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## TOWARDS A MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF DIVERSE CULTURES

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This year-long exploration in Kokusai Kyoryoku of cultural understanding has provided many enlightening and informative examples of different customs, traditions and attitudes in many corners of the world -- from the fishermen of Fiji to the farmers of Indonesia to villagers high in the Andes of Peru. It has been a trip that has gone a long step toward better comprehension of the rich diversity of our fellow travellers on spaceship earth.

In seeking mutual understanding, however, we must always avoid the too easy temptation to over-emphasize differences in cultures which superficially seem to divide us without recognizing our many commonalities.

It is fortunate that, in fact, so many similarities do exist, because there has never been a time when true understanding has been more important. The simple fact is, we need to understand each other to survive into the 21st century.

The warning signs are all around us, and they demonstrate quite clearly that we're all in the same boat. Our common world is beset with political power shifts, economic instability, uncontrolled population growth, over-urbanization and ethical breakdown. To be sure, industrialized nations like Japan, the European countries and the United States have been largely insulated from the grinding poverty and famine that accompany such conditions in developing countries.

But industrialized powers feel more shock waves every day. Instantaneous communications and global transportation, as well as mutual



economic problems and an overwhelming need for oil, are forging a new world united not by common aims, but by common peril.

Today, each society is exposed to forces and processes beyond its control. Every national boundary is permeable to outside political decisions. Virtually every national economy largely depends on another that is equally shaky. Each nation alone is supremely and continually vulnerable -- vulnerable beyond military power, vulnerable beyond military power, vulnerable beyond any stopgap solution man has ever devised. Within the confusion, major powers have lost the ability to shape the world according to their own values and social visions -- and change has become the only global constant.

The immensity of the problem makes us realize that new solutions must be created -- solutions based upon new ways of thinking. We need comprehensive solutions to massive problems like the food/energy/financial crises, one facet of which cannot be understood without the others. We need sensitive solutions to counter the misunderstandings created by simultaneous global communications systems, within which speed is everything and reflection is rare.

In short, coping with tomorrow's world will depend on a level of international understanding and co-operation far beyond what man has ever devised. We must act on the conviction of human solidarity, in the belief in the human species as one unit comprised of many cultures. We must build a new pluralistic society, where all nations are respected within a peaceful international order.

The true understanding required for this task is much more profound than the simple comprehension of customs different from our own.



It is evident that Japan will play an active role in this new global society, and the third world too will be increasingly involved. This is indeed fortunate, because Japan's developmental successes (as well as its mistakes) can provide valuable insights for building a new world order.

This new order will eventually arise from the power diffusion that I mentioned earlier -- the weakening of the superpowers, the vulnerability of every nation. Already, such a diffusion offers hope for the smaller, weaker nations to offer original responses to their own problems. Therefore, it isn't too far-fetched to predict that alternative, non-Western modern civilizations will appear assuming a place beside industrialized societies in rough equality.

I stress "modern" civilizations, for these newly-born societies will be based on exceptionally sophisticated thinking. As contemporary civilizations, they will be tied in to the cosmopolitan culture, shaped by a global communications network for industrial production, commerce, information, science, technology, behaviour, life-style and creativity.

But as these new third world societies enter the mainstream, cycle-breaking developments will likely take them on different routes toward industrialization and modernization. These new routes will be sophisticated and profitable, but less energy-intensive and more humane; the technology they generate will serve, not dominate. Because they will be enterprises based on totally new world-view concepts, they will offer exciting, fresh opportunities for international management and global decision-making.

These developments will also have far-reaching implications for



Japan, since they offer solutions for certain problem areas of Japanese industry. Moreover, their beginnings coincide with a time when Japan is trying to define a world role beyond the scale of automobiles and electronic hardware. Already successful in economic relations with both industrialized and third world countries, she needs and seeks new concepts of international co-operation.

What, then, will be the Japanese role in encouraging these developments? By debating this question, your nation will uncover its own national priorities, and help define its own place in the international system.

Internally, I believe that Japan as a nation is still trying to define her self-image. I seem to sense that many Japanese have found limits to materialism and consumerism. Recent polls show that young people want the nation to return to traditional values. Such deep feelings reveal a kind of developmental maturity -- a desire for development beyond the economic phase, into a stage where people instinctively grope toward human collectivity.

Many developing countries are in precisely the same stage. The magnitude and intensity of their reactions against Westernization and excessive materialism demonstrate how concerned they are, too, about the breakdown of traditional values. Like many Japanese, they seek alternative concepts of modernization that fit the values rooted in their societies.

When even a cursory analysis reveals such strong similarities between cultures, you may be sure that mutual benefits will result from closer discussion. As an example, take the well-known Japanese ability to create and maintain privacy in an overcrowded society. Until recently, the



Japanese were the only people required to use such measures, because everyone else had more space or fewer people than they. But projections now show beyond a doubt that overcrowding will affect every nation on earth by the 21st century. Here in Asia alone, there will be one billion more people.

To me, taking a lesson from the Japanese experience seems essential in order to learn to live in such a society with any degree of harmony and civility. To survive, other people must learn to develop a sense of inner space -- through heightened perception of beauty, artistic creativity or religion as an inner experience. Such knowledge not only will preserve individual equilibrium, but will also contribute to the prevention of those phenomena, notably crime and lawlessness, that accompany overcrowding.

This is only one example of how assessing the applicability of the Japanese experience on developing countries, and vice versa, would help both cultures gain increased understanding of what they have been and where they are going.

In conclusion, let me add another thought to what I said at the beginning of this article: we need to understand each other not only to survive, but to progress. Compassion and the fundamental spiritual and moral values of the human heart naturally compel us to reach out. But we also realize that in a time when the problems of one nation affect all nations, the world cannot function with 600 million desperately poor and hungry people on its back. Nor can it afford to shackle the untapped energies and creativity of three-quarters of its people.

We have lost the luxury of understanding for fashion's sake, because



it was the liberal, decent thing to do. Now we must understand others, thoroughly and deeply, for the survival of our world and for our children. There can be no more demanding imperative.