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Is There a Tomorrow for a Japanese Society without Hope? A Dialogue between Kaneko Masaru and Kaneko Masaomi

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Back to Back with Death

Kaneko Masaru: I read your book, *I've Become Homeless*. The general image of homeless people is that they've chosen that lifestyle themselves. Speaking from reality, that is totally wrong. Homeless people are in much more dire circumstances. That comes across well in your book.

The popular Tora-san movies depict people who enjoy free living rather than being fettered to a company in exchange for security. Homelessness is different, isn't it? It is no longer a "life choice." In circumstances where hope is no longer tenable, human relations also become attenuated. Before you know it, you have no choice but to become homeless. And from such a point it is not easy to find the resolve to stand up.

Kaneko Masaomi: Actually, some time after I wrote *I've Become Homeless*, I was approached with an offer to make it into a movie. But in discussing the possibility, I realized that the story they wanted was, as I had guessed, a "Tora-san" (laughter). Our opinions did not match, so, in the end, the movie never happened. Isn't it true that that's the way the homeless are seen?

Masaru: Maybe it's because people experience their own realities as painful, too, that somehow they think, "Being homeless would be easier. I suppose becoming like that is a choice I could make."

Masaomi: In that sense, the hurdle between the homeless and their observers has dropped extremely low.

The other day, guards stood in front of Shinjuku Station to close it off to the homeless. The guards were saying, "Who knows but that I might finish up on that side."

When I was researching *I've Become Homeless*, I often listened to the stories of homeless people sitting on the Shinjuku streets. About that time, my work on Municipal Assembly policies had me coming home at four am, taking a bath, and then leaving for work again at six am. I started thinking it would be easier to stay overnight on the street somewhere near the municipal offices. I had intended only to gather information, but in turning my back on the Shinjuku commotion and listening to them, I began to feel like I had no idea where I was...

Masaru: Those who become homeless have had their independence and dignity as human beings snapped in two by company "restructuring" or sustained harassment. Of course, a number of cases like that are presented your book.

Isn't the situation more severe now than when your book came out in 1994? The number of homeless people is incredible, isn't it?

Masaomi: The official count for Tokyo is about five thousand people, but I'm afraid there are probably eight thousand. Osaka is even worse. There are probably over ten thousand homeless people.

Masaru: Osaka Castle Park is like a tent village.

Masaomi: And there are about three thousand homeless in Nagoya.

Masaru: I was surprised to hear that even in Sapporo there are homeless in the underground streets—it's got to be freezing!

Masaomi: Yes. In winter it's a matter of life or death. They really are back to back with death. Homelessness is hardly a "choice."

Masaru: In no way a "choice." I think the general public lacks the vision—the power of imagination—to see what is really happening.

For example, suicide among managers of middle to small enterprises is increasing. Normally, we think, "That's nothing to die over." But if you look at each individual case, you realize how desperate each one is. There are people who commit suicide thinking, "If I die, life insurance will be paid. I can keep my family from being chased by debt collectors. This is the last thing I can do." Or, there are those who feel no motivation to recover even if told, "We can reschedule your repayment obligations." Suicides are happening among those who have lost the desire to live.

Shuttered business districts (where the majority of shops always have their shutters closed) are like that. Most of the managers have grown old. They say, "I've had enough. I want to quit as soon as possible." They don't consider what will happen to the shopping district. It's all they can do just to look out for themselves.

The reason Tanaka Yasuo [Governor of Nagano prefecture] is popular now is because he speaks about "the value of living" in terms of being able to say "This is how I am going to live my life." Talk about the "value of living" can easily end up in religion, but my sense is that the problem is not simply a matter of economics but has deeper roots. "Hope-less" People

Masaomi: I think homeless people are "hope-less," without hope. I have dealt with them extensively in my work, and really feel that to be true.

They don't think, "How will it be later on if I make a little effort now?" They can't see a future at all. If someone says, "Why don't you go to the hospital and let your body recover so that you can make one more go at it?" this is the reply that would come back: "So what if I did go the hospital? Then what would happen? Even if I got a little better, there wouldn't be any work waiting for me when I got out. So why go through all the business trouble of being hospitalized?"

Concerning lack of imagination, I think that it is not enough just to show the macro numbers. "Three million six hundred thousand people are unemployed, you know," and "So?" is how the conversation ends. It is only when you cut these numbers more finely that you can begin to see the current situation. The areas about which we do not have any macro data are the extremely problematic ones.

For example, out of the three million six hundred thousand unemployed, how many are heads of their families, with dependents? And how many of them have been job-hunting for a couple of years and are unable to find work? If you break it down like this, things get very serious.

Say it gets to the point that hundreds of thousands of the unemployed are heads of households, people supporting families, people who really have no way of feeding themselves from tomorrow. With families to care for, what are they going to do? They have to do something, maybe even commit some crime. They are on the edge. On the other hand, there are those who don't even have the energy to enter the crime scene in order to make do for now. You don't get this sense of gravity from the big numbers, but if you look at the details of each case, one by one, you can't help being overcome.

Masaru: "Hope-less" hits it on the mark. And it's not limited to the homeless. Many people no longer understand why they are alive, while there are increasingly more who do not get enraged at injustice. I believe that not getting angry demonstrates a decline in the will to live.

Half of the hope-less become homeless. The other half escape from Japan and travel abroad. As for income, they are worlds apart, but I don't think they are, in fact, all that different. There has to be a line connecting them.

Masaomi: I think of the homeless as canaries in the coal mines. Canaries were placed in coal mines to warn of gas leakages. When gas began to seep out, the canaries, in their weakness, would die on the spot. Likewise, homelessness has hit the weakest. Gradually, gas is blowing in our direction, yet we laugh, "What are they up to, those guys?"

Masaru: For example, no matter how rotten bank management has gotten, or how mistaken the policies of the Koizumi government and Takenaka Heizo and the like, there is nobody else to take their places, so their approval ratings keep rising. Meanwhile, the numbers of unemployed and "freeters" (perpetual part-timers) keep increasing.

People have this sense of security that they won't become a freeter or a homeless person. I wonder whether that is really so. They feel secure, but if you ask them, "What brings you joy in your life?" they can't respond.

After World War II, Japan allowed everything, including its responsibility for war, to slide into ambiguity. In any case, it has played the game called "economic growth." People were lashed to the company. Even their weddings and funerals and such were under surveillance. I don't think that is the least bit fun (wry laughter.) That was the game. Everyone's dream was for the company to grow big, for themselves to rise inside it. The dream was for the GNP to increase, to stand among the developed nations. When you think about it, it's a poor dream. Yet within it, each person held their own little dream.

However, in the shuttered shopping streets, people have lost even the will to suggest, "Let's revitalize this district," or "Let's make this a pleasant commercial area." Actually, a lot of people have fallen into this hope-less state but aren't even aware of it. Regarding lifestyle, 70% respond, "If I can make ends meet, that's good enough." By "making ends meet" do they mean just living and eating? Is that good enough? Poverty of imagination does not only afflict the

homeless.

Masaomi: In a world like that, human connectedness weakens. Of course, in the background lies economic poverty, yet I think in more cases, a direct motive behind the decision to become homeless is rather a poverty of human relationships. Everything—the company, the school, the neighborhood—is losing its function as a community.

Masaru: I don't like collective 'groupism' very much, but it's true that we are losing what might be called basic human relations, or the opportunity to consider oneself in relationship to others.

Masaomi: It seems to me that as that kind of sociability, mutual support, or communication erodes, we confront problems like bullying or ostracism at work and at school.

Recently, I heard something from a homeless person that rather bothers me. "We get attacked more," he said. More frequently, young people shoot them with air guns or throw rocks at them. If they end up killing someone the media goes crazy, but these kinds of assaults happen over and over on a daily basis. Kids on their way to cram school kick them, muttering, "Lazy bums!" "No sleeping in the daytime!" "Harder!" the girls egg them on. When I hear stories like this I feel that the children must be taking out on the weak their own blocked emotions about their own situations.

In addition, about ten years ago already, I did a survey because I often heard people complaining that work is not enjoyable. I was surprised by the results, which indicated that people were on bad terms with their superiors and that human relationships were just horrible. The recession wasn't even that serious at that time.

Masaru: Let me preface this by saying I don't know how universal it is. Once, when bullying was getting worse, I heard from a teacher that, "The school won't collapse." It won't be a case of teachers vs. students. Here, everyone does her or his own thing during class—reading books, walking around, singing." "Shikato" means to purposefully ignore someone or something, but it is not so much that as that unconsciously, they have stopped communicating with each other.

In that sense, the ability of the "bubble surplus employment generation" to communicate has been drastically reduced. Everyone seems to be worried about decreasing academic ability, but I don't think that the adults are so wonderfully together and that it is only the children who are going to the pits.

Masaomi: The weakening of human relationships is happening in families, too. These days we find elderly homeless people on the street who are receiving retirement funds. Legally, you need an address to receive retirement stipends. They ask what they should do since their registered address is not where they live, or how they can receive medical treatment in a hospital or as an outpatient.

In cases like these, economic circumstances are not everything. Human relations are a big factor. The other day, I met someone who said, "There was no place left for me since a child's room was needed." Work Isn't Worth It

Masaomi: Regarding employment, too, I think the framework has now begun to crumble completely. When middle-aged and older people see freeters they preach at them: "Why don't you get a job?!" But work is becoming less and less a place where one can feel motivation or zest for life. Because we force them into jobs, we end up with the 7-5-3 phenomenon. 70% of middle school graduates quit their first jobs after three years. The same applies for 50% of high school graduates and 30% of college graduates.

Masaru: Before we even mention the employed, we should note that these days there are lots of regions where only one in five high school graduates finds a full-time job.

Masaomi: Yes, the first step is a problem, too. On top of that, labor is becoming more monotonous and its intensification more common.

Masaru: As industries become more service-oriented, personnel expenses increase. So they make hiring more fluid, based on an intricate work manual. Labor has become terribly exhausting.

Managers of game centers or of pubs belonging to chains can expect to sleep from three to five hours a night if they are full-time employees. There are even students in my seminars who are thin and hollowed out from working late into the night and then getting up in the morning to go to work again. With a lifestyle like that, you can't get anyone besides freeters to do those jobs. Freeters actually work eight hours a day, five days a week. If they were full-time employees, that would be something. Deflation has people competing late into the night. Those in their thirties who were hired during the bubble still have this fantasy of switching jobs, but the reality is that if you switch jobs the conditions will be much worse. So more and more people end up not working anymore and hibernating in their rooms.

Middle-aged and elderly people say they lack perseverance. What they really mean is, "If you guys don't work, I won't get my retirement allowance." It's an extremely selfish demand. They've chased after economic growth. They had a goal in mind. Now the situation is totally different.

Masaomi: In discussing about solutions to the unemployment of youth, I hear one line of thought that goes like this: "Young people today lack work-consciousness. Therefore, we should have them experience various occupations at an early age." However, there are very few places to receive them. As the work field grows more impoverished, forcing people chase after work will simply result in them quitting.

I think we will be at a loss what to do unless we back up and rethink what it means to work.

Masaru: No matter how well you master the proper angle for bowing to customers at McDonald's, you will only be able to switch jobs to Kentucky or Lotteria (laughter). The reason why comic books and tv dramas about cooks are so popular now is because you can see your skills improving and people pleased by your work. The obverse of this is that there are very few occupations where you can clearly see yourself as useful to society—cooks, or charismatic beauticians. Granted, without money you're stuck, but that's not all. Unless you can feel motivated or see some destination, you don't stay long at the job.

In the service industry today, there are very few jobs like that. Even for full-time employees, the labor standards laws are practically meaningless.

Masaomi: It seems to me that due to the bubble, Japan has transformed into a "money standard system." Work is secondary, as in "Anything goes if it'll make money!" That's how it feels on the ground as an observant in the Labor Policy office. Convenience stores are a typical example. "Mr. A worked eight hours and sold this much. Mr. B sold only this much, so Mr. B's wages will be half of Mr. A's." That kind of thing is happening without compunction. The way results and wages are linked is "rational" to the extreme, which makes the significance of work less and less comprehensible.

Masaru: Merit-based pay sounds lovely as words: "If you work, you will be rewarded." But you yourself do not advance. Though product planning at Sony or Toyota may seem like fun, there aren't many jobs like that in the world. Mechanical labor counts for 80-90%.

It used to be that one of the best aspects of Japan was "on-the-job ingenuity." Workers took joy in that, but it is disappearing holus-bolus. With everything orchestrated by computer, technicians on the job are left little room for individual creativity.

Masaomi: People don't take much pride in making things anymore. I've heard someone say that if the shoes you made don't sell, take them to Yumenoshima [reclaimed island in Tokyo Bay where much of Tokyo refuse is dumped] and dump them. If you dump them in pairs, people will take them away, so first you throw away only the right shoes, then a week later you toss the left. Everyone is focused solely on sales. Where Did the Labor Unions Go?

Masaomi: When I do labor consultations at work, I get the impression that consciousness of solidarity is very thin among workers. For instance, people come with the complaint that their employers won't pay them. Even if I tell them, "It's dangerous to take action alone. You could all get together to negotiate, or go to the Labor Standards Inspection Bureau together," they never act in the plural. I don't think it was like this a while ago.

They have almost no communication with co-workers sitting right next to them. If I ask them, "So did you discuss this with your superiors?" they say they haven't done that either. "So why don't you take this opportunity to talk to the people at work?" I say. They ask, "You mean it's okay to discuss this sort of thing with colleagues?" That's the way things are.

Masaru: Labor unions in this country scarcely function. Recently, there are many lawsuits concerning unfair labor practices and wage discrimination that do not come up via labor unions. You think, "Why don't they go to the labor union?" but they do not rely on unions, and the unions are making no efforts to help them.

Masaomi: Presently, the law is structured around the assumption that labor unions are functioning properly and that there is a balance of power between them and corporate executives. Those for whom these conditions are not in place do not have any rights.

The same goes for protection of lifestyle. It's hard just getting to the point where you can assert your rights. In the case of today's Japan, even though laws concerning labor standards exist, if you assert your rights you will be fired. So no one says anything. This is a country where the concept of contract simply does not take root.

Masaru: What's more, Japan's labor unions are organized according to industry. The grand purpose, in which everything else is implicated, is the growth of the industry. "Even if employees force something on us, we will protect the profits of the industry." That's the way it has become. It's totally perverse.

Basically, you can't fight by yourself. That's why unions exist. The reason why people are increasingly coming to labor consultation alone and suing by themselves is because really awful things are happening.

Masaomi: I have thought for a long time that there are two kinds of labor unions. Is it ideology and face that they really care about? Or do they pragmatically lay it on the line—"If you join the union, you will have these benefits"—and create a solid organization with a clear merit system, including insurance functions? Which one is it? You know, just lining up political slogans during the spring labor offensive...

Masaru: Their slogans sound empty somehow.

At times like this when employment is becoming so difficult, a union that doesn't protect employment is meaningless.

Masaomi: One effort to bring actual merits of unionization to the fore can be seen among unions comprised of alliances of individuals hired as part-timers, temporary staff, and those who personally object to the industry. Earlier you mentioned the limits of industry-based unions. I think we can place our hopes in efforts to revitalize human relations apart from the industry. Why the Government Doesn't Compile Data

Masaru: In the 1980s during the era of Thatcherism, I made a number of research visits to local governing bodies in England. There were huge numbers of homeless people. The rich had gone to the suburbs. Immigrants and those at lower income levels were concentrated at the center. Slums developed and people became homeless. When I look at Japan now, I remember this. In cities throughout Japan—and the number is increasing rapidly—there may not be any homeless downtown yet, but you never see anyone walking down the street there.

The current Prime Minister, Blair, who appeared after Thatcher, has constantly touted community and education. That shows how bad England had disintegrated in the 80s. At present, the most unpopular politician in England is Thatcher.

If, in the name of globalization, we hurry from industry to the service professions, adopt international accounting standards, and make employment more fluid, the same situation will arise in Japan. The problem would manifest itself even more drastically in this deflation were Koizumi to imitate Thatcher or Reagan.

Masaomi: These days, market-driven theories are popular not only for the economy but for addressing employment and labor. Businesses are relaxing the rules, turning full-time employees into freeters and temporaries. They're even trying to do away with the notion of time.

Human beings can't store up sleep or work. A beer company worker, for example, is told to be flexible, to work madly to death during peak season, and then to sleep at home when he becomes "free," but humans don't function like that.

Masaru: One fundamental tenet of the ILO (International Labor Organization) Constitution is that human labor is not a commodity. Yet some are trying to erase this principle from the labor laws.

Masaomi: What they're aiming for now is basically an American-style policy, isn't it? To throw away all the good aspects that are being implemented in Europe.

Masaru: However you look at it, it is inconceivable that the American way is going to last for very long. The fact of the matter is that real wages of those at the bottom are not increasing at all. Rather, they are decreasing.

In contrast, the average yearly income of the top ten CEOs in America is about \$150,000,000 (approximately 18,500,000,000 yen). This is about forty-five times as much as twenty years ago. All I can say is that this is extraordinary. It is beyond what in Marxism is called "exploitation." Even critics have to recognize this reality.

For instance, in the world of finance, you can make more money in a single deal than a laborer would in ten years. That's how it was during the bubble era in Japan. Land bought for 50,000,000 yen would appreciate in only a few months to 80,000,000 yen. In order to earn 30,000,000 yen, it would take a mid-level worker from five to six years.

With society structured like that, you get rotten guys sitting at the top. They are the ones chanting grade-ism, performance. "Increase profits!" they demand. Why aren't people outraged at double, triple layers of unfairness?

Masaomi: Even worse is that they talk about philosophies of education. They're like preaching thieves.

Masaru: With temporaries and freeters increasing to this extent, we can't ignore their retirement and health insurance. Things can't go on like this.

Even freeters, whether employed for short or long periods, pay taxes according to their income. Industries also pay taxes in accordance with wages distributed, that becomes social security funds. It is our urgent task to create a system whereby they are acknowledged as members of society.

However, business managers' associations in Japan merely call for consumption tax increases, in order to evade their own burdens. They are not the least bit interested in really shaping society.

Masaomi: They don't follow the global standard at all.

I can say this perhaps because I don't derive my identity from the fact that I work for the government, but it seems to me that the government's bureaucratic structure is transforming in nature into a bad creditor. It's in a fix, bogged down. Their handling of the mad cow disease is a typical example.

When it comes to the question, "What would you have the government do?" one thing would be to have it gather and publish information. It is the same with the homeless. In fact, the government has deliberately avoided compiling proper statistics.

Masaru: In other countries, they may not have a family registry system, but they do have proper statistics on their homeless. In this country we have mandatory family registration, but we hardly ever create statistics on the homeless.

In short, people don't want to acknowledge that there is a problem, that the number of homeless is increasing this much.

Masaomi: That's exactly it. That's why I'm most concerned that there is no data. Why is there no data? It's simple. If you create the data, you have to address these issues in your policies. You have to protect the welfare of these people. If you had information on how many people have not had a proper meal in over three years and are on the verge of death, you'd be forced as part of your unemployment policy to expand unemployment insurance.

Masaru: Or you could say that it is important for places outside the government, too, to do the work of creating data like that.

Masaomi: We can force the government to make public the data it has. Whatever data doesn't exist, we can create. If we do that, the government will have no choice but to get moving.

Masaru: One thing that causes lack of imagination is that there is no data or information. The media is just official reports. It's gotten to the point where I tell students they absolutely must not read the front page of the newspaper (wry laughter).

Masaomi: Whenever there is a problem, the bureaucracy tries to implement measures that can withstand the criticism of society, but using only the people and resources they already have to hand. The Homeless Support Act (2002) is like that.

However, who, in actuality, do you think cares for those in a "hope-less" situation? Volunteers. Homeless people will not trust the government unless they let volunteer organizations intervene. How to Set Fire to Rage

Masaomi: Presently in the Tokyo Labor Policy office, about 50,000 labor consultations are made a year. Dismissal, retirement allowance, and failure to pay wages are what we call the Three Big Troubles. Over fifty percent of cases have to do with these issues.

Among those, overwhelmingly the most prevalent is dismissal due to bankruptcy. Absurd firings. For incomprehensible reasons, people are easily laid off. I get the sense that the anger of those who are dumped is less intense than it used to be. What are they thinking? "Some of my friends quit work, too. Well, I guess that's the way it is these days."

In popular music-discussion programs and the like, sometimes they have a question and answer section where they ask what you should do if you're fired. The response is enormous. People come for advice, like a certain brown-haired young man trying to make it as a musician: "I worked three days and was duped? only two thousand yen. Can anything be done?" There are loads of stories like that.

Yet not one young person like that gets angry. "It's okay. We can make them pay," I say. "Well, excuse me, then, Mr. Kaneko. Will you go get the money, please?" "No, you have to go get it." "No thanks. If that's the case, forget it." And so it goes. Those who get angry are middle-aged and elderly, as well as a majority of women.

Masaru: Getting mad is crucial, isn't it? I agree that not everyone has given up to that extent. They're carrying around a lot of pent up stuff, which might be dangerous if set alight.

Masaomi: I deal with a lot of sexual harassment cases. Women's anger at sexual harassment is an awesome power. Think about it. They're fighting mammoth enterprises with their own personal dignity.

Fires are ignited simply by knowing the term "sexual harassment" and avenues to vent one's rage.

Masaru: I think there are three problems: language does not capture people's feelings; obvious goals are not apparent; and there are no channels for expressing opinions. Under these circumstances, even imagination, anger, and other basic human emotions are collapsing.

Environmental problems, to which hardly any attention was paid in the past, have become big issues today. What we need is the same kind of tenacity and resourcefulness that was shown in relation to them.

