Why Christians should talk together about Obama's visit to Hiroshima

By L. Roger Owens
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"Seventy-one years ago, on a bright cloudless morning, death fell from the sky and the world was changed."

I hear these words on a bright, cloudless morning on my way to work. They begin the speech that President Obama gave several hours earlier at Hiroshima.

As I listen to NPR's report of the speech, members of two generations come to my mind. The reporter mentions middle school children in downtown Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and I think of my own middle school child summoned by a bell each day to his studies at the same hour the bomb was dropped.

But I also think of my dad, a bombardier instructor in World War II. He loved to regale us with stories of how while flying over the desert, heat waves rising from the sand would nearly knock the plane out of the sky; how combat bombers were instructed to destroy the plane's top-secret Norden bombsight if they were going down; how he was smitten with a California girl whose piano playing could take anyone's mind off war.

I think of Dad, and I wonder: Would we have been able to talk about Obama's moving speech?

Because one thing we could never talk well about was the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And our inability to talk about these things was a microcosm of the wider church's increasing failure to talk with one another about deeply held convictions over which we disagree, to come out of our partisan trenches and seek understanding.

When I was 20 with my new pacifist convictions, I argued with Dad to convince him that any Christian should regard the slaughter of civilians as simply wrong.

But with face reddened in anger—a sign this conversation wouldn't last much longer—Dad forcefully reiterated the justification Truman himself gave for dropping the bombs: We saved thousands upon thousands of young, American lives. Dad's might have been saved as well—he'd been two weeks away from deployment.

Yes, *soldiers'* lives, I'd say. We killed *civilians* to save *soldiers'* lives.

Twenty years later, when my need to convince has almost disappeared and my longing to understand has grown, I wonder: if Dad were alive, would I finally be able to sit with him and begin to see the horror of a young man about to be sent to kill and die? And would he be able to see my heart that breaks for those middle school children who never got to grow up, and for my own who are learning to be Christians in a war-drenched world?

I don't know. But I do believe Obama's speech at Hiroshima has given the church an opportunity to have the conversation my dad and I aren't able to have—not in order to debate and persuade, but to listen, speak, and understand.

Pastors might invite congregation members to watch Obama's speech together. Then, reminded that this isn't a time to prove a point or win a debate, people might share with one another the hopes, fears, and convictions that shape their reactions to the first visit of a U.S. president to Hiroshima.

Christians might do together what Obama said the souls of those who died that day are asking us to do, "to look inward, to take stock of who we are and what we might become."

Christians might wrestle honestly with Obama's question, "How often does material advancement and social innovation blind us to the truth? How easily we learn to justify violence in the name of some higher cause."

Christians might ask where we see ourselves in the president's claim that every "religion promises a pathway to love and peace and righteousness, and yet no religion has been spared from believers who have claimed their faith as a license to kill."

Christians might together "look directly into the eye of history and ask what we must do differently to curb such suffering again."

Conversation like this is not easy. Some people will feel attacked or misunderstood. But I also suspect if we take this opportunity and commit to staying in conversation, if we commit in these conversations to seek to understand rather than to win a point, then one result might be a shared heartbrokenness about the destruction of war, a growing acknowledgment of our complicity, and a firmer commitment to seeing it end.

If we'd had the chance, I imagine my dad and I would have been blessed to discover this shared sadness and commitment after such a conversation.