

Prime Minister's Award

Toward a Society Where People Readily Help One Another

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I live my life in a wheelchair because I have a disease called congenital cerebral palsy. I often face inconvenience in my wheelchair life, but there are times when I am filled with a warm feeling.

One such time occurred to me when I was getting on a bus on my way to weekly physical therapy. The bus driver usually helps me, but on that day, a gentleman on the bus, noticing me in a wheelchair, immediately asked me, "Shall I help you?" and lifted my wheelchair up onto the bus. The driver, after making sure the brake was on, also came to me and folded up a seat to make space for my wheelchair. I was feeling relieved to be able to ride on a bus without difficulties, when a lady sitting behind me talked to me, "I got this from someone. Please have this if you like," and put kashiwamochi, a rice cake wrapped in an oak leaf, in my hand. She might have thought of her grandchild living away from her place when she saw me. I guess so because she told me she lived alone. Anyway, I was surprised to encounter these people, who so kindly reached out to me, a total stranger. Compassion may be contagious. After these warm exchanges, the bus was filled with a more peaceful atmosphere than usual, which made me feel comfortable. This only half an hour event in the bus warmed my heart, too.

It was a really pleasing day, but not every day goes like this. I feel sad when some passengers on a bus or train give me a blatantly annoyed look or when a bus driver has some trouble helping me get on a bus. I was wondering how people in wheelchairs like me could live a life without any worry or restraint, in the same way as non-disabled people. Then, the other day, I watched a TV news report featuring Yusuke Terada, a YouTuber in a wheelchair. He travels across Japan in a wheelchair by hitchhiking, asking people, "Could you push my wheelchair?"

Mr. Terada has trouble walking due to cerebral palsy, the same disease as mine, but he used to walk around only with a stick to show that he was as capable as non-disabled people.

When he was twenty, he began to use a wheelchair on his parents' advice. He said he did so reluctantly, but once he started using it, he was thrilled to gain more freedom than he had imagined. This expanded his world, and a thought started to grow in his mind: "I want to travel this new world of mine while I can still move my body." He came to think that while he was on a trip, he might be able to spread the atmosphere of naturally helping each other in communities by asking people, "Could you push my wheelchair?" He also came to hope that he could create a society where all the people facing difficulties, such as the elderly and those with a stroller as well as those in a wheelchair, can ask with no hesitation, "Could you give me a hand?" He has so far traveled to over 30 prefectures including a visit to Kagawa in April this year with the assistance of more than 400 individuals and groups, and this took him three years.

I was surprised that Mr. Terada, who has the same disability as me, was bravely undertaking such a grand project. I always hold back and hesitate to ask for help because I am afraid I might bother other

people. But Mr. Terada quickly becomes friends with strangers and readily asks for their assistance. I thought I should learn from his attitude of cheerfully and actively communicating with other people. I also learned from him that, if I wanted to see a better society, it was important to move into action, reach out to people around me, and have them understand my thoughts, instead of just wishing for it.

I admit that I was selfish and did not feel much gratitude toward others as I so strongly wanted to compete with the non-disabled and be treated equally. But come to think of it, wheelchair ramps were installed in various places and bumps were leveled to save me from inconvenience at my junior high school; an elevator was added to the ferryboats that I often ride on; and wherever I go, there are many people who offer to help me. Now I know I live my life with lots of support from many people around me.

But then, am I a person only to be supported? My family has supported me for 13 years, but I, too, have been of help to my family (so I believe). My parents do not particularly say they love me, but I am fully aware that they really care for me, though I need a lot of assistance. On the other hand, as a triplet, I sometimes help my triplet brothers with their homework. When I think about it in this way, I cannot imagine a relationship where only one side helps the other. The mere existence of someone can be the support of someone else. Human relationships are based on “the spirit of helping one another.”

So, from now on, I will not be afraid to say, “Could you help me?” and never take others’ support for granted. I want to be a person who can sincerely say, “Thank you” for the help I receive from others. When you have some difficulties, remember “the spirit of helping one another.” When I see someone needing assistance, I will be happy to give a helping hand. It is difficult for me to do so using my body, but I can lend an ear and think about the problem together. I want to be an important existence for someone. To help, to be helped, and to be grateful for the help. These are the first step I can take toward a society where people readily help one another.