

The President's Inaugural Address*

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It is a great honor for me to be nominated to President of this Association by its Board of Directors. I swear that I will follow the great path that has been laid down by the past Presidents of this Association. At the same time, I hope that the members of the Association will continue to help this Association grow and continue to help improve intercultural communication and understanding.

On this occasion, you may be expecting an inspiring presidential address from me. But, today, please allow me to relate to you some of my past cross-cultural experiences.

I had my first cross-cultural experience in 1945 - 54 years ago. It still remains the most unforgettable, shocking, and saddest experience of all for me. It took place only four and a half months before the end of World War II. The war became so desperate for Japan after its defeat in the Philippines that it was easily predictable that the American armed forces would soon invade Okinawa, my home island. In this situation one desperate move for the Japanese army was to mobilize young high school students on the island. My schoolmates and I were inducted into the Japanese army as privates to defend Okinawa. The induction took place in March, the American forces landed in April, the battle on Okinawa ceased in June, and Japan surrendered in August - all in 1945.

The duties of us student soldiers were to dig underground shelters for the soldiers, run as messenger boys, transport ammunition, and gather food. The monsoon season began and everything had to be performed in wet weather. As the battle moved on, one day in April, word got around that an American pilot was captured near our caves as his reconnaissance plane was shot down. Our sergeant encouraged us to go and see the American captive to raise our fighting morale.

I, together with a friend of mine, went to the site where the captured American pilot was supposed to be. We found him lying untied on the ground at the foot of a big tree. We immediately knew that he was so weak that he was barely breathing and that it was not necessary to tie him. We guessed that he was beaten mercilessly by his captors. As we looked on him, we noticed that he was trying to say something. We got close to his face and heard him say very, very weakly, "Mee-zuu, wa-ter." We felt sorry for him and brought him a cup of water. He drank it and said "Thank you," very softly. By the way, that was our first experience of listening to English spoken by its native speaker. Then, all of a sudden, there was a big shout behind us and, as we turned, we were slapped in our face. There stood a corporal shouting at us, "Don't you know he is an enemy captive?" As we went back to our underground quarters after this incident, we said to each other, "This is war. We should have nothing but hatred for enemy soldiers."

About ten days later, we were attacked by the advancing American troops. The attack was fierce and I was wounded in the left arm. I was taken to an underground field hospital about ten miles in the rear. There my arm was amputated. I was in this dark, damp, and filthy hospital for about two weeks with little food and medical treatment. Then the hospital was abandoned as the American troops kept advancing. Those patients like me who could not walk were left behind to die. But two days later I could gather all my strength, stood up, practiced walking, and slowly moved out of this underground field hospital.

I do not remember for how many days I roamed in the battlefield, perhaps for four or five days. I do not remember what I ate or where I rested. One day I was so exhausted that I was taking a nap leaning against a huge rock. Then, I was awakened by an American soldier who was apparently patrolling the area. You can imagine how shocked I was. My body started shaking remembering my encounter with that American captive only a few weeks ago. But my fear was soon gone when this soldier offered me a cup of water saying, "Mee-zuu, wa-ter." I drank it. Then I was taken in a jeep to an American field hospital in a tent fifteen miles away from the front. There I was given a careful medical treatment. The American medical officer who treated my wound said to me jokingly that from that time on I should never kill maggots because they kept my wound clean by eating the pus. Thanks to the American medical treatment, my wound healed in about two months.

Even as a young student, I kept wondering what made the difference between us Japanese soldiers and those American soldiers. How could soldiers be trained to kill enemy soldiers and at the same time and retain sympathy for the same enemy soldiers? Was it religion? Was it education? My own conclusion was humanity. One

can be trained to hate others, but one can also be educated to retain one's love for humanity. I may sound very abstract, but I feel that cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural understanding may be achieved if we retain and cherish our basic, even instinctive love for humanity.

Now, I move on to relate to you my other cross-cultural experiences. In 1950, five years after my first unforgettable experience, I won a competitive Government scholarship to study in America. I was asked which university I wanted to go to. Since I had little knowledge of American universities and since scholarship was to be given for only one year, I felt that it did not matter much where I was sent. So I replied to the governmental agency that I wanted to go to a small college in a small town where I could observe American democracy in action. The agency complied with my request and sent me to a small college in a small town in the State of Georgia. Here I withhold the names of the college and the town to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding.

The college had a student enrollment of about 500 and the town's population was about 1,200. The students and the town's people were kind to me. But very soon I was surprised to find that strict racial discrimination was practiced in this town—not only in this town but also in all the Southern States. Schools, restaurants, theaters, and public transportation practiced the policy of segregation. As we all know, the Black people overcame this public policy of racial discrimination in the 1960's, as they marched singing "We shall overcome."

I thought racial discrimination was a national disgrace for Americans who were proud of their democracy. Then, I was truly shocked to be told by an American anthropologist that Japanese, too, practiced discrimination for centuries. It was discrimination not on the basis of the color of skin but on the basis of occupation. For centuries those Japanese who were engaged in the occupation of butchering and skinning animals were discriminated against and they were practically forced to live as "untouchables" and "an invisible race" in segregated sections of towns called *buraku*. Even in modern times when many of them were no longer engaged in butchering business, they encountered hardships in seeking jobs, getting married, and mixing with fellow Japanese. Under the influence of the American efforts at racial equality, the Japanese, too, began solving the buraku problem. The B Government began allocating a huge amount of budget to raise the standard of living of the buraku residents and publicize the problem to the nation. As a result, today, there is much less discrimination against the buraku people, but the traditional psychological barrier still remains. The Japanese as a nation should be singing, "We shall overcome."

Another cross-cultural experience took place in the same Georgia town that I spoke of. Before I left Japan for America in 1950, I said to myself, "Get a driver's license because I am going to a country of automobiles." In four months of time before my departure, I practiced driving. When I thought I was able to drive with one arm, I went to the police station and applied for a driver's license. But, to my dismay, my application was not even accepted on the ground that I was physically handicapped. I protested and asked the officer in charge to see me actually drive. The officer refused and told me very sternly that it was clearly stated in the law book that physically handicapped persons were not to be licensed to drive. I was disappointed and asked the officer if he could drive. He said he could not, but it was his subordinate's job to give an actual driving test. In those days in Japan very few people owned a car and had a driver's license.

When I became a student at a Georgia college in 1950, one of my new American friends asked me if I wanted to drive his car around the country. I told him that I did not have a license even though I could drive. The next day he took me to the town's office and told me to apply for a license using his car. I took the test and passed it. The police officer surprised me by saying that a special parking sticker would be sent me by mail together with my new license, which would allow me to park anywhere except by a fire hydrant. The sticker was to help a handicapped person park without much inconvenience. Here I was struck by the difference between the American and Japanese attitudes towards the physically handicapped. I am happy to report to you that the Japanese attitude towards physically handicapped persons has changed greatly in the past forty years. Efforts are still being made to assist the physically handicapped to live their lives as normally as possible both publicly and privately without discrimination.

I have related to you only three of the cross-cultural experiences that I had during and after World War II. We are all aware that different cultures have different concepts of humanity. Our Association has been devoting itself to the study of intercultural communication so that we may have a clearer concept of culture and humanity. There is a difference between a purely academic research and a humanistic study. Purely academic research may lead us to the discovery of truth, but purely humanistic research can lead us to creating happy life for all.

In closing my brief inaugural address I wish you all another productive year.

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