

Diversity in Harmony

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What is your image of a diverse Japan? Let's say we want a more diverse society, we want a Japan that embraces its diverse range of people, ideas and lifestyles more than it does now. What would that take? Is it possible? For diversity to work, something has to come from the inside of us, not just the outside. It isn't enough to have diversity, we have to be inclusive of that diversity. Going around telling people, 'We must be more accepting,' or 'We need diversity now' doesn't do anything. We are not talking about something we must do. We are talking about something we want.

The Olympics are over. When they were on I could actually feel the diversity and inclusion were real. But now they seem distant. Commenting on inclusion in Japan, the Ritsumeikan sociologist Lawrence Yoshitaka Shimoji says that, "the word we use in Japanese doesn't really mean 'inclusion.' We use the word that means more like, harmony. And what harmony means here is everyone being the same, one in harmony." If the Olympics made us want to live in a more diverse society, perhaps we need to think about our idea of harmony, because if harmony just means oneness and sameness, we can't have diversity *and* harmony.

How do we become more inclusive? What does that mean? Are we not inclusive now? How can we become more open on the inside, when most of us do not share space and time with people from overseas, or a member of the LGBTQ community, with someone with a serious disability, or anyone who might seriously encourage us to think strongly about diversity and inclusion? How do we learn how to get good at being inclusive when we often don't look like a diverse society?

In order to encourage ourselves to be more inclusive I think there are some important things to keep in mind. The first is, we are a diverse society and have been for a long time. Over one in fifty births are to mixed heritage couples. Second, we need to keep in mind the differences between us, you and I, and other people around this world, are much smaller than the things which we share, and the things we cherish. When we keep this in mind, I think we can better deal with some of our fears of difference and otherness. Thirdly, we have to embrace and foster our interest in the world outside of us. Not outside of our country necessarily, but an interest in something and someone beyond ourselves. It isn't possible to go on a vacation right now, and it's tough to meet people, but there is so much literature written about just how diverse Japan already is and how we think about this diversity.

Some of you might be thinking that the job of making a more inclusive society, that's the job of young people. Perhaps young people need to come forward - we who are less prejudiced, less concerned with being the same. I know from experience trying to be more inclusive can be frustrating. I completely gave up on an exchange student staying with my family, partly because of personality differences and partly because of cultural differences. I gave up on being inclusive. I have thought and talked about this experience, and looking back on it I wish I would have gotten to know her better; I wish I had been mindful that our differences were actually quite small.

I asked you at the start what your image of a diverse Japan was. For me, diversity in harmony is not being the same, but about gathering differences and gluing them together with inclusion. This might not always go smoothly, but this is what a diverse Japan will be.