

You think you just fell out of a coconut tree? You exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you.” These are words spoken by an American statesman with multiple roots. Like patchwork quilts, we were raised inside society and culture. Yes. Me, you, and all who exist continue to live in its legacy. Because no human can live on their own.

The first time I discovered context was in my residential village in Vietnam. Residents were mainly Japanese and American nationals. Just like our countries, it seemed we’d get along, yet it turned out to be the complete opposite.

Even when friendships blossomed, they disagreed over things like using the fridge without asking or wearing shoes inside the house. Both sides began avoiding each other—the disagreements even getting violent sometimes in divided kids groups of Japanese and International schools. In this village, I belonged to both. I went to a Japanese school while my best friend Ellie was American. My older sister also attended an international school.

When I was in the first grade, a fifth-grade boy found me alone on the school bus and said, “Your sister in international school speaks terrible English”. I defended her by saying “No, it’s not my sister, it’s you”. He then violently shook my bag— and made me cry all the way home. However, the fifth grader denied what he did to the teachers and parents. All the Japanese kids believed him. Nobody believed me. All except for Ellie.

When we are trapped in the context, it can be so easy to forget that each of us is human in our own right—and Imperial Japan was no exception. They called American people “devils” and “animals”, creating a context to dehumanize them. Challenging the context meant exclusion. Nobody was free from the context. No one. America was also trapped in their context. They named the Japanese people “JAPs”, conducting multiple dehumanization propaganda. They sent their Japanese-American citizens to concentration camps and used inhumane atomic bombs.

In war, countries often trap citizens in national contexts. When we see people not as humans but as enemies, we eventually convince ourselves that we can do anything to them. Then, how could people escape from the context they’re trapped in? The answer is not in our differences but in our shared values.

I would like to share a quote from “kimishinitamou kotonakare” written by Akiko Yosano in 1904.

Dear little brother, I cry for you, thou shalt not die.

As the youngest child, you loved everyone

Would parents place a blade in children's hands

Teaching them to murder other men

Teaching them to kill and then to die?

Have you so learned and grown to twenty-four?

Thou shalt not die.

The emperor may not fight the war but he has mercy

He will not say to bleed, friend, or foe

He will not say to die, past the road of thorns

He will not say to die in the empty name of honor

No matter what country or context we belong to, the heart that loved our friends and family are the same.

Then we must have the capability to overcome our differences and emphasize shared values. That way, even with our different opinions, we may communicate and step to reconciliation. The opposite of dehumanizing is becoming friends. Beyond the context, beyond the differences, beyond the borders.

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Beyond the Context