

A Song for Nagasaki by Paul Glynn, Marist Fathers books, Hunters hill, NSW, 1988, 168pp.

I will forever be grateful for the friend who sent me this book. It is one of the most influential books in my life, and I made more marks and underlining in it than in any other book I have ever read. Here I met one of the world's great Peacemakers: Doctor Takashi Nagai ("The well that lasts").

Nagai belonged to a Japanese medical family committed to the Shinto faith. However by the time he graduated from high school he was a convinced atheist. An avid reader, he studied at Nagasaki medical University, graduating in 1932. The scientific rationalism at university strengthened his unbelief. He was most annoyed by a sense of the crassness of 'foreign gods' being worshipped in the Cathedral at Urakami, a suburb of Nagasaki.

Nagai's passion was science; he believed it held the key to every door that barred human progress. He also loved Japanese poems from the seventh and eighth century CE. This helped keep him sensitive to the Japanese ideographs (symbols used in writing systems to represent concepts), which he read each day, and which kept him aware of the importance of feelings and intuition.

At high school Nagai had read in Pascal's *Pensees* and pondered much his thought: "man is a thinking reed". At university he came across Pascal as the inventor of the syringe and the barometer. So he continued to study the *Pensees*, aware that it was written by that rare combination of scientist and mystic.

Pascal challenged two false attitudes to reason, which hinder the discovery of truth: one - overconfidence in the rational, which can lead to scepticism; two - resignation to stupidity (naivety). Nagai realised that higher truths are *of wisdom* and are received rather than grasped, seen "by the eyes of the heart". He loved Pascal's famous quote "the heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of". But the greatest challenge to Nagai was, in Pascal's words, "Faith is a gift of God... You must pray for it."

For the years of his medical studies Nagai questioned the meaning of life? This led him to seek lodgings in 1931, his fourth year, with a catholic family, as an opportunity to observe their way of life and prayer. Thus he came to live in Urakami with the pious Moriyama family whose Christian roots traced back through decades of persecution to the time of the arrival of St Francis Xavier in 1549.

Takashi Nagai was born in 1908. The same year as Nagai's birth a daughter was born to the Moriyama family; they called her Midori, meaning 'verdure' (healthy, green). Lodging in their home, 23 years later, Nagai found dimensions of their faith that drew him. At one time he decided to explore the local Cathedral and, to his amazement, found that poor farmers and fisher folk built it over 22 years, using only their local energy and finance. The family's simple faith and regular practice of piety touched him as he observed echoes of Millet, his favourite painter of Breton peasant life.

In 1932 the newly graduated Dr Nagai was apprenticed to the recently appointed radiologist in the basement of the Nagasaki hospital. With brand-new machinery, and despite the risks of a field of study in its infancy, Nagai set about mastering the art of X-ray. He later became a specialist in the theories of atomic structure and nuclear fission.

That year Nagai accompanied his hosts to his first Christmas Eve midnight mass. The rich ceremony in the crowded auditorium contrasted with his fear of emotionalism.

The following evening he carried the fevered Midori on his back through the snow to the hospital where her appendix was removed by emergency surgery. Afterwards the operating surgeon embarrassed Nagai when he commented about Nagai's romantic feelings for this young woman. But within four weeks Nagai was conscripted to the army to serve in Manchuria, where he tended the wounds in the soldiers from the battlefield. Midori sent him a catechism and he began a more serious search to understand Christianity, while Pascal's words "go down on your knees" spoke to him.

Nagai returned from the front disillusioned and near despair, drained of optimism and exuberance, and feeling morally depraved. He visited the Cathedral and spoke to the priest who explained the history of suffering of Japanese Christians from Nagasaki. The priest said "you admire Pascal and I think he has made a priceless contribution in his insistence on prayer if you want to meet God." He added that Christianity is all about God's revelation of mystery; it is not something that is grasped intellectually, like radiology, but is experienced prayerfully.

Nagai took up his old job in the x-ray department but used his spare time on the Bible, the study of the catechism and in conversation with the priest. He took lessons in liturgy and prayer from a spiritual adviser who knew little about philosophy, but was a fountain of wisdom and goodness. He happened to also work at the University Hospital – as a janitor!

Facing opposition to his growing faith by his revered father, Nagai came across a sentence in the Pensees: "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition." So in 1934 he participated in a pre-dawn baptism, choosing Paul as his Christian name in honour of St Paul Miki, the Jesuit martyr, who was among the 26 Christians crucified in Nagasaki in 1597.

Nagai's godparent was Midori's cousin and, when he learnt of their feelings for each other, he became their marriage 'go-between.' Nagai's only condition was that his future wife understood that his work in x-ray meant he lived with the risk of dying young. Her response was "it will be my privilege to share in this journey wherever it leads and whatever happens on the way." They married in 1934 and Midori set about establishing a relationship of 'wa' with the Nagai family. 'Wa' is a vital word in Japanese rather like the biblical *Shalom*. It is composed of two ideographs for 'grain' (rice) and 'mouth', that is: if you are not hungry you do not fight.

In 1934 their son was born – they named him Makoto (Honesty). Nagai began to lecture in the new radiology department, and was appointed as chief of medical staff in the University Hospital. Through joining the Society of St Vincent de Paul he became involved in visits to care for the health of rural people. He came to believe that "assistance is authentic, when it helps restore a person's dignity." In 1935 he had a health crisis, which left him with asthma. For the first time Nagai tasted his own mortality and began spending more time reading the Bible or being alone in the Cathedral.

Their daughter Ikuko was born in 1937. In July they learned that full scale hostilities had broken out between the Chinese and the Japanese near Peking. Nagai was re-mobilised as chief surgeon in the Medical Corps Division. He spent 30 months in China at the front seeing the barbarism of the Japanese Militarists. He began writing about his concern in letters and in jottings of his journal. The Chinese mothers reminded him of Midori, and their children looked like his own children. He pondered the concept of "just war" – one supposedly waged to preserve Justice and Peace.

Nagai set up a medical group who undertook to do all they could for wounded civilians and children. His St Vincent de Paul friends at Urakami Cathedral spread the word and soon food, clothing and children's toys started arriving. He distributed the parcels through the Chinese Vincentians. He was finding it harder and harder to see Justice and Peace. He felt the same compassion for a wounded Chinese as for a wounded Japanese and wrote, "I now know I have come to China not to defeat anybody, not to win the war. I have come to help the wounded, Chinese as much as Japanese, civilians as much as combatants."

After sadly closing the eyes of one soldier he had come to admire, Nagai commented on the self-centred nationalism and empty propaganda of generals and politicians that killed this youth, who had so much to offer to the world. Nagai began praying a kind of Christian mantra. He would choose a short phrase from the Psalms or from the pocket New Testament he always carried and repeat it over and over. On occasions, as he worked around the clock when treating badly wounded soldiers, his body and mind became almost numb, but he kept his spirit at peace by continuously murmuring: *the Lord graciously restores the dead to life.*

The nenbutsu (thought + Buddha) is the prayer most common in Japanese Buddhism. The ideographs for nenbutsu contains the ideographs for 'heart' and 'now'. To pray the nenbutsu is to escape preoccupation with the past or the future. It is to escape the noisy, busy head and to find the eternal, peaceful now, in one's heart. For Nagai this meant resting in the one who called himself "I am who I am." Practising this ancient way of eastern prayer bought Nagai deep peace in the most unpromising places and helped him understand Pascal's words: "don't just study the scriptures, pray them." Thus Nagai discovered great peace in entrusting himself and his men to God's providence.

Early in 1940 came the sad news from Midori that their daughter and Nagai's father were dead. He experienced a season of the dark night of the soul. He was repatriated to Japan where he received the prestigious *Order of the Rising Sun* for having risked his life to save his troops.

After discharge and return to his beloved wife Midori and his son Makoko he resumed lecturing in radiology; and as Professor Nagai he initiated mass X-raying in Nagasaki to discover signs of tuberculosis in its early stages. His voracious appetite for science was one result of the long exile from the University. The depravity of war and the lying, jingoistic propaganda gave him a fierce desire to discover more and more truth. He began writing again.

On Christmas day 1941 the Japanese Imperial forces engaged the combined forces of Britain and America. Nagai had been twice at the front, distinguishing himself under fire. Almost immediately he received orders to organise air-raid measures for the suburb of Urakami. Nagai also built an underground operating theatre including an X-Ray room. Their second daughter Kayano (the Miscanthus reed – graceful reed) was born at this time.

In 1942 Japan lost the naval initiative for the war and in 1943 experienced great losses. Nagai built up an emergency supply of medical essentials in his underground theatre in case the hospital was bombed. He was aware that seven Mitsubishi complexes existed in Nagasaki including a war plant a kilometre north of his home. From August 1944 air raids became almost daily affairs around the Nagasaki Bay area. People were dying, food shortages were growing and the rate of tuberculosis increasing.

All this time Nagai was exceeding the safety limit of daily exposure. In June 1945 he himself was x-rayed because of extreme exhaustion. The diagnosis was 'incurable leukaemia, with life expectancy remaining of 2 to 3 years.' Nagai prayed "Lord, you know how weak I am. I don't know how I can take it! My wife and my children! And all the unfinished work here! Lord, I know you said we all have to carry the cross but... I am very tired and this cross seems so heavy."

When he told Midori, she quietly lit the candle on their family altar and knelt before the crucifix, which her family had guarded through 250 years of persecution. Nagai knelt beside her, noticing that her shoulders were shaking. She remained there in prayer until the emotional turbulence subsided. Later she reminded him "we said before we married, and before you went to China the second time, that if our lives are spent for the glory of God then life and death are beautiful. You have given everything you had for work that was very important. It was for His glory."

Her complete acceptance of the tragedy, and her refusal to hear any talk of blame freed Nagai. He experienced great peace in a surge of energy for whatever there remained to be done. He wondered "Was this the joy that comes from abandonment to the will of God, of which Pascal wrote?"

The Japanese media did not carry news of the A-bombings on the evening of August sixth, but Nagai heard a report about a new bomb that had devastated Hiroshima. The next day Granny and Midori took food and set off with the children on a 6 km walk North East to a country home overlooking a peaceful mountain valley. Midori returned home early next morning, on the eighth, and when an air raid alarm sounded headed for their shelter with her husband. Physically, Nagai was in bad shape; they sat in their shelter they spoke of the coming Feast of the Assumption, August the 15th, the day Frances Xavier had arrived in Japan. That night Nagai was on air raid duty.

On August the ninth Midori declined an offer to walk with other women to the mill to have wheat ground. She said she would do it on the way to see her children later in the day. That day the sun turned black. Nagasaki urban area was a secondary target, and only attacked after the primary target, Kokura, was shrouded by cloud.

At 11 AM a radio broadcast a warning and two minutes later the four and a half ton A-bomb was dropped onto the city of 200,000 people. More than 70,000 would die. Dr Nagai was in his office as it began to disintegrate around him. He described a "giant invisible fist smashing everything in the room." Blood spurted from his temple, as he lay trapped in a pool of broken glass. 80% of the patients and staff in the hospital perished, but a nurse found five of the X-ray staff alive, and they rescued Nagai.

Outside in the chaos and confusion Nagai created the equivalent of the Japanese flag using a white sheet and his own blood. He used this, as a rallying point and it became the headquarters of efforts to support the hundreds of dying and wounded people. Fires continued to burn four hours, black rain fell, survivors moaned and pleaded for water. At 4 PM Nagai took a moment to survey his suburb of Urakami. The area was a flat, smoking desert of ash. He realised Midori was dead and then he fainted. At midnight he watched the Cathedral catch fire and burn (at the same moment the Emperor was announcing that he would admit defeat on behalf of the nation). Next day the landscape was "a nuclear ash-scape." Nagai felt the conflicting emotions of a triumph for physics and a tragedy for Japan.

On the 11th, as cremation pyres were built for the bodies, Nagai stumbled towards the site of his home. He found Midori's charred remains, and the melted prayer beads in her right hand. He was consoled by the realisation: *she died praying*. As he reflected on their love for each other and for God, he wept uncontrollably. Now he knew he had lost everything of value. He fell on his back in the ashes of his own home, where he lay unconscious for hours.

He awoke to the light of Venus, the morning star, and set out to walk the 6 km to the hills, repeating the words of his new phrase: "the heavens and the earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." He reunited with his children and their gran in the mountains, where he observed great numbers of victims had gathered. He soon arranged for care teams from the hospital to tend these people.

On August 15 Japan officially surrendered to the West. By September the eighth Nagai was suffering from A-bomb sickness. He wrote his farewell message and lapsed again into unconsciousness. By October the fifth he made a remarkable recovery. He built a hut from charred beams and tin, buckled by the heat. The hut was neither wind, nor rain, nor snow proof. And in this place, with his two children, aged four and ten, and his mother-in-law, Nagai began to contemplate the meaning of what had taken place.

On November the 23rd Nagai spoke at an open-air Mass for the dead. He surprised everybody by speaking about the redemptive dimension of suffering and death. He noted that the bomb was dropped further north than planned, and it had burst right above the Cathedral. Nagai suggested that Nagasaki was slain as a whole burnt offering... atoning for the sins of the nations in World War II. "In an instant thousands of Christians were called to God and a few hours later flames turned to ash this venerable Far Eastern holy place." Nagai went on to say: "how noble, how splendid, was that Holocaust of midnight August nine, when flames soared up from the Cathedral, dispelling darkness and bringing the light of peace. In the very depths of our grief we were able to gaze up to something beautiful, pure and sublime!"

Nagai began a 100-page report of the first month's experience of treating victims. He encouraged his friend Yamada to restore the undamaged bell from the Cathedral and at 6 PM on Christmas Eve 1945 the Bell announced to all the community the Angelus, as if the Cathedral was rising above the ashes to herald Christ's birth. This gave Nagai the title of his next book: "the Bells of Nagasaki", which he completed on August ninth 1946, the first anniversary of the bombing. In Urakami the first public building to be constructed after the bomb was the local church.

Nagai wrote: "Authentic religion is the only guide to using atomic energy as a key for survival or for total destruction. It is prayer that gives the vision for life." And he found inspiration in Psalm 36 "in your light we see light." This experience brought him closer than ever to the heart of Pascal. They were one in their love of science and literature, and above all one in their vision of prayer.

From November 1946 Nagai became bedridden and in 1947 a relative built a nice hut for him, which was 3 m x 4 m. As his books began to sell he gave the income from writing to rebuild the hospital and to plant 1000 cherry blossom trees as a sign of hope and life. In the spring of 1948 Nagai handed over his place for his younger brother to live with the two children and their grandmother, while he moved into a 2 x 2 m pilgrim's hut next door.

Called 'Nyokodo' this place became like a shrine; it meant 'just as yourself'. When Gandhiji was assassinated in January 48, the Japanese press began to call Nagai "the Gandhiji of Nyokodo." Aware of his impending death Nagai decided to write down the things he wanted his children to know, such as "Jesus tells us to love our eternal self, rather than our material possessions; being poor in spirit and pure in heart might not win you a lot of money but it will give you something even more precious, peace of heart."

Before Nagai died in 1951 he wrote while lying on his back and completed 20 books in six years! William Johnston described him as "a mystic of peace for our times. In the vast quantity of atomic literature he has a unique place... He attempts a theology born of cruel suffering and painful conversion of heart. With his message of love he takes an honoured place beside the great prophets like Ghandi, Luther King, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton."

In the last four years of his life he also wrote an average of five letters a day. People began to visit his place, among them Helen Keller and the Emperor of Japan. Nagai wrote "unless you have suffered and wept you really don't understand what compassion is, nor can you give comfort to someone who is suffering. If you haven't cried you cannot dry another's eyes." Nagai believed that suffering, gracefully accepted, refines the human heart and the experience of darkness sharpens the vision of the spirit. One professor wrote in 1962 "I cannot remember anyone who met him who was not struck by the love that flowed out of every pore of the man..." His visitors included scholars, farmers, believers, atheists and Communists.

Nagai loved autumn as the time for deep reflection. Japanese poems are tinged with sadness in autumn because this season brings home the poignant impermanence of life. In several places Nagai wrote of the need for tears. "Tears open the eyes and the heart to the pain of others."

In Nagai's correspondence with the lepers of Tokyo he makes a point of identifying with them: "my body, too, is breaking up, yes it is almost done for. But physical suffering is an opportunity to gather treasure for heaven. Just a few years of honest endeavour carrying our burdens and then we will rise renewed and enter unspoiled joy." Elsewhere he wrote that though our bodies are done for, how much better off are we than if it were our hearts that were corrupting.

Nagai reached a deeply contemplative prayer life. This is seen in his final book from 1950 entitled "Reflections from Nyokodo", where he wrote his own farewell poem: "Goodbye my flesh. I must now journey beyond, as the fragrance must leave the rose." In the last three weeks of his life he wrote "The Virgin Pass" – describing the mountain pass and the events there, where Paul Miki and 26 Christians were imprisoned, tortured and martyred. His last written words quoted Tertullian from the third century "the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians."

His final words were "pray for me, please pray for me. I want to receive the Eucharist." He received it and did not move until he completed 15 minutes of thanksgiving. He was carried 700 m to the foot of the Cathedral where he prayed for peace. They returned him to the hospital where he was bathed in preparation for his passing. He died of heart failure on May 1st 1951.

At his funeral on May 3rd 20,000 mourners packed the Cathedral. The Mayor of Nagasaki solemnly read out 300 messages of condolence, taking 90 minutes. Then while Nagai's friend Yamata rang the

bell for the noonday Angelus, the city of Nagasaki erupted as whistles horns and sirens sounded the beginning of a moment to honour of its first citizen. In the nearby school classrooms fell silent and as the sound of the bell died away children broke into sobbing.

The procession of mourners was more than a kilometre long. At the graveside his epitaph was Luke 17: 10 “We are merely servants; we have done no more than a duty.” He was buried alongside Midori whose gravestone reads, “I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me.” Beyond the natural and earthly, Nagai shared with St Francis, a vision of the cosmic. Nagai saw God in everything: in midsummer heat, autumn typhoons, midwinter blizzards, darkness and pain.

In the Epilogue the author observes: “If you speak Japanese and have attended the A-bomb anniversaries in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki you will have observed a great difference. Some regular participants express it this way

Hiroshima is bitter, noisy, highly political, leftist and anti-American. Its symbol would be a fist clenched in anger. Nagasaki is sad but quiet, reflective, non-political and prayerful. It does not blame the US but rather laments the sinfulness of war and especially nuclear war. Its symbol is hands joined in prayer.

“Shigeru Idei is a mathematics Professor who became involved in a peace movement mostly of Shinto inspiration. When I asked him about the difference between Hiroshima and Nagasaki he replied: “The popular jingle expresses it perfectly: shouting Hiroshima, praying Nagasaki.” Nagai, more than any other individual, is responsible for the very spiritual atmosphere in Nagasaki’s commemoration of the A-bomb.

It was precisely when Nagai thought he had lost everything in the nuclear wilderness that he discovered he possessed everything! In that modern desert he experienced a kind of return to the Garden of Eden because he was able to walk there with God.

Our society has sought to solve the problem of suffering by removing pain. Yet the physical pain in earlier societies helped them to be realists and to face up to the deeper human issues, the ones beyond the physical. Nagai’s strongest appeal is that he came through such tough modern problems, becoming stronger and more attractive for it. God’s providence led him through the worst experiences of the 20th century to make him a pathfinder for others. His dying words were: *pray, please pray.*

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This summary was extracted from the book

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