

If You Remember

I have 13 grandfathers. Of course, one of them, my mother's father, is related to me by blood, but the other 12 are formerly homeless elderly men living in Tokyo. Last year when I was studying abroad in Tokyo, I spent five months volunteering with a non-profit organization called Sanyukai which provides aid to homeless individuals living in Taito ward. During that time, 12 formerly homeless men who were also volunteering with Sanyukai allowed me to record their life stories for my undergraduate thesis. I would like to share a little of those stories now.

After losing their physical strength or becoming unable to find work, many of these men became unable to continue their jobs as day-laborers and lived on the streets until they reached the age when they could apply for welfare. They were given aid by Sanyukai, and to return the favor they began volunteering alongside students, housewives, and nuns helping other homeless individuals. All of them are elderly, and the eldest will turn 88 this year on August 14th. Most of them have become estranged from their families and many told me that they no longer kept in contact with wives or children they left behind in their hometowns. One man told me he didn't know if his wife and children were alive or dead after his home prefecture was affected by the Tohoku earthquake disaster. In many cases, these men gradually became distant from their siblings, and felt unable to attend family gathers because they never got married.

From these stories, you may think that these men are lonely and pitiful. However, they come to Sanyukai every day, drink tea, chat with each other and with volunteers, and help each other out, and through this they developed a community. When I saw the smiling faces of these men, who were living happily even though they did not have money or blood family to take care

of them, I started to wonder: what exactly is important for people to feel they have a purpose in old age? These grandfathers taught me the answer to this question.

If I don't show up for a while, someone will come and check on me. If I have a problem, someone will help me with it. If I die, someone will take care of my funeral proceedings. Even if I die, someone will keep my picture and greet it each day as they go about their life. I won't become a lost forgotten soul; someone will remember me. The eldest man who turns 88 this year lost his parents in the firebombing of Tokyo in 1945 and said "Knowing I won't become a lost soul is my biggest happiness. Now I have nothing to worry about."

I often hear that the world, and Japan especially, is becoming one where people's personal bonds are disappearing. Through centralization, rural depopulation, and exhaustion, the connections that hold people together are being stretched to the breaking point. Because of that, many people live in loneliness, and many people die in loneliness. This is not only sad, but a terrible waste. When we listen to the stories of elderly people, their knowledge and experiences are passed on to us and keep living. If we take their stories into our hearts, then a part of them will not disappear, no matter what. In the sad time of life as elderly people approach the death that waits for everyone, the fact that someone will remember them, that someone will remember that they lived, this can comfort them. No matter what kind of life a person has lived, we shouldn't let anyone disappear from this world without anyone noticing.

The most important thing I learned from this experience was that even if someone passes away, their spirit will keep on living through the hearts of people who knew them and retell their stories. If we remember, then death is not the end.