

# Feelings About Being Placed in an “Assembly Center”: Masao Watanabe

This video clip is an excerpt from Masao Watanabe’s oral history interview, conducted on June 19, 1998, by Densho, an organization dedication to sharing the history of Japanese-American internment during World War II.

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Tier 2 terms

restructured, temporary, harmony, nerve, former, temporary, stall, intentionally, experience, positive, image, liberty

Tier 3 terms

fairground, hovel, United States Constitution, citizen, citizenship, democracy

Web Version:

<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/feelings-about-being-placed-in-an-assembly-center-masao-watanabe>



*This article contains a multimedia feature that is available at the web address above.*

**Masao Watanabe:** I had been to Puyallup a few times when it was the fairgrounds of Western Washington. Little did I know that I would replace the pigs and the cows and that type of stuff, you know, 'cause they — they restructured the fairgrounds and the parking lots into these temporary hovels. And they had a hell of a lot of nerve calling it Camp Harmony.” But, anyway, it was ... boy, it was a real traumatic type of living, where you’re in the former stalls where the pigs and the cows and everything else were. Temporary shacks, just the walls — [they] were so many feet off the ground, and families of six and seven were crowded into one little spot. I think intentionally, I forgot a lot of “Camp Harmony.” I hate to use the word “harmony,” but it was just not a very good experience.

**Interviewer:** How were you, what were you thinking? I mean, you were a high school graduate and so you had learned a lot in your civics courses and history courses about the

United States Constitution and all those things. What was going through your mind as this was happening to you, a United States citizen?

**Masao Watanabe:** Well, in retrospect, I can say a lot about that, but I just ... I just felt that all this liberty and crap was all crap. You know, it just, you read so much about democracy and all this and it was a real eye-opener to see what could happen to citizens and what does citizenship mean. 'Cause it just bothered the heck out of me to think that I tried to be a good citizen and, man, they are tossing me into joints like this. I didn't like it. I can't imagine anybody liking it or having positive images of being locked up.

### Source

To access the full interview please visit,

<http://ddr.densho.org/interviews/ddr-densho-1000-103-15/>

### TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

1. Question

When things are in harmony, there is unity or agreement. It is a positive thing. Why did Masao think "Camp Harmony" was an improper or ironic name for the place?

2. Question

Masao says, "I think intentionally, I forgot a lot of 'Camp Harmony.'" What do you think the word "intentionally" means? Why might he have wanted to purposefully forget about his time at "Camp Harmony"?

3. Question

Re-read these sentences: "I just felt that all of this liberty and crap was crap. You know, it just, you read so much about democracy and all this, and it was a real eye-opener to see what could happen to citizens and what does citizenship mean." Put these sentences into your own words.

## TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS & Answers

### 1. Question

When things are in harmony, there is unity or agreement. It is a positive thing. Why did Masao think “Camp Harmony” was an improper or ironic name for the place?

Answer

Replacing pigs and cows with people was the exact opposite of feelings of harmony, unity, or agreement.

### 2. Question

Masao says, “I think intentionally, I forgot a lot of ‘Camp Harmony.’” What do you think the word “intentionally” means? Why might he have wanted to purposefully forget about his time at “Camp Harmony”?

Answer

It was such a traumatic experience that he tried to block the memories from his mind so he didn’t have to re-live it.)

### 3. Question

Re-read these sentences: “I just felt that all of this liberty and crap was crap. You know, it just, you read so much about democracy and all this, and it was a real eye-opener to see what could happen to citizens and what does citizenship mean.” Put these sentences into your own words.

Answer

Liberty and democracy are considered founding ideas of this country, but being in this internment camp made him start to question whether they were a reality and what it really meant to be a citizen of the U.S.