as one,
stronger united with ev'ry rising sun. (Chorus)

The Spirit leads; the future, still unknown,
is not to fear, we trust in God alone,
Be with us still as we move on again,
strengthen, inspire us, our Saviour and our Friend. (Chorus)

Words and music by David Kai ©2005. Tune: LEMON CREEK

You can hear the hymn in this video, which also includes pictures of our family and the Japanese Canadian United Church community.

Children's Activity

Michiko Bown-Kai

I am very grateful for the survivors of internment camps who have shared their stories. Growing up, I learned about the internment through a combination of my *Bachan*'s stories and children's books on the subject.

Some resources to guide and deepen this conversation with people of all ages are:

- *Naomi's Tree* by Joy Kagawa
- *On Being Yukiko* by Jeff Chiba Stearns
- *Take What You Can Carry* by Kevin C. Pyle
- *Displacement* by Kiku Hughes
- *Obasan* by Joy Kagawa

Another activity for the family to engage in together would be learning the Japanese art of paper folding, called origami. Take time together to learn the story of Sadako Sasaki, a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and how the paper crane became an international symbol for peace.

Group Commitment

Michiko Bown-Kai

Commit to learning more about Canada's World War II history and, in particular, the stories which challenge the narrative that Canada is a peace-making country. Many Canadian families are connected to World War II history through relatives who served in the armed forces. What does it mean to respect and honour the decisions and sacrifices made by our family members in the past while also being willing to critically investigate our country's failures?

As I do the work of learning about my family's experience with Japanese internment, it brings up more questions about the importance of all of us knowing more about our histories.

Knowing our family history can be an excellent way to better understand the ways that Whiteness is a social construct, and help create a sense of deeper connection when engaging in the work of anti-racism. For example, learning about the ways in which my grandfather from Newfoundland experienced conflict between Catholic and Protestants while growing up has made me realize the ways in which prejudices can travel across oceans.

How well do you know your family history? Have you traced your family history with attention to the ways that injustice and systems of oppression have impacted the story of who you are today?

I also want to recognize that especially for some people of colour, family histories have been lost through the violence of displacement, enslavement, and other acts of colonial violence.

Advocacy

Michiko Bown-Kai

In recent years, Japanese Americans who had similar experiences of internment during World War II were horrified to realize that the buildings once used to intern Japanese Americans were now being used as detention sites for immigrant children. As an expression of solidarity, Japanese Americans came together to form Tsuru For Solidarity. This project is dedicated to working to bring an end to these detention sites. They support immigrant and refugee families targeted by racist immigration policies.

As a Canadian, I am mindful of the fact that it was the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) who participated in the processes of evacuating and interning my family. When I observe the ways in which the RCMP is used today to violently target Indigenous peoples, especially land defenders, I understand deeply the lack of trust and anger at the ways in which the government does not necessarily serve the best interest of all and does not serve and protect all people.

If we are to learn from history we must be willing to dismantle the systems which were a part of my family's internment that are continuing to cause ongoing harm to this very day. How might you be a part of a racial justice solidarity movement, such as Tsuru for Solidarity?

Michiko Bown-Kai (they/them) is a mixed race fourth generation Japanese Canadian (yonsei) who is passionate about the intersections of faith, social justice, and the arts. They are currently serving in congregational ministry at Saint Luke's United Church in Cambridge, Ontario (territory of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Attiwonderionk peoples, Haldimand Tract Treaty).

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