Individuality

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"Individuality is just being selfish." Some people say. Or sometimes people say, "Individuality is only thinking about yourself." I disagree, because individuality can also exist when you are open to others around you. I think individuality is standing up for yourself with the people around you, and not making them smaller or weaker than you are.

When I was 7, I moved to England due to my father's work. At first I didn't understand any English, but I attended regular school with British girls.

At the beginning of my time at this school, one girl would come and sit beside me during break time. She would talk to me and say things such as "Say hello." or "Say Maho". I would repeat her words and she would praise me. Another girl helped me with my reading. Although I had little communicative ability, everyone accepted me as who I was.

In year 3, every Monday we had a special time to talk about something you wanted to share. During this time, the whole class was relaxed. At that time, I didn't realize why I felt comfortable. However, looking back now, I know I felt secure because I knew that I was safe from any kind of hatred or discrimination. We were all able to speak up as an individual, as everyone respected each others' opinion no matter how different they might be.

Having spent most of my childhood abroad, once we returned to Japan, settling back was hard. Life was different. People and their way of thinking were also different. With this dramatic change, I became different too. I missed England terribly. I was scared to lose grip with the only place I thought I belonged to. Automatically, I shut myself out. I thought that if I didn't accept anything from Japan it would help me to keep in touch with England. However, I was wrong. But of course, I didn't know it back then. That is why I wondered why I couldn't make new friends, and why I couldn't speak and act as an individual. In short, I was floating in a bubble.

It was my experiences in England which helped me. Recalling how we were so accepting of each other when I was in England, I slowly started to make an effort to respect my classmates in Japan. Gradually, I became more positive and started listening to other people's way of thinking.

5 years on, I have as many friends in Japan as I had in England. I realized that accepting others doesn't take anything away from me, but only makes me see different qualities of different people more clearly. I now understand why I couldn't build true friendships at first in Japan, as I had in England. After all, who would want to be friends with someone who doesn't reciprocate?

I know now, that we can only express our individuality when we are also accepting of others as individuals. I know this because, whether in England or in Japan, when I paid respect to others, I felt free from discrimination and hatred, and I was able to stand up for myself. Individuality doesn't mean being selfish or only thinking about yourself.

In this world we live in today, there aren't a lot of people who live in peace. War, discrimination, hatred and violence are all around us. I think the reason for these is a lack of respect for people and their individuality. If we can respect each others' differences, if we can have an open heart to see other people's point of view, and if we can understand that individuality can never be created by one person alone, then and only then can we move forward towards peace, individually and together.

Thank you for listening.