

BIRDS THAT FORGET TO SING

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It all happened a year ago. I was looking for the sports column in the newspaper when one article flashed into my eyes. I started reading about the life of a young boy in Pakistan named Iqbal Marsi. I read how at the age of 4 he was sold, sold into slavery to work as a carpet weaver. How at the age of 10 he escaped and started travelling around the world, talking about the circumstances the children were facing. And I read that at the age of 12 he was shot dead. I thought about his life and I looked at mine. Today, I am standing here to broaden your knowledge about the ongoing issues of child labor.

According to the International Labor Organization ILO, 250 million children are said to be working in the world today. Children are working on roads, where you see them pouring molten metal without any protective gear at all. Youngsters scavenging through rubbish and trash, trying to find anything they can resell. The UN Chronicle published in 1997 reported an unbelievable number of 60 as the percentage of working children in the Philippines exposed to chemical and biological hazards that cause respiratory diseases. And half of the child workers are constrained to work, eventually dropping out of school. To one's sorrow these children soon forget what they have learned. They are just like birds that have flown but have forgotten to sing. Innocent little ones are hurled out into the public with no option to make the most of their chances. For students in Japan, there are days when teacher's words sound like a lullaby. But for a lot of kids in the developing countries, that's their greatest dream. For one day to have a chance to receive education.

One of the main reasons of this problem is said to be poverty. And I'm sure that many people would say, well the world simply doesn't have enough, enough resources, enough money, enough food for everyone. Well the factor is not the deficiency, but that there is not an equal distribution of it. In fact if you take the top 447 richest people alive, they own half the money of the world's population. If you take the richest man in the world Bill Gates and the two executives of his company 'Microsoft', they can actually buy the entire continent of Africa. Let's take a look at our every day choices, something as simple as golf. Every year in this world 40 billion dollars are spent for this game, when we only need a quarter of this money yearly, to provide

education to every child. We have to ask ourselves, what are our priorities?

In order to give every child a chance, the advanced countries must turn their eyes to this problem. To begin with, I recommend elementary, junior-high and high schools here in Japan to align and become sister schools with that of the developing countries. And by chance, they might even gain the opportunity to visit those countries in the school excursion. "Seeing is believing". Through this process the Japanese students can understand the situation their peers are in. I believe the students can come back with a story to share, and an idea to help their peers in the world.

As for myself I had a chance to visit India this summer. I remember asking the human rights staff, how I could help. He said to me that the most important thing that we could ever do, is to keep in mind that there are children struggling in absolute poverty, because of the greed, because of the wastefulness, by many of us in the advanced nations. And it was that day that I understood for the first time in my life, that being a global citizen, is more than just being able to travel. It's more than speaking many languages. It's about making commitment in our lives for a more justiced and humane society, no matter where we live.

Lastly, I want to leave you with one final thought. These children are birds, which will eventually fly to the everlasting sky. Let those birds fly with a song to sing. A song will be the strength to overcome the difficulties awaiting ahead. Let's teach the birds how to sing before they fly. Let's give children education before they work. It is bad enough to step in someone's line, but unforgivable to step on someone's dream. We must never trample on children's hopes. Not another one, not another day.