

Atonement

My name is Toko.

I think the strongest thing I remember from my childhood
is when the war ended in Japan. I was about five.

This was right after the atomic bomb was dropped
in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I grew up and when I was a young woman
I came to the United States
to study at the Chicago Theological Seminary.

One day I heard on the news how the blacks in Selma, Alabama
were wanting to register to vote, and the whites were not making it possible.
I heard how one Sunday the black community of people
marched across the bridge to Montgomery in protest,
and how they were kicked by the Alabama troopers on horseback
and how the troopers had the water hose and hosed them down.

It's called *Bloody Sunday*

So Dr. King asked the seminary students and ministers to come to Selma
to do another march for voting rights.

Ten of us from the seminary went down to march in Selma.

And when we lined up to go on the march, the way we lined up was...

All of the black women were three abreast in the middle of the march

Two rows of African American men were outside of that

Then outside of that were white women, me included.

And outside of that were white men, to protect people in the middle.

So, when we lined up like this, it was like—"I'm scared,
but I'm okay because all of us are standing together!"

It was such a powerful thing.

And when Reverend Abernathy said, "Let us march!"
we started walking—everybody locking arms.

And I cannot tell you how electrifying that was...

It was just amazing—like electricity went through my body!

I was scared to death because it was the same troopers
from the Sunday before,

with the dogs

and clubs

and fire hoses.

But it was okay because all of us were standing together!

And as soon as we started walking,
we were surrounded by the Alabama troopers.
The troopers wore helmets and those reflective sunglasses.
And they had those heavy sticks.
They stood and made a wall around us and said,
“YOU MAY NOT GO ANY FURTHER!”

So, Abernathy said, “let us pray.”
All of us dropped to our knees,
and that’s where we stayed for the whole afternoon and night.
And when the sun came up in the morning
Abernathy said, “Let us stand and sing our National Anthem.”
And you know how you sing a national anthem—
you take your hat off and you have your hand over your heart.
So we watched the troopers,
and they didn’t know what to do
because they weren’t supposed to be singing with us.
But after all, this was the National Anthem.

And they were all so frustrated and flustered, they looked to their captain,
The captain was flustered too,
but finally, he took his helmet and he put it over his heart.
and all the troopers did the same thing.
Then we sang national anthem.
And everybody was—for that moment—together as an American citizen.

That was the moment that changed my life.

The Selma story is my most important story
because I have this idea...
When we are together,
we can do things which are much, much bigger than we ourselves.
I call it *At-Onement*
At-Onement is like atonement.
Everybody is separate, but we can become one.
Atonement means healing.
By becoming one, we heal each other’s wounds,
and each other’s hurts
and we become ONE PERSON

Maybe that is why I have a great passion for singing.
I sing with a choral group and again this is *At-Onement*,
When you have all these different voices—
soprano
and alto
and bass
and tenor
and each sing different parts
and when it comes together,
then it's a HUGE, WONDERFUL BLEND OF SOUNDS!
And when you are singing in the middle of it
you think you died and went to heaven.
With my voice blending in among all the sounds that
soar up there!