

A Heart Not Fulfilled

Mami Kawahira

October 31st: This year, Halloween in Shibuya, Tokyo, was a nationwide news topic because of many crimes committed on that day: pickpocketing, rapes, assaults, and so on. It was especially shameful because some people arrested were adults who must know right from wrong. On TV, a commentator shared her analysis, using the word “心の貧困”. Literally, it means “poverty of the heart.” I would translate it as “a heart not fulfilled.” So, are there so many people in Japan whose hearts are not fulfilled? If so, why? As someone who studies children’s education, I come to believe our problems start very early in our childhood.

I grew up in Okinawa and I went to public schools here. One day, when I was a senior of kindergarten, my homeroom teacher collected all her children and made us stand in lines. Then, she held a long ruler and started hitting us one by one on the leg. We didn’t know what was going on. All we could do was just stand there and suffer. We figured out the reason later. It was because one of our classmates did not listen to her. So, we were made collectively responsible for a misbehavior of one child. We were at fault as a group. Now, sadly, the punishment worked really well and kid’s behavior improved dramatically. We started checking on each other. We learned to follow the examples, and do the same as others do.

Do you think this is an extreme case? Something that happened long time ago? As a society, we probably have become more sensitive about corporal punishment or harassment, but I believe we still tend to see people as a group, and not as individuals. At daycare centers, kindergartens, public schools, teachers still see children as members of a group. For example, if there is a child who cannot sit still and listen to the teacher, she is considered to have a developmental disability. In extreme cases, some children are even afraid of being better than others. You are not welcome in your society if you are too good. So everyone tries to blend in, and sadly most of us are successful, trying.

But, now, let me ask you. Have you ever seen a “normal” kid? No child is exactly the same as the next one. I tell you, the difference among children is striking, much more so than among us adults. If there is such a thing as a normal child, she has enough reasons to be unhappy, being either worse or better than the norm. All children come to feel they are not acceptable as they are, and their hearts will forever remain unfulfilled. I often

imagine that in Japan all of us are trapped in the same box. Some try to get out, but most fail to do so. Through my own experience and by observing small children, however, I have learned this: we are not the same.

Meanwhile, I have some things to say about our early childhood education and care. First, I think we should become more “children-centered” rather than “teacher-centered.” Of course, to sit still and listen to others is important in society, but it doesn’t necessarily mean you have to be the same. Second, I suggest that we let children make rules and options by themselves. I’m sure they will follow their own rules. We, adults, tend to think children are helpless, but are they really? Third, I believe, what we can do best as adults is to create a great environment for children to make progress in their own ways. That way, children will feel they are accepted as an individual and that we will help children fulfill their hearts.

A couple months from now, I will probably be working at a preschool or a kindergarten. I’m ready to embrace each one of my kids as who she is. I promise you today to listen to the voice of every child and help her find out her own potentials. I hope more people will join me in my efforts so that Japan will celebrate a truly happy Halloween to our hearts’ content.

Thank you for listening.