

THE  
NOBEL  
PEACE  
PRIZE

Speech given by

Chair of The Norwegian  
Nobel Committee  
Jørgen Watne Frydnes

Nobel Peace Prize 2024

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Your Majesties,  
Your Royal Highnesses,  
Esteemed laureates,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

*“There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal, as human beings, to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death.”*

Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein and other prominent intellectuals from around the world posed these questions to humanity in 1955. Their famous manifesto highlighted the dangers of nuclear war and urged global leaders to seek peaceful ways of resolving international conflicts. Today we must ask ourselves once more: Have we remembered our humanity? Have we chosen a path towards the light, or are we still on the road to destruction and death?

Russell and Einstein composed their manifesto 10 years after two American atomic bombs had killed an estimated 120 000 inhabitants of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A comparable number died of burn and radiation injuries in the ensuing months and years. The Japanese cities were almost entirely destroyed, resulting in social and economic collapse. Many of the nearly 650 000 survivors have struggled with psychological trauma and physical suffering. They have been silenced, neglected and stigmatised. They have had to fight not only for their economic rights, but for simple acknowledgement of the hardships they have endured.

Nihon Hidankyo, a grassroots movement of atomic bomb survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for 2024 for its efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons and for demonstrating through witness testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again. This year's prize to Nihon Hidankyo joins a distinguished list of Peace Prizes that the Norwegian Nobel Committee has previously awarded to champions of nuclear disarmament and arms control. These laureates have worked in different ways to reduce the threat posed by nuclear weapons. Thirteen Nobel Peace Prizes have been awarded, in full or in part, for peace efforts of this kind. On each occasion, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has warned against the menace of nuclear weapons. This year, that warning is more urgent than ever before.

As 2025 approaches, the world is entering what many analysts characterise as a new, more unstable nuclear age. The role of nuclear weapons in international affairs is changing. The nuclear powers are modernising and upgrading their arsenals. New countries appear to be preparing to obtain nuclear weapons. Key arms control agreements are expiring without being replaced. And threats to use nuclear arms in ongoing warfare have been made openly and repeatedly.

It is perhaps necessary to remind ourselves just what nuclear weapons are: the most destructive weapons the world has ever seen. Today's nuclear weapons – and there are more than 12 000 of them – have far greater destructive power than the two bombs used against Japan in 1945. They could kill millions of us in an instant, injure even more, and disrupt the climate catastrophically. A nuclear war could destroy our civilisation.

Although the shadow of nuclear weapons continues to loom over the world, we gather here today in a spirit of hope. For there is a point of light that we must recognise. It is the fact that no nuclear weapon has been used in war since 1945.

In response to the atomic bomb attacks of World War II, a global movement arose whose members have worked tirelessly to raise awareness about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of using nuclear weapons. Gradually, an international norm developed that stigmatised the use of nuclear weapons as morally unacceptable. This norm is often referred to as “the nuclear taboo”, a term coined by the political scientist Nina Tannenwald, who is present here today. Like other international norms, the nuclear taboo is maintained by collective agreement – by widespread moral outrage at the prospect of using nuclear weapons, and by a mutual fear of the abyss awaiting humanity if the norm is violated. But the taboo is fragile, and it becomes more so with the passage of time. We therefore need reminding.

Nihon Hidankyo and the Hibakusha – the survivors of the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – have never wavered in their efforts to erect a worldwide moral and legal bulwark against the use of nuclear weapons. Their role in establishing the taboo is unique. Their personal stories humanise history, lifting the veil of forgetfulness and drawing us out of our daily routines. They bridge the gap between “those who were there” and we others untouched by the violence of the past. They are living reminders of what is at stake.

To our dear guests from Nihon Hidankyo – to Terumi Tanaka, Toshiyuki Mimaki and Shigemitsu Tanaka – and to all the Hibakusha here today: It is an honour to be your hosts on this historic occasion, and we wish to express our deep gratitude for the outstanding and vital work you have performed in the course of your lives, and for all that you continue to do.

You did not resign yourselves to victimhood. You defined yourselves as survivors. You refused to sit in silent terror as the great powers led us through long periods of nuclear armament. You stood tall and shared your unique personal testimony with the entire world.

A light in the darkest night. A path forward. You give us hope.

Decade after decade, your stories, your educational work and your urgent warnings against the proliferation and use of nuclear arms have helped to promote and consolidate widespread opposition to these weapons around the world.

You help us to describe the indescribable, to think the unthinkable, and to somehow grasp the incomprehensible pain and suffering caused by nuclear weapons.

You have never given up.

You are a symbol of resilience.

You are the light the world needs.

I am 40 years old and belong to a generation in Norway with no direct experience of war. I grew up after the end of the Cold War, when democracy seemed unstoppable and nuclear disarmament realistic. My generation lived through an optimistic bubble in history. That time is over. For more than half of my working life, I have dealt with the consequences of terror and experienced the cruel aftermath of young lives being brutally torn away. Working with pain, sorrow and trauma, I have learned to recognise the power of stories and memories.

The way we remember violent or traumatic historical events – both individually and collectively – determines whether and how we move forward as a society or remain trapped in the past. Not just individuals but entire societies, current and future, are shaped by trauma. It is our duty not to forget. It is our responsibility to pass along stories and memories to future generations – including the painful, disturbing ones, which often yield to society's amnesia.

Governments and rulers often have a need to move on. In many cases, this is because somebody wants to avoid being held to account. For people not directly affected, forgetting may also be a matter of comfort. It spares us the distress of entering into the suffering of others, and thus, of needing to care.

Those who are directly swept up in violent events may find it hard to talk about their own suffering. After traumatic experiences, many survivors have both a fear of their own memories and a fear of forgetting.

As we are gathered here today, the Nobel Prizes in medicine, physics, chemistry and literature are being presented in Stockholm. While this year's Peace Prize laureate is Nihon Hidankyo, the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature is the South Korean novelist Han Kang. Her writings about trauma and memory are part of the reason she was selected for the award. She has said:

*"I believe that trauma is something to be embraced rather than healed or recovered from. I believe that grief is something which situates the space of the dead within the living; and that, through repeatedly revisiting that place, through our pained and silent embrace of it over the course of a whole life, life is, perhaps paradoxically, made possible."*

Memories can imprison us, cut us off, prevent us from moving on. But they can also be a catalyst for new life, a safeguard against forgetfulness, and a tool for honouring

those who have suffered. Memory work can be an act of resistance, a force for change. For this, we need all of our institutions of memory: history writing, documentation and education as well as personal testimony, literature and art.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee today honours all survivors who, despite physical suffering and painful memories, have chosen to use their costly experience to cultivate hope and engagement for peace. Our tribute also extends to the half million Hibakusha who have died since 1945, and who for many years offered their first-hand testimony while helping to develop and uphold the critical international taboo against nuclear weapons.

One day, the Hibakusha will no longer be among us as witnesses to history. But with a strong culture of remembrance and a continuing commitment, younger generations in Japan and elsewhere are carrying forward the experience and the message of the witnesses. They too have inspired and educated people around the world.

But they must not bear this responsibility alone. We all have a duty to fulfil the mission of the Hibakusha. Their moral compass is our inheritance. It is now our turn. Disarmament efforts require insistent public appeals and sustained pressure. A new generation of brave voices, interested students and willing teachers is needed.

Disarmament also requires courageous and visionary political leaders. None of the nine countries that possess nuclear weapons – the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea – appear interested in nuclear disarmament and arms control at present. On the contrary, they are modernising and building up their nuclear arsenals. The Norwegian Nobel Committee calls upon the five nuclear-weapon states that have signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty to take seriously their obligations under this treaty. In addition, more countries must ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Political action is crucial.

The Nobel Peace Prize for 2024 validates the most fundamental human right, the right to live. This year's prize also fulfils Alfred Nobel's desire to recognise those who devote their lives to the work of benefitting humankind.

In the committee room of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, here in Oslo, hang the portraits of every Nobel Peace Prize laureate since 1901. Two of the portraits are of Ales Bialiatski and Narges Mohammadi, who received their prizes in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Both are serving long prison sentences for their peaceful advocacy of human rights – the very work that earned them the Nobel Peace Prize. The Norwegian Nobel Committee calls upon the Iranian and Belarusian authorities to release them immediately, permanently and unconditionally.

Their portraits, and those of the other laureates, serve as an important reminder that injustice, brutality and war are still with us – but also, that society can change for the better. The portraits tell a story of courageous people who never give up in the struggle to bring about positive change.

We are not doomed by some genetic code to repeat the mistakes of the past. We can learn. We can choose another path. We can raise our children to believe in a shared human destiny. We can listen to Russell and Einstein – and remember our humanity.

The path towards a world free of nuclear weapons remains long. We will see progress and setbacks. But that does not mean the vision cannot eventually become reality. Imagine a world in which 100 years have passed since nuclear weapons were used on the battlefield. Surely this is a vision we can all share. We could listen to those who claim it is pointless, or instead, take inspiration from the Hibakusha – from their stamina and persistence.

It is naive to believe our civilisation can survive a world order in which global security depends on nuclear weapons. The world is not meant to be a prison in which we await collective annihilation. No matter how long and difficult the path, we should learn from Nihon Hidankyo: We must never give up.

So let us listen to the testimony of the Hibakusha.

Let their courage be our inspiration.

Let their persistence drive us forward.

Let us all strive to keep the nuclear taboo intact.

Our survival depends on it.