

Precious but Fragile

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"The new nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom." President Lincoln pointed out. "We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom." President Kennedy declared. Freedom of speech guarantees us the right to express our own opinion. Therefore, I can express my own opinion right here on the stage today. In today's China tens of thousands of students demonstrated for demanding it. Freedom of speech is precious, but at the same time it is very fragile, too. Today I would like to discuss the significance of the free expression.

Last year Emperor Hirohito got very sick. We could easily recall the self-restraint movement. Let me tell you one example. That was a car advertisement on TV. One guy appeared and called out, "OGENKIDESUKA" or "Are you well?" But after the announcement of the Emperor's illness, they erased his words. So the guy only moved his lips without any words. Like this advertisement, many TV programs were restrained or replaced. In January of 1989 Emperor Hirohito died of cancer. In the three days following his death, Japan was faced with a very strange situation. All mass media reported only one news story: the death of the Emperor. All TV and radio programming was cancelled and replaced by the special interest stories about the late Emperor. Every newspaper and magazine reported the same information. Restrained? Restrained by themselves? No. It seemed to me that so called UYOKU or right wing reactionaries were behind this. We could easily recall the Nagasaki mayors incident. Moreover Asahi Shimbun reported on May 30th that Uyoku pressure canceled many events concerning the Emperor and Showa history.

Then let's get a perspective. When we take a look at today's world, we also see some movements against freedom of speech in other countries. In Britain, Salman Rushdie published a novel called "Satanic Verses." According to Time Magazine, Ayatullah Khomeini claimed that there were some parts of the book that insulted Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. He was entitled to make his claim because freedom of speech guarantees his right to express his opinion, but Khomeini took a radical action, which was wrong. He ordered that the author be killed! His order shocked the whole world.

Then many countries decided not to publish the book, including Japan. One man's order frightened us into giving up our freedom of speech. How fragile it is!.

I think there is one common thing in these two incidents. That is violence for oppressing other's opinion. Then if freedom of speech is lost, what will happen? In 1925, the Japanese government created "Chianijiho", the maintenance of public order act. This law regulated freedom of speech, and applied especially to newspapers. Fascism had captured Japan. The Second World War followed. Japanese students are taught this lesson all through their school years. My parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, everybody who experienced the war, tells us not to repeat this tragedy. Look at today's China! If you say something against the government, they will arrest you. The control by totalitarians.

Then what can we do against it? I suggest two things today. First, the Japanese government should establish a press ombudsman system. Ombudsman is an official who receives and investigates complaints made by individuals. Many European countries have this system and it is working. Uyoku people will be quieter. Second, we should be patient and tolerant enough to listen to others. Especially the students should do this through discussion. Because, in the process, we could develop our attitude of listening to others carefully and expressing our opinions honestly. Introduction of de-bate to home room class is a good way, I think. If people could develop this fair attitude, they do not depend on violence.

Freedom is precious but fragile. The Emperor's death and Rushdie' s problem have given me an opportunity to consider how important freedom of speech is.