

POINT OF VIEW/ Genichiro Takahashi:

## **The real impact of Empress Michiko's words**

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SPECIAL TO THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

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Many years ago, a remarkable woman delivered the keynote address at a congress of the International Board of Books for Young People. I got hold of the text of her speech by chance and found it inexplicably beautiful. I was profoundly moved by her words.

The woman recalled her anxiety as a child when she was evacuated from her home in Tokyo during World War II. She then talked about the "sorrow" and "despair" all children are bound to feel from time to time. But what I remember most vividly are these words: "Reading taught me that life is surely not a simple thing. We must recognize and face life's complexity. In person-to-person relations. In country-to-country relations, too."

Ever since then, I have been on the lookout for anything this woman writes or says.

The woman is none other than Empress Michiko of Japan.

On her 79th birthday on Oct. 20, the empress responded in writing to questions submitted by the media about her thoughts and events that impressed her during the past year.

By far the longest response she gave concerned the Japanese Constitution. "It seems to me that this year, before and after the Constitution Memorial Day in May, we saw more active discussion regarding the Constitution than in previous years," she noted. She then went on to discuss the Itsukaichi Draft Constitution, which was one of many private draft constitutions that were written in the late 19th century prior to the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1890.

The Itsukaichi Draft Constitution vigorously upheld freedom of speech, freedom of religion and other fundamental human rights that are guaranteed under the current Constitution. The draft was discovered in a warehouse in Itsukaichi, western Tokyo, in 1968, about 90 years after it was written and then forgotten.

Michiko said, "I was deeply impressed by the strong desire for political participation of the people who lived at the dawn of modern Japan and their passionate hopes for the future of our country."

I was moved beyond words as she continued, "As a document of how ordinary citizens in Japan had already developed an awareness of civil rights at the end of the 19th century, in a country which was just opening up after years of closure, I think it is a rare cultural asset in the world."

One thing I noticed about her birthday message this year was that she seemed to dwell longer than usual on mourning her close friends who passed away during the year. They included Shizuko Ohashi, co-founder of Kurashi no Techo lifestyle magazine; Beate Sirota Gordon, who was deeply involved in drawing up the current Constitution; and Etsuko Takano, general manager of the Iwanami Hall film theater in Tokyo.

"Having lost these women who have walked a few steps ahead of me in life, I have been reflecting once again on their lives and the times that they lived through," the empress said.

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With her serene words echoing in my mind, I recalled what Yasuji Hanamori (1911-1978), the other co-founder of Kurashi no Techo, once said: "Once again, we must search the back of our storage room or closet or desk drawer and dig out 'democracy' that has become rusted, bent out of shape and broken. We must clean the rust, find the missing parts and restore it completely. Democracy is for 'demos,' or ordinary folk like us. In a democracy, our lives come first."

I also thought of the world's most advanced constitutional provision on women's rights that was proposed by Beate Sirota Gordon but never adopted. And there were these words of Etsuko Takano: "No matter how well-made, any film that glorifies war or highlights violence does not move me."

While going through the names of people she mourned, Michiko mentioned Shuzen Hokama, a leading authority of Okinawan studies, from whom she said she and her husband, the emperor, "had learned much about Okinawa."

Having miraculously escaped the slaughter at the Maeda escarpment during the bloody Battle of Okinawa in the final months of World War II, Hokama devoted the remainder of his life to questioning that war.

He made this unforgettable comment late in his life: "It took about 10 years to remove the bullet and stone fragments that were lodged in my body. Some were surgically removed, but many simply became dislodged from my skin, in the way the human body

eliminates toxins. Every time something popped off my skin while washing myself in the bath, I flashed back to the Maeda escarpment."

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Quality opinion magazines print fine opinions, observations and scholarly discourses every month, and they were certainly not lacking this month.

A feature titled "Big debate by Japanese, Chinese, South Korean and American intellectuals" that ran in Bungeishunju magazine, proved that contrary to what the debate participants seemed to think, dialogue is always possible for people with different ideological convictions so long as they are willing to face one another squarely.

An interview series with economist Kosuke Motani in Shincho 45 magazine provided valuable advice on our country's future. Other opinion magazines, such as POSSE and Journalism, also ran fine, meaty features.

But I have my reasons for focusing on Empress Michiko's words instead.

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Opinion magazines discuss politics and society, and sometimes criticize them. Since we have to live with the political and social circumstances that govern our lives, we certainly cannot do without those magazines.

Yet, no matter how true and impressive the words we read there or are used in journalism, we sometimes feel strangely divorced from them, as if they are of no immediate concern to us.

After reading Empress Michiko's words and the words of the people she repeated in her writing, I went back to them with a sense of sweet longing, and I realized something common to them all. And that is, the empress and all the people she quoted invariably thought of "society's problems" as their own problems, and were able to talk about them in their own words.

Only such words escape falling by the wayside to be quickly forgotten.

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Genichiro Takahashi, a professor of linguistic expression at Meiji Gakuin University, was born in 1951. He discussed nuclear power generation and the recent frenzy over the 2020 Tokyo Olympics in his conversation with critic Tatsuru Uchida in Volume 57 of SIGHT magazine. SPECIAL TO THE ASAHI SHIMBUN