The Marathon of Life:
Storytelling for healing and peacebuilding with second-generation survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings

by Keiko Tsuzuki

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Abstract

This paper introduces "the Marathon of Life", a narrative project developed in collaboration with four Hibaku Nisei – second-generation survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings in Japan. Although they did not directly witness the bombings, their lives have been shaped by intergenerational trauma, moral responsibility and enduring histories of silence. Born into the aftermath of the bombings, these individuals became peace activists. The project offers one contribution to ongoing conversations within narrative therapy and collective narrative practice about how our work may respond to historical trauma, activism and intergenerational memory. Through the collaborative development of the Legacy Marathon map, familiar narrative practices such as definitional ceremony and outsider witnessing were thoughtfully adapted in ways that reflected participants' lived realities. The project explores how narrative practice can remain accountable to social and political contexts while sustaining a non-pathologising ethic. Practices including *goinkyo* community dialogue and an informal ethics process are shared not as prescriptive models but as locally situated responses to questions of care, accountability and collaboration. The Marathon of Life work also invited critical reflection among Japanese narrative practitioners, supporting deeper understanding of the Hibaku Nisei's position in society. By centring lived experience and collective meaning-making, this paper suggests a possible pathway for narrative practitioners engaging in peacebuilding and social justice contexts.

Key words: metaphor; trauma; Japan; Hiroshima; nuclear disarmament; Hibaku Nisei; activism; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy

They run, not to escape the past,
but to carry it forward with purpose.

This paper offers a narrative therapy project co-created with Hibaku Nisei, second-generation survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. Though not direct victims, they carry the emotional, social and moral legacies of their parents who lived through one of the most traumatic and destructive events of the 20th century.

In postwar Japan, the fear of radiation-related illness led to deep-rooted stigma and discrimination that haunts the survivors' progeny. Combined with Japan's complex postwar identity, this has left many Hibaku Nisei caught between their own unresolved grief and a society shaped by political denial and a collective desire to escape a painful history. While some attention has been given to first-generation Hibakusha, the voices of Hibaku Nisei have remained largely unheard. The work described in this paper explored how these individuals have navigated intergenerational trauma, social exclusion and historical silence in a world still threatened by humanity's capacity for destruction – particularly the ongoing risk of nuclear warfare and its potential to annihilate all forms of life.

The project emerged in response to Hibaku Nisei seeking more effective ways to share their stories with a broader public. This aligned with my academic and ethical commitment to narrative practice and historical accountability.

I used collective narrative practice to co-create alternative ways of telling their stories: ways that honour pain, reclaim dignity and open up space for activism and healing. Core practices included testimonial storytelling, definitional ceremonies and the creation of the Legacy Marathon map, which helped Hibaku Nisei activists reflect on the past, present and future in culturally resonant ways. These practices supported identity reconstruction and collective activism.

The project engaged Japanese narrative practitioners as outsider witnesses. Additionally, a small informal group, "my own research ethics committee" (MOREC), was formed to ensure the work remained grounded in cultural respect, ethical reflection and accountability. This project became a narrative-based approach to history, identity and justice, rooted in lived experience, shared hope and activism.

Why Hibaku Nisei stories matter

Remembering Hiroshima and Nagasaki

On 6 and 9 August 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, marking the first and only use of nuclear weapons in war. In Hiroshima, an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 people were killed by the end of the day, many within seconds of the blast. In Nagasaki, approximately 40,000 were killed immediately, with total deaths reaching around 70,000 by the end of 1945. Combined, over 210,000 people died by the end of that year, with tens of thousands more dying from burns, cancers, radiation exposure, trauma and suicide in the years that followed.

Survivors – known as *Hibakusha* – faced long-term illness, psychological trauma and widespread social discrimination. Their children, the *Hibaku Nisei*, inherited not only the stories but also the health concerns, emotional wounds and social stigma. Although the physical blasts ended in 1945, the psychological and cultural reverberations continued through generations. Most Hibaku Nisei have remained silent; however, a few have become peace activists determined to prevent future nuclear catastrophes. In 2024, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nihon Hidankyo, the national organisation representing the first-generation atomic bomb survivors (ICAN, 2024; Lamche & Landale, 2024). This long overdue

recognition of survivors' testimonies refocused attention on their experience and on the ongoing threat of nuclear weapons. Yet, despite this honour, the world remains perilously close to repeating the same catastrophe.

Intergenerational trauma: The silent inheritance

While Hiroshima and Nagasaki set the historical context, it's equally vital to acknowledge the enduring psychological and social burdens carried by the Hibaku Nisei – burdens that stem not just from memory but from inherited trauma and social prejudice.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of psychological wounds from one generation to the next. In the context of narrative practice, it's essential to not only name this phenomenon but to understand how it is experienced by those who live it. When working with Hibaku Nisei activists, I often asked myself: What kinds of invisible forces shape their lives, beliefs and activism? Alongside considerations of intergenerational trauma, we can also enquire about the intergenerational transmission of survival knowledges.

A study by Japanese researcher Masahiro Tatara (1998) highlighted the silent suffering of Hibaku Nisei. Many live with ongoing fears about gene mutation and chromosomal abnormalities due to their parents' exposure to atomic radiation. This fear is compounded by social exclusion. The stigma surrounding radiation has led to marginalisation, discrimination and cultural invisibility for Hibaku Nisei. The trauma they carry is not only emotional or biological; it is shaped by historical silences and political neglect. Their experiences show how personal suffering can be part of larger stories of marginalisation and resistance.

Social marginalisation and political silencing

Since the end of World War II, Japan's geopolitical entanglement with the United States has influenced its military, diplomatic and domestic decisions. Against this backdrop, Hibaku Nisei activists have voiced opposition to both governments about the legacy of the bombings. Yet calls for recognition or compensation have been dismissed or deflected.

The Radiation Effects Research Foundation (2019) analysed the emotional landscape across generations. It found a consistent pattern: anger with nowhere to go. Hibaku Nisei reported feeling erased by national silence and international indifference.

My personal connection to this project

I am not a Hibakusha or Hibaku Nisei, but this project has a special place in my heart. I am a Japanese Australian narrative therapist who grew up in postwar Japan but lived most of my adult life in Australia. My family has a lineage of antiwar activism, but since I settled into a peaceful life in Australia, I almost put this behind me. My paternal great-grandfather was an antiwar activist. He condemned all wars and forbade any of his three sons from going to war. To make sure of this, he took advantage of the conscription system at the time, which was patriarchal and exempted the eldest son from military service: he secured eldest-son status for his younger sons through adoption to childless families.

My father continued that tradition as a young man, resisting military indoctrination and refusing to become a suicide bomber pilot at the end of World War II. Fortunately, the war ended, but if it had not, my father would have been punished under Japanese wartime military law, most likely with the death penalty.

I reconnected with this family tradition when I was studying narrative therapy. One day, my lecturer David Denborough mentioned that his parents were antinuclear activists who had grave concerns about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (see Denborough, 2019). The moment I heard this, I pictured the flattened and devastated landscape covered with death ash and radioactive fallout from the atomic bombs. This vision was powerful enough to reawaken

my connection to my family's tradition of antiwar activism. This led me to discover the Hibaku Nisei activists seeking recognition of their parents' suffering and their own inherited trauma. Their courage and clarity were the catalyst for the collaboration shared in this paper.

Together with four Hibaku Nisei activists, I co-created an alternative pathway to tell their stories. Drawing from collective narrative practice, the Legacy Marathon map uses the metaphor of a marathon to symbolise strength, endurance and purpose. This supported Hibaku Nisei activists reflect on the past, present and future in culturally resonant ways, honouring their families and envisioning hopeful futures.

For these stories to be received and understood, we invited seven Japanese narrative practitioners to participate as "outsider witnesses". They listened without judgement and responded with heartfelt reflections during formal storytelling events. This respectful practice opened space for shared meaning, empathy and deeper historical understanding.

Theoretical framework

This work drew from narrative therapy, trauma studies and the evolving discourse on moral injury to develop a culturally grounded, ethically responsive framework for working with Hibaku Nisei activists.

Narrative practice

Rooted in the work of White and Epston (1990) and extended through Denborough's collective narrative practice (2008), narrative therapy emphasises externalising problems, re-authoring identities and co-creating stories of resistance. The Legacy Marathon map, adapted from the Tree of Life method (Denborough, 2007; Ncube, 2006), uses metaphors of movement and endurance to reflect the lived activism and historical burdens carried by participants.

Intergenerational trauma and invisible inheritance

Hibaku Nisei experience trauma not directly, but through familial silence, social exclusion and embodied anxiety – an "invisible inheritance" (Danieli, 1998; Tatara, 1998). Rather than pathologising these effects, I sought to honour participants' own language and meaning-making, focusing on narrative and symbolic forms of expression.

Moral injury and ethical testimony

Originally applied to soldiers (Shay, 1994), the concept of moral injury has been expanded to include collective and historical dimensions (Denborough, 2021). In this paper, moral injury is understood not as pathology but as a relational and historical rupture. In postwar Japan, where official narratives often avoid addressing past wrongs, Hibaku Nisei face ethical paradoxes: carrying the trauma of victimhood while embedded in a national context that resists full moral accountability.

This work positioned narrative testimony as a form of moral repair, an act of ethical resistance that echoes Paulo Freire's call to "name the world":

> To name the world is an act of liberation. (Freire, 1970, p. 88)

When marginalised individuals speak their truths and define their own realities, they reclaim agency over their histories. Through the Marathon of Life, Hibaku Nisei activists engaged in this liberating act, transforming inherited silence into shared stories of dignity, resistance and hope.

Therapeutic storytelling as social intervention

Definitional ceremonies serve as public rituals to counteract invisibility and foster recognition (Myerhoff, 1986; Strauven, 2016). Within a collectivist culture like Japan's, such storytelling becomes both healing and political: a way to restore dignity, challenge historical silence and allocate responsibility in future outcomes.

Together, these frameworks position the Marathon of Life not only as a therapeutic method but as a narrative intervention into memory, justice and peacebuilding.

Connecting with Hibaku Nisei activists

I reached out to several organisations representing survivors of the A-bombings and was told that the first-generation survivors were all too old to participate in a storytelling project. However, four second-generation activists agreed to meet with me. Our initial meeting was an online video conference with them in Japan and me in Australia. I was concerned that meeting online might feel unfamiliar and uneasy. However, this concern was unfounded: fortunately, they were used to meeting online for their remote work because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At first, the Hibaku Nisei activists rejected any involvement with therapy or psychological treatment. When I initially introduced myself by referring to my university training and participation in a master's course in narrative therapy and community work, this raised concern. They positioned me within dominant individualising and pathologising mental health discourses often associated with mainstream Western clinical psychology. They did not see their suffering as a personal disorder but as the result of structural violence: nuclear warfare, state denial and global militarism. In their view, many therapeutic approaches shift responsibility on to individuals, overlooking the broader historical and political causes of their pain.

However, after I explained the unique ethics and spirit of narrative therapy – its emphasis on non-pathologising collective meaning-making and attention to social and historical context – they agreed to participate. They were also seeking more effective ways to engage others and strengthen their message of nuclear disarmament.

This project could not have moved forward without me first seeking to understand their lived experiences. Although born after the bombings, the Hibaku Nisei carry deep emotional and cultural wounds inherited from their parents. Most parents kept their identities as Hibakusha secret to protect their children from social discrimination. To explore how this trauma had been passed down, I invited the four activists to share their own stories, not only as participants but as co-creators of this project.

What follows is an introduction to the Hibaku Nisei who participated, followed by key aspects of the testimonies that shaped the project. The ongoing project initially included four Hibaku Nisei activists. To protect their confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms:

- Mrs Aya Saki, 57, daughter of a first-generation A-bomb survivor
- Mr Masa Saki, 60, Aya's husband and son of A-bomb survivors
- Mr Taka Fuji, 64, whose family history is deeply connected to the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki
- Mr Shin Saito, 74, who was undergoing treatment for stage 4 pancreatic cancer.

When Mr Saito first disclosed his health condition, I hesitated to invite him to the project. I worried it might place an undue burden on him. But he was determined to take part, right until the very end. Mr Saito bravely broke the long silence that many Hibakusha carried and passed on to their children. He shared how fear of discrimination from mainstream society had silenced survivors for decades. Despite his terminal illness, Mr Saito shared not only his story as a Hibaku Nisei but also his personal struggle with cancer, which he linked to the radiation-affected genes inherited from his parents. His decision to continue treatment was influenced by his wife. "I'm ready to go", he told her, explaining that many of his relatives and friends had already died from cancer and were waiting for him. But his wife gently pleaded, "Please keep going – I want even one more day with you". I was fortunate to meet Mr Saito in Nagasaki during my visit in February 2023. Heartbreakingly, he passed away the following month. I am deeply grateful for his participation.

Testimonies of lived trauma

To increase understanding of Hibaku Nisei lived experience, I would like to share how these four people experienced trauma as second-generation survivors. Through interviews and collaboration, I elicited stories that show how their trauma continued to be carried in relational and historical ways, not just psychologically but socially and somatically:

- **Indirect exposure to trauma:** Mr Fuji witnessed his parents suffering from PTSD, anxiety and depression following the bombings. Their unspoken anguish shaped his own experience of constant anxiety and hypervigilance.
- **Physical health anxiety:** Mr Saki's father endured chronic illnesses linked to radiation exposure. As a child, Mr Saki internalised the fear he saw on his parents' faces during each of his own health episodes. Over time, this evolved into an existential dread – a belief that he must be terminally ill, even without diagnosis.
- **Socioeconomic strain:** Many survivors face systemic employment discrimination. Their families, including the Hibaku Nisei, often live through restricted economic opportunity, creating layers of intergenerational poverty tied to stigma and exclusion.

These stories don't sit neatly in diagnostic categories or within clinical frameworks. They carry pain shaped by history, amplified by silence and transmitted in the most intimate spaces: families, memories and identities.

Engaging with Japanese narrative practitioners

A striking quality of the Hibaku Nisei activists was their readiness to move from reflection to action. After the initial interview, Mr Saito said, "We need to tell our stories". They wanted their voices heard, especially as their experience had been excluded from public memory. As someone who grew up in Japan, I saw only a short mention of their experience in my school textbooks.

In response to their request for a wider audience to their testimony, I carefully selected seven Japanese narrative practitioners, diverse in age and gender, to witness their stories. Why be so selective? Because Hibaku Nisei activists often speak in strong, direct ways that protect their deeper feelings. Collective narrative practice can open new paths, but it also risks changing how stories are shared. That's why I focused on choosing people who understood that behind bold voices there's still ongoing intergenerational trauma.

This wasn't just about storytelling; it was about making sure those who listened were truly ready to honour and respect what they heard.

My own research ethics committee

The Hibaku Nisei's straightforward testimonies overwhelmed me. I came to understand my ethical responsibility to care for and collaborate with these participants and vowed to myself that I would take this responsibility seriously and ethically. To support this, I organised what I called "My own research ethics committee" (MOREC) to consult before conducting each session with participants. This informal committee consisted of six people from outside the Hibaku Nisei group and the practitioner group. While we never met all together, I met informally with whoever was available at any given time. We all shared a commitment to social justice and human dignity.

In creating MOREC, I found the principles expressed by America Bracho in "An institute of community participation" (2000) to be deeply applicable. Bracho wrote, "When we articulate and work with these common desires and hopes, we can create space for cooperation across great differences" (p. 7). This insight resonated with the collaborative and reflective spirit I sought to cultivate with MOREC.

These were the members of MOREC[1]:

- Miya, late 40s, a nurse and counsellor with deep insight into trauma-informed care
- Sari, 38, a former perpetrator of domestic violence who courageously transformed her life and now advocates for change and accountability
- Aki, 40, had lived with a rare and intractable disease for over 25 years[2]
- Moto, 50s, a cisgender gay man and a complaint-handling specialist in a luxury hotel chain[3]
- Tom, 70s, a veteran social justice documentary filmmaker with a lifetime of experience in community advocacy
- Mie, 70s, was living in Australia and keeping her identity as a Hibaku Nisei hidden because of fear and stigma.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have received the thoughtful input, critical perspectives and heartfelt encouragement of these individuals. Their support helped shape this project into one that is not only ethically grounded but also socially meaningful and deeply human.

Testimony as transformation

Hibaku Nisei activists have long spoken in testimonial style – a language honed in courtrooms and public forums over years of resistance. In this project, their narratives were reshaped through Denborough's (2005) framework for receiving and documenting double-storied testimony. This method allowed for both acknowledgment of pain and amplification of resistance, bridging strategic storytelling and healing narratives.

As they shared stories of inherited trauma, institutional neglect and geopolitical erasure, the Hibaku Nisei participants also shared acts of resistance, hopes and dreams. They described being Hibaku Nisei as "both a curse and a calling", an identity forged in the fire of injustice and sustained through activism.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the stories shared in these sessions, capturing both problem-saturated stories and responses.

Table 1. Hibaku Nisei testimony

Participant	Problems and their effects	Unique outcomes, acts of resistance, hopes
Mr Fuji	Japanese government and society have neglected Hibaku Nisei's health concerns and perpetuated discrimination. Disappointment, anger and emotional exhaustion.	Determination to win a court case against the Japanese government for medical assistance. Meeting with a Mexican organisation that encouraged him to speak up at a United Nations conference.
Mrs Saki	The decades-long work of the Hibaku Nisei towards the abolition of nuclear weapons seems to have been forgotten. Feeling disappointed and disillusioned.	Revitalised purpose after meeting people who had been exposed to radiation at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. "This gave me strength to keep working towards the abolition of nuclear power and nuclear weapons."
Mr Saki	Sporadic media coverage of the Hibaku Nisei doesn't translate into sustained public attention and support. Feeling frustrated.	Cherishing irreplaceable ties with friends and comrades in the close-knit Hibaku Nisei community. Dreaming of expanding this circle of friendship all over Japan.

Participant	Problems and their effects	Unique outcomes, acts of resistance, hopes
Mr Saito	Japan's invasion of Asian countries during World War II is unforgivable. This makes it hard for a Japanese person to raise their voice for peace. Feeling caught between.	A wild dream of founding an Earth Federation for World Peace, in which all countries would be equal and treated fairly.

In these moments, activism and healing were no longer opposites but entwined possibilities. When asked how they wished to move forward, the Hibaku Nisei participants emphasised their longstanding desire to reach those outside the Hibaku community. I agreed to co-create an emergent narrative practice – one that might carry their stories into a living, forward-moving framework of transformation.

The Legacy Marathon map

We initially considered using the Tree of Life method (Ncube, 2006), a popular narrative approach. However, Mr Saito, remarked, "We are not standing still. We are running". This powerful metaphor gave rise to the Legacy Marathon metaphor and map: a method grounded in movement, direction and endurance. The marathon metaphor reflected the ongoing, often nonlinear, nature of personal growth, activism and legacy-building.

We found this method to be a deceptively simple yet generative practice. It draws from narrative therapy principles: supporting people to separate themselves from problem-saturated narratives and rediscover the values and hopes that have carried them forward, often quietly, across time and borders. It supported participants in re-authoring their lives by imagining new versions of their stories.

The marathon metaphor enabled people to share their life stories in ways that reveal not only what they have struggled with, but also what they care about, believe in and hope for. It is significant for Hibaku Nisei, the children of atomic bomb survivors, who have inherited emotional trauma yet continue to fight for justice and peace. In Japanese culture, *gaman* – the ability to endure tough times with patience and strength – is a deeply respected trait. That's why we used the image of a marathon: it is not just about surviving but about moving forward with purpose. The participants aren't just victims of history; they are runners carrying forward their family legacies.

Table 2 shows how the Legacy Marathon map guides inquiry across four "scenes" using questions based on narrative practices.

Table 2. The Legacy Marathon map

Scene	Example question	Narrative practice basis
Scene 1 PRESENT TIME: Here and now	What would you name your journey?	Re-authoring identity
	What keeps you going now?	Identifying unique outcomes
	What is your path like at this point?	Thickening narrative
	Who is around you and what are they saying?	Re-membering conversations
	Where are you standing now? What's this place like?	Metaphor and landscape of identity
Scene 2 PAST: Legacy and origins	When did this path begin for you?	Tracing origins of preferred story
	What turning points shaped you?	Unique outcomes
	What legacy or values have been passed down to you?	Re-membering / cultural inheritance
	Who has supported you in hard times?	Mapping relationships of support
	Where were you and what spaces mattered?	Contextualising story in place
Scene 3 FUTURE: Vision and destination	What goals are you moving towards?	Preferred identity project
	What kind of person do you want to become?	Future-oriented re-authoring
	What will it look and feel like to arrive at your destination?	Imaginative metaphor
	Who will witness your arrival?	Anticipatory re-membering
Scene 4 NEAR FUTURE: Next steps	What are your next steps?	Action planning from preferred story
	What strengths will you carry forward?	Building on unique skills and abilities
	What will you need on this part of the path?	Resource-based narrative mapping
	What is the climate of the space you are entering?	Anticipating emotional and social contexts

Initially, we tried using paper and coloured pens to record the participants' marathon journeys. However, the first storyteller described her journey as beginning in prehistoric times, and extending to travels to Chernobyl, Bikini Atoll and the Australian desert, where nuclear tests and accidents have occurred. Attempting to capture this vast story as it was told was difficult and resulted in many sheets of paper pasted together. When the participant said that the goal of lasting peace on Earth was too far away even to see, we gave up on recording their marathon journey on paper. We settled on gently closing our eyes and using our imaginations to visualise the stories.

Mrs Saki's marathon journey

Mrs Saki is a Hibaku Nisei activist who occasionally uses a wheelchair. Her story shows how deeply the Legacy Marathon metaphor connected personal pain with shared hope. This method is very flexible. As you can see in the following table, Mrs Saki wanted to go back to prehistoric time, so we included that in her story.

Table 3. Mrs Saki's testimony: A life in which I never gave up on my dreams

Present	I am in my wheelchair and parking at the Hiroshima Memorial Dome. I see my husband and close friends surrounding me. I know we all go on this marathon. They are rooting for me. Usually, each runner runs alone, but thankful for my disabled condition, I can run with them. I have an essential mission of passing on the stories of my father, a first-generation survivor, to future generations.
Past	Looking back, I see a rough road. I often wonder how I will keep going. I can see my parents waving their hands for me. I can see my mentors who encouraged me when I started my activism. Some Korean Hibaku Nisei comrades there, too. I feel they are all cheering for us. In the past, I felt bitter about not having children due to radiation health concerns. Surprisingly, today I have become a mother figure for younger activists.
Future goal	My goal is to advocate for Hibaku Nisei's medical aid and, ultimately, to work towards world peace by abolishing nuclear weapons. What a beautiful place the goal is. We can feel free and safe. However, I know it is impossible to reach during my lifetime. I feel people need some reminder not to forget the war. If peace continues, people may forget how destructive war is. Even though there are no weapons in this imagined future, there could still be conflict.
Historical past	I want to go back to the time when humans first started conflict. Deep in my heart, I know it is not weapons that make war but humans. Even farming tools or stones can kill people if someone uses them for that purpose. We should face humanity's tendency to engage in conflict. I need to carry on the legacy of antiwar movements. Now, I accept the historical significance of my activism.
Near future	I am doing some volunteer work for protecting the ocean environment. I feel calm there. I will listen to people and have more discussions with them, unlike before when I was shouting. I will continue the storytelling work in the community centre. I will have an internet platform to connect with like-minded people worldwide with Keiko and fellow narrative friends. We will have fun.

Mrs Saki reported that the Legacy Marathon map helped her recognise not only her role as a messenger for first-generation survivors, but also her unique identity as a voice of the second generation. She is now expanding her life's work to include environmental activism and supporting the non-Hibaku community, particularly through opposing the construction of a nuclear power plant along a coastal area in alignment with her commitment to nuclear disarmament and ecological protection.

Definitional ceremony

Having recorded testimony from each of the Hibaku Nisei participants using the Legacy Marathon map, we held a definitional ceremony. Drawing inspiration from Barbara Myerhoff's (1986) observations of marginalised Jewish elders in California and Sarah Strauven's (2016) work with Afghan refugees in Belgium, the ceremony was designed to offer visibility, recognition and space for shared reflection. These precedents showed how collective storytelling and "rituals of hospitality" can counter invisibility and foster social change.

Here, I would like to share Mr Saki's story. During the ceremony, Mr Saki was initially tense and spoke in an adversarial manner. However, the witnesses' reassuring reflections brought visible relief to him. He opened up and shared his father's story of being labelled "lazy" due to the effects of his painful radiation-related illness. With Mr Saki's encouragement, his father had testified about the impacts of radiation disability on his life, becoming a first-generation survivor-activist. With his cheeks flushed and tears flowing, Mr Saki described his father as a hero.

This was the first time Mr Saki had told the story of his father's courage to a wider audience, and it marked a departure from the single-story of victimhood he had carried about the survivors. The outsider witnesses were deeply moved. After the ceremony, Mr Saki's previously angry voice shifted towards a more grounded and reflective tone, and those present experienced this moment as opening possibilities for intergenerational healing.

Confronting collective and historical moral injury

Originally studied in soldiers (Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 1994), moral injury is now understood as a collective phenomenon. Societies suffer when they avoid confronting historic injustices (Bleiker, 2014; Sznaider & Levy, 2002).

The Hibaku Nisei's ultimate goals – national reconciliation and world peace – require mutual recognition between victims and perpetrators. Japan holds both positions, and this has led to fragmented collective memory and unresolved cultural shame. In Nagasaki, the Hibaku Nisei have taken courageous steps to address the silence about Japan's wartime aggression by establishing Japan's War Crimes Memorial Museum – a powerful attempt to preserve and transmit painful truths. Yet their efforts have often been met with resistance, reflecting deep discomfort with confronting guilt and bearing collective responsibility.

Many in the group of Japanese narrative practitioners had grown up with limited awareness of Japan's wartime aggression in Asia; education and media in Japan have often emphasised Japan's status as a victim. During the definitional ceremony, the practitioners experienced a profound shift. Through group reflection, they began confronting the historical silences.

The practices we had used – collaboration, receiving testimony, the Legacy Marathon practice, definitional ceremony – laid a foundation for reflection and healing. This made it possible to introduce discussion about the profound themes of historical moral injury. In particular, our prior work supported the narrative practitioner group to confront difficult truths about Japan's past and collectively imagine a path to peace. This was supported by a culturally resonant practice we called goinkyo community sessions.

Goinkyo community sessions

In Japanese tradition, a *goinkyo* is an elderly person who no longer holds formal responsibilities but remains highly respected and actively involved in social activities. The style of conversation one might have with a *goinkyo* is informal and relationship based. Rather than following a strict format, it would foster a warm and trusting atmosphere and encourage thoughtful reflection. This closely resembles the narrative therapy principle of a "decentred yet influential" facilitator (White, 2007).

During one such session, Mr Ito[4], a member of the narrative practitioner group, assumed the role of goinkyo facilitator. He opened the discussion by establishing ground rules, creating a safe environment for participants to engage with difficult material. The session centred on a complex and challenging topic the group had decided to discuss to develop their understanding of the cruelty of war: Hannah Arendt's influential work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil* (1963).

The banality of evil

Arendt's book examines the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a key bureaucrat in the Holocaust. Contrary to widespread expectation, Arendt depicted Eichmann not as a monstrous figure but as an ordinary man performing his duties without critical thought or personal malice. Arendt introduced the concept of the banality of evil, suggesting that significant harm can be committed by individuals who conform to systems without questioning their moral implications.

Mr Ito guided the group in reflecting on this concept, helping participants relate Arendt's ideas to their own cultural context. This approach allowed the group to explore themes of ethical responsibility, complicity and silence without feeling accused or defensive. Although many of the Japanese narrative practitioners were initially reluctant to discuss Japan's wartime actions, the decision to examine Germany's example through Arendt's lens provided a safer indirect means of beginning to reflect on their own historical context.

Participants responded with meaningful insights. One practitioner commented on her grandfather's service in the imperial army, not to blame him but to understand how silence can preserve harm across generations. Another found the strength to begin speaking with her children about Japan's war history, transforming inherited patriotism into a commitment to ethical responsibility and inquiry.

These reflections marked a turning point. The narrative practitioners began to realise that their work was not only about supporting individual healing but also about shaping how society remembers and talks about the past.

Catalysing transformation through outsider witnessing

Another significant moment was catalysed by a video message sent from Aboriginal rights advocate and Elder Robert Eggington to the Hibaku Nisei activists. This message, offered from the perspective of another historically marginalised group that had been harmed by the nuclear cycle, helped participants see their struggle through a broader lens of justice and reconciliation. In response to Robert's message to "never give up", the Hibaku Nisei participants sent a video back to Robert and his community. The narrative practitioners watched both videos and shared outsider-witness responses. This encouraged the narrative group to voice thoughts they had previously kept silent, initiating a healing process both personal and collective.

Miki: "Human rights" and "justice" – these two terms left an impression on me. These have become disparaged terms in Japanese society. Perhaps it's because the term "human rights" is already shady.
In a sense, using the term "human rights" and words like "justice" are hated in Japan. I was struck by these words because they seemed authentic when Robert and Mr and Mrs Saki used them. Somehow these words were different [from how I've heard them used in Japan]. It would be interesting if we could think a little bit about this.

Taka: In Japanese society, there aren't a lot of positive feelings towards words like "justice" and "human rights".
When I hear "I'm an ally of justice" or "social justice", I feel like a shady smell accompanies them.
It's like we've been betrayed in so many ways.

It's like there's something not-so-beautiful going on behind the scenes.
Some people use words like that because they have dirt on their hands.
But on the other hand, it is very important to reinstate these words.
[People's feelings about terms like] "human rights" is troublesome for human rights issues and human rights groups.
If you get involved in that work, you'll get troublesome high-handed remarks. In the end, you feel "I wish I hadn't gotten involved".

Abe: You expressed the sentiment that the human rights group cannot be trusted. Human rights groups probably don't trust outsiders, either.
But if you ask me, is it their fault? NO.
Instead, creating such a system itself is something peculiar to Japanese society.

Yama: When I was young, I attended a rally for a human rights organisation that was so radical that I thought it wasn't my place. However, when I think about it now, I think there was a reality that if you weren't overbearing, you would be crushed, and if you don't raise your voice, you won't be noticed.

Abe: The term "human rights" is mouldy and suspicious, so no one uses it.
So when we are in a situation where we really need human rights, no human being can access human rights.
Very scary. Japan is very scary.
I'm really careful about things like that.

Miki: If the words "human rights" and "justice" disappear from the Japanese language, we'll be at a loss for words when it really matters.
Without the words, the concept disappears – we have no vocabulary for thinking.
This is going to be a scary place.
What started out of my curiosity is that we're headed to an unbelievable place.

Abe: That's why collaboration is needed.
I saw the web pages of social welfare organisations in New Zealand and Australia. They clearly named "social justice". Human rights are respected there.
Thus, they can receive social justice.
We need to collaborate with someone like Hibaku Nisei and Robert.

Kei: It is a huge topic, but we can investigate how much we accept dominant discourses and make them visible step by step.
Our efforts will be a signpost for future generations.

Through this dialogue, the practitioners began to interrogate the meanings of "human rights" and "justice", how these have been distorted in Japan, and how intercultural collaboration might help restore these essential values to future generations.

Conclusion: A practice of connection and change

The Hibaku Nisei participants and the Japanese narrative practitioners described their involvement with this project as life-changing:

> "This is the first time I feel truly seen by the next generation." — Mr Saito

The activists felt validated. The narrative practitioners began to see themselves not just as helpers, but as co-authors of moral transformation. Silence turned into speech. Memory became action.

The Marathon of Life project has illuminated ways that storytelling may extend beyond personal healing into a relational practice of peacebuilding, where collective witnessing invites intergenerational accountability and contributes to locally situated social transformation towards justice. For the Hibaku Nisei activists who took part, it suggested a way to honour inherited legacies while inviting wider audiences to engage in ethical reflection on justice, peace and historical responsibility.

The practices we used combine emotional healing with public responsibility. This didn't offer simple answers but created safe spaces for difficult questions. As war memories fade, we need more honest, respectful conversations across generations and cultures.

In times of silence, stories can speak. In times of uncertainty, stories can guide. The Marathon of Life is not just about running. It's about remembering, reconnecting and rebuilding.

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Notes

[1] To protect MOREC participants' confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms.

[2] Aki's ongoing on and off physical pain, manageable only with morphine, was accompanied by psychological distress due to the absence of any real hope for recovery. Despite this, Aki is one of the most resilient, courageous and positive people I have ever met.

[3] Although Moto's parents rejected his gay identity, leading him to conceal it in professional settings, Moto quietly lives with his male partner in Japan, where same-sex marriage remains illegal.

[4] All names of Japanese narrative practitioners are pseudonyms.

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