

Tolerance is the heart of world peace

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I came to the United States at the age of 10 with my family. Thanks to our cordial American neighbors and friends, my memory of our first several years in this country is filled with joy, satisfaction and gratitude — except for one recurring episode.

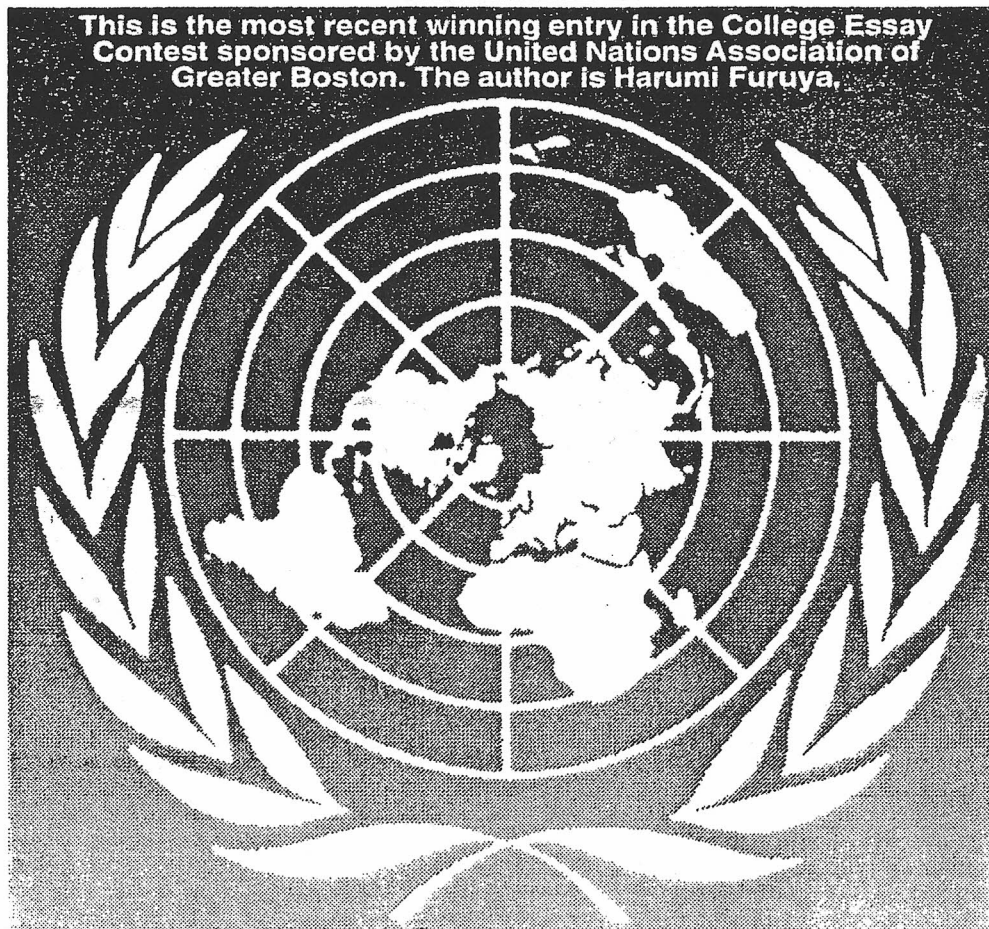
Almost every day coming back from school, I had to pass by a boy of about 12 or 13 who, with a ferocious expression on his face, yelled, "You Chinese girl! Go home!"

At first, I was merely puzzled, thinking, "Why does he look so scary? Besides, I'm Japanese." Although he did no physical harm, his violent words disturbed me very much. Had my other American peers not been so friendly and helpful, I would no doubt have wanted to get out of this country known as "the melting pot" right away.

My personal experience with intolerance is trivial compared to extreme cases of intolerance which have caused billions of deaths in the history of humanity. At this very moment, ethnic cleansing continues unabated in Bosnia-Herzegovina. As for Arab-Israeli conflicts, there have been five major wars since the independence of Israel in 1948.

Only several weeks ago on Jan. 27, the 50th commemoration of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau served as a painful reminder of what intolerance carried to an ultimate extreme can do — in this case, millions of Jews and several other minorities were killed in the inferno of Nazi gas chambers. Moreover, in the immediate post-war period when the Allies were preoccupied with the Nuremberg trial, Tito's communist regime was enslaving and killing Danube Swabians in ex-Yugoslavia. These are only a few examples of human tragedies caused by intolerance in the form of genocide.

Last year, the United Nations was actively involved in preventive diplomacy or peacemaking in disputes and conflicts in 28 regions — more than double that of six years ago. This attests to the fact that there were at least 28 cases where people were dying as a result of intolerance of



one kind or another: genocide, racism, religious intolerance. ... To this day in our "modern" country, racial discrimination is acutely experienced by Afro-Americans. In addition, there is prejudice against other minority groups in our own community, as I have experienced firsthand — which, trivial as it may seem, must not go neglected.

An increasing number of people are becoming aware of what intolerance has done in the past. Many are informed of the present situations in Bosnia and in Rwanda. But how many feel directly threatened by the genocide in Nazi Germany or in present-day Bosnia? How many see it as a seri-

ous threat to humanity — thus to their own well-being — and become personally concerned about a tragedy happening far away from home?

Furthermore, do we realize that "trivial" racism in our own peaceful, complacent community has the potential to be blown out of scale, especially in times of crisis, and bring about tragedies not unlike those currently experienced by people on the other side of the globe?

We must start to fight intolerance in our home community. Education of children at school and at home is a key factor. In this multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-national world, there are inevita-

bly people who appear and sound very different from ourselves.

In our own small community, there are people of different religion, race and sexual orientation who might seem strange to us at first. Children of all people — because they are our future hope — must learn what the abstract term "tolerance" means: it is about recognizing the difference among individuals, accepting the "different" ones, and respecting their right to live according to their beliefs and practices insofar as they do not pose imminent physical threat to others' well-being.

The world is becoming "smaller" in that an increasing number of people immigrate or live abroad temporarily due to the growing interdependence between countries. More than ever, everyone's economic, environmental, political and societal interests are converging. Now that countries and individuals can no longer lock themselves in their own little cells and still be self-sufficient, tolerance has become essential to human flourishing as well as to survival.

It has often been believed that it would be impossible to dispense with historically rooted ethnic or religious intolerance that goes back centuries. However, there is no reason *not* to believe in such impossibility; nor is there any time to waste by doing nothing to improve the present situation.

All individuals must recognize sooner or later that tolerance is a virtue which has become a necessity in our modern times if humanity is to flourish. Consequently, it is in everyone's interest to internalize "tolerance" and practice it. Only by exercising "tolerance" as a daily activity at home can we hope for an abatement of extreme cases of intolerance in this world and secure our future. □

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