

Look Beyond the Image

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Seven years ago I went to my first homeless soup kitchen, run by the Catholic Social Action Center in Kobe or SAC for short. That's when I first met people who are called homeless. I was very young, so I didn't know about their situation then, but I remember thinking that they looked a bit dirty. What is your image of homeless people? A lot of people seem to have a stereotype image of them as being smelly, dirty, lazy, scary people, who have no shelter. I wondered if this is what they are really like.

Government estimates in 2011 show that there are 10,890 homeless people living in Japan, but this number does not include the growing number of "net café refugees". People become homeless for many different reasons. According to research done by the SAC, 56 percent lost their job, 16 percent were injured or too old to work and 28 percent for other reasons, like nowhere to go after coming out of hospital or drinking and family problems. I wondered why the homeless don't stay with their family. Mrs. Yamano from SAC explained, "in most cases their families have abandoned them". There are valid reasons why people are homeless and it is not because they wanted to be in this situation. It happens and it is possible that we too could become homeless someday.

Many homeless people stay awake at night and sleep during the day. If we see a homeless person asleep during the daytime, we may think that they are lazy. In fact, they feel safer and warmer to sleep in the daytime. At night they collect other people's recyclable goods to make some money. They are also afraid of being attacked at night so they sleep during the day. Isn't it shocking to find out that people are afraid of being attacked at night while sleeping? I was even more shocked and angry when I read about two junior high school students attacking a homeless man in Amagasaki in 2010, because they didn't like this man and wanted to hurt him by setting his tent on fire. They thought that nobody would care if they attacked homeless people. Why do these things happen? Don't they have basic human rights? Do we have prejudice against homeless people?

Recently I went to a homeless soup kitchen again, and what I noticed most was that everyone was quite friendly. One man, after the meal, taught my sister how to play a Japanese board game called "igo" and another man entertained us with his magic tricks. I realized that even though these people were smelly and dirty, deep down we are all human beings with the same feelings and social needs.

I know that the ideal solution maybe to help the homeless find housing and earn some money. Perhaps there should be more programs run by the government and other agencies to help them improve their lives, but what can we do?

I think we should be more open-minded and try to understand them and their needs. Young people like us can give our time, acceptance and even friendship to these people. How we think about and treat the homeless may hinder them in improving their lives. One way to eliminate our prejudice is to look into and think more about the homeless people issue. If possible, try to attend a homeless soup kitchen, with a friend maybe, and get to know homeless people better. While they may be dirty and smelly, they are not necessarily lazy and scary. They are ordinary human beings like the rest of us. Prejudice towards the homeless should have no place in our society in the future, and it all starts with us making the first move.