

The Dream of Beautiful Aging

By *Watanabe Yaeji*



ABOUT 25 years ago, I served as the president director of the Japan-China Association on Economy and Trade. Around that time, I took a two-week trip to the United States. While walking the streets of Los Angeles, I came across a group of Americans who really seemed to be enjoying themselves. There were five men and five women who looked like they were around 80 years old walking toward me. I was 63 at the time. They were smiling as they walked, and were laughing and talking with one another as they took in the scenery. Seeing how much they seemed to be enjoying life, I said, “Hi, you all sure look like you’re having a good time.” They stopped and chatted with me for a bit. It turned out they lived in New York, and once every six months or so they would get together and take a two-week trip to various places in the United States. They really appeared to be enjoying their lives.

As people age in the United States, they may enjoy traveling, wearing fancy clothes, or falling in love, or they may challenge themselves with a new activity, like taking music lessons, drawing pictures or writing poetry. In other words, they look at these years as a time to really enjoy living life the way they want to. That trip was the first time I heard the phrase “Aging is beautiful.” It means that life is a beautiful, wonderful thing. That phrase startled me. I’ll never forget how I felt inspired the first time I heard it.

LIFE works in mysterious ways, and this experience ended up having a tremendous impact on me. Most people in Japan who are in their 70s and 80s tend to live out the remaining years of their lives quietly in their own homes. When they do get together with friends, they often start complaining about how they don’t want to get old, or about how their worlds are boring and uneventful. Compared with the United States, senior citizens in Japan are very passive and have a hard time seeing the joy in life. When seniors start to adopt such negative attitudes, young people start to have fewer children, thereby exacerbating the problems of the aging society. Eventually, the Japanese population could die out. I was strongly impacted by the active attitudes of those American seniors I met, and upon returning to Japan I suggested to my friends that we try to think of ways for people in their 70s and 80s in Japan to gather in groups of 10 or 20 and engage in fun activities. We talked about various ideas for about six months, and eventually created the Beautiful Aging plan.

There are many different kinds of groups in Japan, including the Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren), the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the

Japan Association of Corporate Executives. I decided to visit the leaders of these organizations and the executives of the powerful companies that form their membership to ask for their opinions. Although they were all very busy, they were very interested in creating a new trend in Japan by organizing a campaign that would encourage people to have beautiful lives. I consulted frequently with friends like Watanabe Fumio of Tokyo Marine and Fire Insurance, Kawai Ryoichi of Komatsu, Hiroe Isao of Marubeni, and Miki Akira of Nippon Steel, Nasu Sho of Tokyo Electric Power Company, and Fukuhara Yoshiharu of Shiseido. Over the course of several months, I had many conversations with people about the idea of starting a Beautiful Aging Association (BAA).

In August 1992, the BAA was established with the approval of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry). Watanabe served as its first chairperson. With approximately 80 companies as members, we began to conduct various activities aimed at encouraging people to try to design their own lives. We urged them to think about their own life plans by asking themselves various questions such as: what kind of person do I want to become? What do I want to do in the future? The BAA holds study sessions and other meetings to address these questions. We have started a movement to encourage people in their 60s, 70s and beyond to take hold of their dreams and create rewarding lives for themselves. The goal is to help older people stop complaining and instead create and follow rewarding life plans that they have developed. The surprising thing is that once we start to think about these issues, we find hidden within ourselves the potential to make our lives more rewarding, appealing and creative.

LET me explain a bit about my own journey. When I was 60, I was persuaded by a Chinese friend of mine to make a decision to live to be 125 years old. That decision was a turning point in my life. For me to live to be that age, I would have to secure enough income to support myself for that long. There was no way that I could continue to serve as the president of the Japan-China Association on Economy and Trade, where I was working at the time, for another 40 years. After thinking about my options, I decided to become a lawyer and to open my own firm. At the age of 63, I began my legal training and spent two years studying with young people in their 20s and 30s. I passed the national bar exam at the age of 65, and opened an office in Tokyo. Several of those who had studied with me at the Institute joined my firm, and today we have an office of five people. Because the firm is doing quite well, I expect to be able to have an income until the age of 125. I show up at the office every day, but I leave most of the legal work to the other lawyers there. I am therefore able to focus my efforts on developing concepts and giving lectures on topics like health, longevity, making positive contributions to the world and making Japan a better country.

I am 87 years old now, but I have become younger and healthier since the age of 65 when I started my law practice. This partly because I walk 40 minutes every day. Walking at a pace of 1 km in 10 minutes, I take four 10-minute walks each day, for a total distance of 4 km. I have been doing this for 23 years. I take the train to work rather than driving. Humans are made to walk, so walking is absolutely essential for good health.

I also began practicing a type of calisthenics known as *Makko Ho* when I was 47, and I have been doing them for 30 minutes every morning and evening for 40 years now. As a result, my body is as flexible as it was when I was 15. And I think I can maintain



Practice "Makko Ho" for 30 minutes every morning and evening

that flexibility for another 40 years. I have established a plan to live to be 125, and having both emotional and physical flexibility will be absolutely essential for enabling that to happen.

LIFE is fascinating. If we start to pay closer attention to how we live, we can grow as much as we want and become attractive, beautiful human beings. The belief that growth stops as we get older is a huge misconception. The older we get, the more we grow as humans and the more appealing our lives can become. God gives us strength. Three things are important:

- (1) we must not complain,
- (2) we must live a life of gratitude,
- (3) we must live forward-looking, active, constructive lives.

Also, have to stop being obsessed with getting something for ourselves, and instead live in a way that is kind and supportive to others. We can make Japan a better place. We can make Asia a better place. Let's work together to help make this world a more wonderful place to live. If we pool our efforts, we can achieve anything. People tend to see things as being so difficult and humans cannot

do what is difficult. If we instead look at things as being easy and work with others to find ways to solve problems, we can all share our wisdom and gradually move forward, step by step. The road will open up to us.

I look at today as the beginning of my life, and I have a lot of dreams for the future. It is my belief that if you can dream of something, you can achieve it. This year, I want to become younger, more beautiful and more energetic. I want to achieve a golf score equal to my age and become the top player in Japan. I want to create a beautiful world and have an Earth where the water and air are clean. I want to erase poverty and illiteracy. My dreams are never-ending. Dreams are the source of our life power. I hope that we can spread the notion of beautiful aging throughout Japan and create a country where many senior citizens are living rewarding lives. I will continue to pursue this goal and will strive to help make this happen. **J.S**

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