

**44th National Essay Contest on Human Rights
for Junior High School Students
Justice Minister's Award**

It is Time to Throw Away Our Own "Yardsticks"

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A is my childhood friend. She was born without the full use of her legs and uses a wheelchair. One day, when we were on our way home after hanging out, I casually said to her, "It must be tough for you every day." In that instant, A seemed to show a sad smile just a little. She laughed and said, "Well, I'm used to it." However, her reply left a little unease lingering in my mind.

I could not forget that moment even after I got home. I had just wanted to encourage her by saying, "It must be tough for you," but I wondered if I had been viewing her life from a position of pity, assuming it was tough. For A, using a wheelchair is a part of her everyday life and a matter of course. Being constantly told it is tough, she may feel that her life is perceived as being something special. That's how I started to think.

A and I still hang out, even after beginning secondary school. A is always cheerful and the kind of person who makes people around her laugh. She enjoys sports, handicraft, and other various things. Seeing her like that, I have often thought, "She is amazing for putting in so much effort." However, when I think back, that word "amazing" might have been based on my own yardstick.

The next day, I looked up the term "unconscious bias" on the internet. The term was explained as biased views and ideas that people formulate outside their conscious awareness. "Women are naturally good at housework." "The elderly are physically weak." "People with disabilities face inconvenience in everything." These groundless assumptions may sometimes hurt others without us realizing.

One survey found that around 60% of Japanese people answered that they have seen or heard about cases of unconscious bias. Staring at these words on the screen, I came to notice that my own words were exactly that, and my face turned red.

Thinking back on my experience, I remember plenty of examples of bias and prejudice around me. For instance, when I was in elementary school, we had a classmate who had just arrived from overseas. He was labeled as "bad at studying," simply because he spoke in halting Japanese. But he was actually good at mathematics and did calculations much faster than I could.

There was also a case where a boy was scolded by a teacher, "Be a man and stop crying." Crying is a natural way to express emotions, but he was restricted based on his gender. Now I think that these are examples of unconscious bias.

Several days later, I had a chance to talk to A again. I plucked up the courage to say, "I'm sorry if what I said the other day made you feel bad." A said with a smile, "To be honest, I would rather not hear those kinds of things, but thank you for noticing." Seeing her smile, I felt my unease slightly disappear.

This incident led me to be more conscious of how other people take on my words in ordinary conversation. Even if you say something based on kindness, the other person may feel uncomfortable. That is why I learned the importance of respecting and understanding the position of the other person.

Similar cases are often introduced in news reports and books. One visually-impaired man recounted being repeatedly asked, "Are you okay?" at the station, stating, "I appreciate the kindness, but too much assistance sometimes hinders self-reliance." When I read this, I could not help but reflect on my own behavior.

Human rights are rights for all people to live as themselves, and they are equally granted to all people, not only to special people. Treating someone as being special may sometimes create barriers. Envisaging the positions and circumstances of the other person and providing them with necessary support when they need—I feel that such behavior represents respect for others in the true sense.

I want to keep looking for and eliminating unconscious bias that may lie hidden within me and to refrain from measuring someone else's norm by my own yardstick. If each of us comes to hold this awareness, society will become a warmer and more reassuring place. Schools, workplaces, and towns will become spaces where all people can feel safe and at

ease.

I learned a profound lesson from a small conversation under the setting sun. It was not just an exchange with one of my friends; it led me to think about how to live, that is, to respect others. From now on, I will face everyone I meet sincerely, while keeping this experience in mind.