

Education,Culture,Sports,Science and Technology Minister’s Award

I’m an Earthling. What’s wrong with that?

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When I was in fourth grade at elementary school, I passed by a group of female workers, as I usually did. One of them, a woman of foreign nationality, suddenly asked me, “What’s your background?” When I answered I was Japanese, the women laughed out loud. I wondered why they laughed, so I talked about it with my mother when I got home. She replied to me with a serious look, saying, “Well, I have never told you about this, but you are an earthling.” I thought that there was no way that I, a fourth-grade student, could accept such a funny answer, which sounded like something from a television program. But I was also reminded of a few differences between me and other children: come to think of it, my name was longer than that of other people, and I was scolded when I tried to write my name in a shortened form. Additionally, my father’s face looked too strong-featured, and on the phone he sometimes spoke in a language that I could not understand. You can’t trick me! While I was thinking all this, my mother continued to speak.

“Your dad is a Peruvian of Japanese ancestry. His grandpa is British, with a British father and an Italian mother. Your dad’s mother, that is, your grandma is also a Peruvian of Japanese ancestry. Her father and mother are Japanese and Peruvian, respectively. I, who married your dad, am Japanese. That’s why you are a Japanese nationality, but also a representative of people from these various countries, whose blood and pride is intermingled inside you. So you are an earthling. What’s wrong with that?” How vague my mom was!

Though a small child, I had noticed that there was no single word that could describe the somewhat vague character of my mother, but I thought there was no way that “you’re an earthling” would be an acceptable answer for anyone. “But seriously, what am I?” I asked again, loudly. My mother answered: “In your father’s country, most people are of mixed parentage, so few ask about their ancestral roots. So you are a Japanese national but an earthling. What’s wrong with that?” Time went by with my question still left insufficiently answered in a way that is understandable to an elementary school child. Although the topic was sometimes picked up again later on, my mother just answered “You are an earthling” every time. Therefore, I recently talked about it with my older sister, who told me a story about our parents that I didn’t know.

Although our parents are currently dedicated to supporting us in our sports activities, when my sister was little, they used to visit various places, including schools and

community centers, with my sister to talk about the conditions of people living abroad. According to my sister, when foreign nationals of Japanese ancestry, including my father, came to Japan to work, their children did not understand the Japanese language, which made things difficult for everyone, including school teachers, the children and their parents. My sister said that, in light of this situation, my father and grandmother offered cooking classes and put on folk dance performances for local people, in which my sister also participated, aiming to help local people understand the life and culture of them. I remembered that there are still foreign folk costumes in our house, as well as, in an album, a newspaper clipping of a photo of our family wearing the folk costumes. I asked my mother about what my sister had said. My mother told me, “That’s true. Looking at the poor conditions facing children who came from foreign backgrounds, your dad was determined, when the two of you were born, to create a brighter future for you by making it comfortable for you to live in Japan. That’s why after work he engaged in various activities till late, using available opportunities to talk with various people, even though he thought he could only achieve minor things. At the time, he said, ‘It is time to sow seeds. If my current activities sprout after our children have grown a little, and there are blooming flowers when our children reach adulthood, I will consider it a major success. That’s why I will continue to devote myself to these activities.’” I felt I came to know a side of my father that I had never imagined from who he is now.

What is a society where we do not suffer from anything? What am I suffering from? I go to school just like other children, and I am able to get on well with friends. When going to city hall or shopping, I see people with foreign backgrounds working just like other people. When thinking about this, I finally came to understand the profound meaning of my mother’s funny answer, “You are an earthling. What’s wrong with that?” together with the ordinary, common life that my father had aimed for. It was like finding a puzzle piece that fit into the blank space in my mind. I thought, I see! The blood flowing through my veins is filled with the voices, souls, cries, and thoughts of people from various countries. That is not only true of me but also of my friends. Blood has long been relayed from our ancestors to us. That’s why we have to live with might and main to hand down a brighter society to future generations.”

I finally came to understand how valuable our ordinary, common life is, and that it is based on the struggles and efforts of those who came before us.

Next time someone asks me, “What’s your background?” I intend to use that slightly witty answer: “I’m an earthling. What’s wrong with that?”