

# **Realizing the potential of an aging society**

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Japanese society stands on the cusp of change. Starting from this year, large numbers of the postwar baby-boom generation will reach retirement age — the so-called “2007 problem.” The country’s over-65 population already stands at 25.6 million, more than 20 percent of the total, and this percentage will continue to expand. The aging of society is not, of course, something affecting only Japan. According to the United Nations, the global population of people over 60 — today estimated at 600 million — will approach 2 billion by the year 2050.

But the heart of this issue is not in the numbers. The problems of aging present an opportunity to rethink our social and personal lives in order to ensure the dignity and welfare of each individual.

All people have a natural desire to be needed, to have their importance to others tangibly confirmed. Our challenge is to build a society in which people feel truly valued and fulfilled throughout the course of their lives.

The wisdom and experience of older people is a resource of inestimable worth. Recognizing and treasuring the contributions of older people is essential to the long-term flourishing of any society. As a country undergoing this demographic shift with exceptional speed, Japan has the opportunity to show a positive example of creatively responding to this challenge.

In a recent survey of members of the baby-boom generation, two-thirds of respondents expressed anxiety about the future. In addition to economic issues such as the adequacy of pensions and the cost of living, they voiced concern about their own health, their ability to care for parents, etc. Indeed, many caregivers face truly heartrending daily struggles. There is a clear and weighty responsibility to respond to these voices with sensitive and effective public-policy measures.

The same survey, however, also points to positive attitudes. Although only 15 percent of the members of the baby-boom generation are now engaged in

volunteer activities, six in 10 said they hoped to do so in the future. And almost eight in 10 looked forward to developing deeper relations with their neighbors and community.

I believe that such attitudes — the desire to work for the benefit of others and to strengthen the bonds of community — can ensure the vitality of an aging society. Individuals who feel needed and strive on behalf of others can keep their youth and energy. They can transform a community, making it a warm and welcoming place to live.

There is an Eastern maxim that when we hold up a lantern for others, our own way forward is lit. Sincere efforts to brighten our surroundings return to illuminate our final years with dignity. A genuinely happy person is one who has rendered others happy.

I believe that youth can last a lifetime. Inner youthfulness is not a matter of our physical age. Rather, it is determined by the passion with which we live, the enthusiasm with which we learn, the freshness and energy with which we advance toward our chosen goal in life.

Some 30 years ago, I exchanged a series of letters with the well-loved novelist, Yasushi Inoue (1907-91). In one unforgettable passage, inspired by the sight of children setting off to fly kites during the New Year's holidays, he wrote: "I feel the need to send something aloft — a kite perhaps — to raise it high into the sky, to let it dance madly in the buffeting winds."

In another letter, Inoue wrote that with age he found himself increasingly drawn to the fierce mid-summer sun. The image of striding through such heat, he wrote, seemed to symbolize the urgent determination to accomplish something — which is actually the only proof we are alive.

Inoue was already suffering from cancer and had undergone major surgery when he began writing his final novel, "Confucius." For the next two years he continued to work on this novel, which sheds light on the humanity of the Chinese philosopher and his disciples, at times working at a desk brought into his hospital room. I recall him sharing with me these words: "There is no greater

joy than to write one's best work in one's final years, when you are coming to fruition as a person."

Do we view old age as a period of decline ending in death? Or as an ascent toward the attainment of our goals, toward bringing life to a rewarding and satisfying conclusion? A subtle difference in our inner attitude can completely change our experience of these years.

No one, not even those with seemingly limitless amounts of wealth and power, can avoid death. It is only when we become clearly conscious of our finitude — the limited amount of time any of us possesses — that we earnestly consider the question of how best to live, how to make something truly valuable of our lives.

The ideal old age might be likened to a magnificent sunset. Just as the deep red of the setting sun holds the promise of a beautiful tomorrow, a life well lived conveys the gift of hope to future generations.

But all of us, not just great novelists, have something we can leave behind. This is the unique and indelible record of our lives, the mark left by our soul on the world. The degree to which we are satisfied with our lives is something only we can judge and be responsible for. And the greatest passages of life are often those written in times of struggle.

The ultimate proof of having won in life is to be able to look back with a sense of pride and satisfaction, to be able to say that one lived fully and without regret. Perhaps the most crucial element for an aging society is a spirit of mutual encouragement toward the goal of each of us being able to say, with no hint of hesitation, that this has indeed been a good life.

The challenges of an aging society are not limited to questions of policy. They are an opportunity to reconsider the very intimate question of how we choose to live our lives.