

# STORY SHORT WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

featuring audio and video story excerpts with a discussion guide

RaceBridges Story Short units feature a series of original stories told by professional storytellers about race relations, diversity and inclusion. Each unit consists of :

- A description of the story
- A video of the story
- An audio download of the same story
- A transcription text of the same story
- A brief Discussion Guide with questions for personal or group discussion and reflection

These Story Short units are brief and lean for your creative use in and out of the classroom and in a variety of contexts.

## REFLECTIONS ON MINIDOKA

by Storyteller Alton Chung

[www.altonchung.com](http://www.altonchung.com)

Approximate Length of Video and Audio: 7 minutes, 10 seconds.

### THEME

The importance of remembering our own past and the past of our people.

### STORY DESCRIPTION

#### Background

During World War II, the government of the United States authorized the arrest and relocation of every Japanese American on the West Coast. 120,000 Japanese Americans, the majority of whom were citizens, were forced into concentration camps for the duration of the war. During this time, Japanese-American men still served in the U. S. military even as their families were held prisoner at home. The government did not apologize or make reparation for this shameful episode until nearly 50 years later. This is the background for the following story.



Alton Chung

### **The Story**

Alton Takiyama-Chung tells of his own experience visiting the remains of the Minidoka Relocation Center, one of the internment campus used to incarcerate Japanese Americans within the U.S. during WWII. As a storyteller, Chung has told many stories about the experience of Japanese Americans and felt it was time to visit a remnant of one of the dark spots in American history. During his travels to Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho, Chung met an 89-year-old woman who had been incarcerated at Minidoka years before but was returning for the first time. Together they walked through the ruins of Minidoka—there was little to see but they could imagine the lives of those who had been imprisoned there in buildings that were now in the ruins. But even more, Chung and his “old new” friend listen to the roll call, share stories, and partake in a moving ceremony. At the end of their trip, both Chung and his friend agree they’ll both return—and the next year Chung sees his “old new” friend again.

Visit [www.racebridgesforschools.com](http://www.racebridgesforschools.com) to download the corresponding audio (MP3) and video (MP4) files.

### **REFLECTIONS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ABOUT *Reflections on Minidoka***

1. Why do you think Chung decides to go and actually visit one of the internment camps? Why do you think his “old new” friend waited for over 65 years before returning to Minidoka? What is her reaction to the roll call?
1. Chung notes that many of the buildings the internees lived in during WWII had been given away after the war to local farmers to use for chicken coops and storage. Why might that detail be important? What does it reveal about the camps?
2. Why do you think the visit at Minidoka ended with the dragonflies?

### **Taking Action**

Find someone in your family or neighborhood who has lived through wartime in the U.S.

Ask them about how people perceived as “outsiders” were treated during wartime. Consider skimming some newspapers or magazines from that time; see if you can find any evidence that certain groups were under suspicion.

**STORY TRANSCRIPT of Reflections on Minidoka**  
**by Storyteller Alton Chung**

Note : The transcript below of the video and audio story is not in correct text book English. It is a transcription of the spoken story. There are also a few variations from the spoken word. This text is for your guidance and reference as you start to study and think about this story.

Hello, my name is Alton Takiyama-Chung. This story is called “Reflections on Minidoka.” It’s from a larger collection of stories that I created called *Kodomo No Tame Ni—For the Sake of the Children*.

And now, “Reflections on Minidoka.” I have been telling stories about the Japanese-American experience of World War II for several years. I thought it was about the time that I actually went to an internment camp. I’d heard that people from Portland and Seattle went on this annual pilgrimage to the Minidoka relocation center in Hunt, Idaho. I’d heard that people from Seattle actually rented a bus and went 11 hours from Seattle to Twin Falls, Idaho, which is the closest big city.

I flew. I jumped on a plane in Portland, Oregon, flew to Boise, rented a car and drove down to Twin Falls. There, after getting settled in the hotel, they put us on these two big buses. While on the buses I met this woman—89-years-old—and she said that she was 23 when she left the camp, never been back since. I said, “Wow, that’s a long time!” “Oh, yeah, yeah, long time, long time.”

Well, we left Twin Falls on the freeway and got off on an exit, started going on these secondary roads, these irrigation fields, and then out in the middle of nowhere, nothing but sagebrush. We stopped at this low wall and the remains of this chimney, that’s all that remains of the reception area for the Minidoka internment camp.

It was June, but when we got off the bus, it was hot, and that heat just sapped all your strength and all your motivation. We walked the land. They showed us the fire house and all the remains of the fire house and some of the wooden tarpaper barracks that had been donated back to the site. At the end of the war they’d all been given away to the farmers to be used as chicken coops, as storage, and, sometimes, as housing, and some of them had been returned to the site.

They showed us the concrete slabs that are all that remains of the warehouse, garage, and the root cellar. All the land around the camp had been cultivated by the internees, and all that produce was brought back to the camp and stored in the root cellar that the internees had created.

When we got back on the bus, I ran into my old new friend, I said “What you got there?” “Oh, when I was walking around, I picked up this rusty nail.” “What are you going to do with a nail?” “When I went back to Japan

to visit my relative's tomb, it was crumbling, and I picked up a piece of granite from that tomb, and it is in a very special place in my home. I am going to put this rusty nail next to it."

She said she was from Okayama prefecture, which is near Hiroshima. The next day we went back to the site for the ceremony of reading the roll call. This is the list of the names of men who had volunteered to go and fight in the war and who didn't come back from Minidoka. At the end of reading that roll call, that honor list, I ran into my old friend again, and I said, "How's it going?"

She said, "Ah, it was hot. Even though it's been over 60 years, I could not help but cry when I heard that boy's name. See, my family owned a grocery store in Seattle. I knew that boy really liked me, but he was so shy, so shy. He would come in, and he wouldn't say anything, just sit and watch.

Then the war came, and we got sent to Minidoka. They created the 442nd, the all-Japanese-American combat unit, and he volunteered to join. He went off to basic training. Then one day this soldier came into the cabin, a handsome young man. I was sitting in the mess hall, this boy walked right up to me, took off his hat and put it on top my head! I was so embarrassed! I looked up—it was the boy.

Oh, we talked, we got caught up, it was wonderful! And then he had to go. He went with the 442 to Europe to fight and he did not come back, and today, when I heard his name, I couldn't help but cry."

Later at that ceremony they handed out these origami dragon flies, *Tonbo*. They said it was a symbol of courage, strength and happiness. They asked us to say a prayer for a loved one and to write their name on this origami dragon fly and to pin it on this model of a guard tower, it was made of Styrofoam, white Styrofoam.

Like everyone else, I took my origami dragonfly and I wrote the name of my loved one on it, said a prayer, and I pinned it to this Styrofoam guard tower. It was beautiful, this white guard tower with all these multicolored origami dragon flies on it. We stood back and watched. And as we watched, a real dragonfly landed amongst all the other origami dragonflies. It was blue and green, this iridescent green. We all held our breath, so as not to disturb the magic of this moment, and then the dragon fly took off and disappeared into the afternoon sunset.

Later, on the bus, I met up with my old new friend again, and I said, "Hey, how's this whole trip for you?" and she said, "Ahh, it was hot. I am 89 years old but I'll be back next year." I looked at this old woman and I said, "Yeah, yeah, and I'll be back again, too, to remember those who did not come back."

This happened a couple of years ago, that next year I was invited back by the people who organized the Minidoka pilgrimage to tell this story to the internees, their families and friends at the Minidoka site and in the audience was my old new friend, she'd just turned 90 years old, and both of us had kept our promise.