

In the Shadow and the Light

Today, I stand before you not merely as one person, but as a soul shaped by two worlds: Japan and Brazil. However, life wasn't as smooth or easy as it may seem. Before you begin to lose interest in what may sound like a common topic, please hear my story.

Let me rewind to 1908, when Japan was in the midst of an economic crisis. Japanese people boarded a ship called the Kasamaru, setting sail for Brazil in search of a better life. Among them, though not my direct family, was the beginning of a path. Five years later, my great-grandfather followed, then my great-grandmother.

Life in Brazil was far from easy. It was a land of coffee plantations, unfamiliar customs, a different language, and faces that didn't resemble their own. Discrimination wasn't just common, it was a daily reality. Yet they didn't give up. They chose to stay, to grow, to become Brazilian without forgetting their Japanese roots.

Fast forward to today, and the tide has turned. Making the same journey, we arrived here in 2018. As much as I miss the country I grew up in, I can't help but admire the beauty of Japan. I was so excited about everything, the places, the food, the culture, and the people. Everything almost seemed perfect. But nothing in this world is perfect, and my struggles began, mostly at school.

Back in elementary school, I couldn't read or write Japanese. I hated school and had no friends. Most of the time, I was confused. I felt like I was in complete darkness.

But even in that darkness, a light appeared. Someone stood by me, my Japanese class teacher, Ms. Saito. No matter what happened, she was there. She listened. She encouraged me. Thanks to her, I learned Japanese faster than I ever expected.

Just as things began to improve, life gave me another challenge: bullying. At first, it was small things like always being "it" in tag games or being bossed around during cleaning time. But gradually, it got worse. My indoor shoes would go missing. Someone kicked me from behind while I was washing my hands. *"I guess it's normal for a foreign kid to go through this,"* I told myself.

But then things went too far. One day, a schoolmate punched me, giving me a black eye. My mind told me to fight back but I didn't. I come from a religious family. My parents always taught me to be good to others, no matter what. Maybe that's why I couldn't bring myself to fight back. To this day, I still don't understand why he hated me so much.

Yet, through all of that I saw goodness in people. One of them was my soccer coach. When we had just moved here, money was tight. My parents couldn't afford a pair of soccer shoes for me. So, my coach bought me a pair himself and even took me to almost every practice.

Another time, I lost control of my bicycle and crashed on the street. My knees were bleeding badly. An elderly couple saw me, rushed across the street, carried me to their home, and took care of my injuries before sending me safely on my way. And of course, Ms. Saito who never stopped supporting me.

Discrimination, bullying, and indifference exist everywhere in the world. I believe they're part of life. But it's up to us how we respond, how we choose to see the goodness that still exists in this sometimes-cruel world.

So, let us choose kindness over cruelty. Let us choose respect over prejudice. It doesn't matter what color your skin is.

Let us build a better, more compassionate world than the one we have now.

Thank you for listening.