

The Truth Behind a Rainbow Nation

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This is a famous quote said by Nelson Mandela, during his speech when South Africa had changed into a democracy. Behind this positive phrase, still lies the sad reality of the tremendous gap between the rich and the poor. The people of the world are turning a blind eye to the situation and that includes our ignorance.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Today I would like to share how my experience of living in South Africa brought my attention to one of the world's most serious issues, poverty. What is your image of poverty? Is it a homeless person? Or, is it a skinny little child? Poverty is prominent everywhere, even in this wealthy and developed country, Japan. But the extent of it cannot be compared with what you see in a third world, in my case, South Africa.

The three years that I lived in South Africa made me start to think about poverty as I lived with the issue right at my door step. I had seen the situation with my own eyes, leaving me with the feeling of guilt to be on the wealthy side. At school, a program called 'Bread Buddies' was held where we made sandwiches once a week to take to a local primary school. Some students there would only have that one sandwich to eat for the day and others would take half home for their family. I could not stand the fact that these little children were going through this situation. These children told me that they sometimes received money and food by knocking on the car windows on the streets.

In most homes of the wealthy people, there would always be a maid working for them. They would do all the washing, cleaning and sometimes all the cooking. While they did the chores, the house owner would just lie on the sofa with a packet of chips watching television. My family also had a maid for a short period of time, but we did not feel comfortable with exploiting the poor in this kind of way therefore, we decided to not have one. During the short time, I was shocked and surprised with an action that my maid took.

She went through each rubbish bin in our house searching for anything that she could use to take home. As time passed, I realized that this sight was never rare in South Africa. Although we did not have a maid anymore, our rubbish bin would be half the size by the time the truck came to collect it. The poor people who walked by had taken all they needed.

These experiences made me realize how much of a peaceful and pleasant environment we live in, here in Japan. However, it is our ignorance and feelings of not wanting to be involved that makes our country so peaceful. The knowledge most people have of South Africa is appalling and I strongly felt that from the first few words that came pouring on to me when I first informed my friends that I was going to move to South Africa. That was: ‘is your dad a hunter!?’ They did not even know that South Africa had a normal city full of traffic. They would ask ridiculous questions such as ‘do you ride camels to school!?’ with serious facial expressions. This immediately convinced me that stereotypes from the media such as the television cause many misunderstandings. Some knowledge cannot be learned by just reading a book therefore; you must never get taken away with the image you see just on television or any kind of media.

There is nothing more than a priceless experience influencing how you feel towards a serious topic like poverty. ‘A rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world’ Yes, we are very fortunate to be living in this world, but I hope that my speech has given every individual here the chance to step back to think about the third world. Again, I must say, please never turn a blind eye to this situation, as the power of peace lies in our hands.