

## **Three Actions That Start with Me**

(Original in Japanese)

*Eri Nakayama*

*(Age 14, Japan)*

*Hiroshima Nagisa Junior High School*

In the mornings, I ride the train to school. I ride in the same train car at the same time every day. And every day, a blind man rides in the same car as me, and always sits in the same seat. He gets off the train at a different station. He gets off at the station where the most people get on. When his station is announced, with a flutter he takes out a folding white cane from his bag, and as though he can see perfectly, he weaves his way through the crowd and exits the train.

I observe this same scene every day. When the man passes by, many people look at him as if he's a bother to them. It always pains my heart to see this, and every time, I think about moving to another car. Why do people look at this blind man so coldly? Why does the crowd feel the need to avoid him even though there's nothing bad about him? Every time I see this, I want to change people's cold hearts, and I want to be able to do more than just observe.

When I was still in grade 8, we had a series of classes on the theme of "living together". We tried to understand the situations of blind and deaf people by identifying with them, and we thought about what we can do for them. What stuck in my mind most from those classes was a talk by a deaf person named Ms. Kohri. Ms. Kohri has a wonderful job traveling the world almost daily, bringing countries together by translating the sign languages of various countries into English, Japanese and other languages. I imagined that, before she got such an important position, she must surely have wished she could break free of her deafness. But Ms. Kohri took pride in being unable to hear, and was actually happy about it.

I was very surprised to hear this. I had always said things like "Poor them" in regards to blind and deaf people, and now I felt that I owed Ms. Kohri an apology for thinking that way about something that she was proud of. And not only Ms. Kohri—I felt deeply apologetic to blind and deaf people all over the world.

I also learned something from Ms. Kohri. The title of her talk was "I'm Fine, I'm Fine." I interpreted it to mean that no matter how disabled someone is, they are all right, and that if we have the courage to reach out to them without hesitating, we can make a connection with anyone and come to understand each other. I don't know if this interpretation is correct or not. But that, I think, is what I learned from Ms. Kohri. I feel that Ms. Kohri filled a gaping hole in my mind with new ways of thinking about blind and deaf people.

Recently, everyone is talking about 'equality'. Among those calling for equality are some who, like I once did, take a narrow-minded view of blind and deaf people, saying, "Poor them". I know I can't have all of these people hear Ms. Kohri's talk, so what I would like is to reach out to those with the same mistaken view that I had, and teach them what I learned from Ms. Kohri's talk, and how it changed me. We are all the same. Even though we look different, we live on the same earth, we look up at the same sky, and we are all living as human beings. I want to change the minds of people who are unaware of this. The change doesn't have to happen all at once. Through the actions we take, our message spreads, even a little, to the people around us, and one by one, I think people will start to change. Since I'm still in junior high school, there is only a little I can do right now. But when big changes come from small, gradual actions, I believe we can call it a great success. One idea that I've had is to create train cars specifically for disabled people, so they can ride with peace of mind and live easier.

Morning again, same time, same train car, same scene. The car is so packed with people that the blind man can't get off. "He's getting off," I say to the people around me, and guide the man to the platform. The man smiles at me and says, "Thank you." I feel that I've taken the first step to change.