

Okayama Prefectural Okayama Daianji Secondary School

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### May I Help You?

I changed elementary schools four times. Each school had its own rules, its own way of doing things. When I moved to Kumamoto, a girl spoke to me trying to give me some advice. “This is a notebook for homework, and this is your daily record so please turn it in over there. Well, these are scissors, this is glue, and...” “Wait. Um ... I know scissors and glue.” She didn’t think I was stupid, she was just trying to be kind and considerate. However, at the time, I thought her thoughtfulness was just meddling.

“Thoughtfulness,” or in Japanese – *omoiyari*, means to worry about or have sympathy or compassion for someone. Moreover, there is an expectation that you should be able to read, to just know what that person needs. However, even if you think that you are being “thoughtful,” it can come across as disingenuous or unwanted. How can we avoid this? After looking at a couple of examples, it should be clear that the answer is communication.

Two strong earthquakes hit Kumamoto in 2016. When I saw the damage and people living in shelters, I really wanted to do something to help because I had lived there. Some who felt the same sent relief supplies. Others wanted to show their sympathy by sending one-thousand paper cranes. When supplies like instant food arrived, people had no way of cooking them. Too many paper cranes were sent and people had trouble disposing of them. Kumamoto residents then used the news to tell the country about this problem. As a result, people instead showed their sympathy by

writing messages on the outside of boxes. Inside the boxes were the kinds of supplies that people really needed.

If these misunderstandings can happen among people of the same culture and country, it can surely happen across cultures. When I was in Australia, my host family always made an effort to talk to me. On my first night, my host mother said, “Chi, I have *hashi* for you. Do you want to use them?” She pulled out a pair of long chopsticks from a drawer – they were *saibashi*. Honestly, I was glad – even if I couldn’t use them – but I was also a little sad. I wanted to try real Aussie life – I didn’t want anything special done for me. Sometimes, not assuming someone needs your help is a way of being thoughtful. In this situation, you could also wait and see if the person is having trouble, and then offer your help.

Next year, the Olympics are coming to Tokyo. Most Japanese remember our pitch for the Olympics when Christel Takigawa said “*o-mo-te-na-shi*” – thoughtfulness for guests is a key part of this word. If we are going to truly embody the Japanese ideal of *omoiyari*, we may need to change the way we think about it in a global, changing world. During the Olympics, people will be visiting all over Japan – not just Tokyo. In Okayama, if you see someone having trouble, just ask “May I help you?” If they say yes, please do what you can to help, if not, you don’t need to do anything. That’s enough to show your compassion. Communicate before acting.

Whether someone new comes to your school, or there is a large disaster, or visitors from abroad are coming to your town, you may have an impulse to do something that you believe to be kind. But, we can’t always predict what everyone needs. What we can do is be better about asking, listening and then acting – or in some cases, not acting at all. Your *omoiyari* starts with your first communication.

(610 words)