

40th Contest Anniversary Award

Something Scarier Than the Virus

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“I am a Resident of Okayama City”

It was during the Golden Week holidays last year that I saw this label. At the time, I was in the car with my family in Okayama City. Noticing that the license plate of the car in front of us was “Tama,” I thought to myself, “What? They’ve come from Tokyo where there are so many COVID-19 patients, even though we have hardly any in Okayama.” But the next moment I suddenly noticed something. On the car’s trunk lid was a label with these words in large letters: “I am a Resident of Okayama City.” This showed that the owner of the car did not live in Tokyo but in Okayama like me. From this, I realized that the driver could not drive with peace of mind without attaching that label. How did we end up in a world like this?

At that time, “hunting license plates of other prefectures” had become a hot topic in the newspapers and the TV news. Some people, fearing the spread of COVID-19, were scratching or otherwise vandalizing cars that had out-of-prefecture license plates when they saw them. Whenever I saw such news, I couldn’t help getting angry at how stupid they were being. But what about my own reaction when I saw the Tokyo license plate? Perhaps I was just the same as them. Realizing that I shared that discriminatory feeling of wanting to distance myself, out of fear of the invisible virus, from people or places with even the slightest suspicion of infection, I felt very ashamed.

According to the Japanese Red Cross Society, there are three kinds of infection associated with the COVID-19 virus. The first is the virus as a disease. The second is the infection of worry and fear. And the third is the infection of hatred, prejudice, and discrimination. I feel that this third kind of infection is actually our greatest enemy. It is a sad fact that extreme prejudice or discrimination towards a specific disease and the people who suffer from it has occurred before in our history. One example of this is leprosy.

In the town of Oku, Setouchi City, where I live, there are two national leprosy sanitoriums. As a local, I often used to go to the summer festivals of Aiseien and Komyoen with my family when I was a kid. When we crossed the bridge to the island where the summer festival was held, I remember my mother telling me, “Once there was no bridge here. People suffering from leprosy had to live on the island apart from their families and they were not allowed to leave for the rest of their lives. It must have been so hard for them. Now, thanks to this bridge, we can all come and go freely. It’s a great bridge.”

At the site of the summer festival, former sanitorium patients were watching the Bon dance in their wheelchairs. Some of them had deformities of their mouths or ears. When I was little, I felt afraid when I looked at them. But when I saw that an adult woman near me talking to former patients quite normally and laughing happily together, I realized there was no reason to be scared. I still remember my feeling

of relief at that time. Seeing that woman's natural and proper response, my fears about leprosy disappeared instantly. I think children tend to watch the behavior and attitudes of adults towards other people and judge whether they are hatred, prejudice, or discrimination. Each person's proper behavior serves as a deterrent against anxiety, fear, and discrimination. Like the woman I saw that day, I want to be someone who can stop discrimination by the next generation through the right words and actions.

After the summer festival, I had the opportunity to learn about leprosy at my elementary school. Finding out that it can now be treated with medication, that there is hardly any risk of infection from others, and that it is not hereditary, I reaffirmed that leprosy is not something that should be feared or discriminated against. I will never forget the words of a former patient when I visited Komyoen on a field trip: "Don't forget that this place has a sad history. Please realize a society where people will never again feel so sad." We must not repeat the mistakes we made about leprosy. In spite of that, amid this COVID-19 crisis, I feel we are not putting those lessons to good use.

When you think about it, leprosy and COVID-19 are quite similar. In both cases, the patients and their families, who we should be protecting, have been subjected to prejudice and discrimination from the people around them. Now I have learned that, in order to rid ourselves of the unease and fear that cause hatred, prejudice, and discrimination, it is very important to correctly learn the facts and not be misled by false information.

Now that COVID-19 is spreading again, anyone might get infected even if they take all the right precautions. I want us to realize a warm and compassionate society where we do not exclude others at such times, but treat them inclusively. Society will change through the behavior of every one of us.