

Imagine two ladies sitting in a restaurant having a conversation over their lunch. They look relaxed, smiling, and enjoying each other's company. What do you think they are talking about? Their hobbies? Their vacation? Their children? The answer is none of the above. They are talking about the upcoming presidential election.

This is what I saw and heard during my homestay this summer in the United States. I was lucky enough to be chosen as one of the six junior high students to visit our sister city in California. One weekend during my stay, my host family and I went out to eat at a restaurant with my host mother's friend. There, I was both surprised and impressed by the fact that my host mother and her friend were openly discussing the presidential election. This was almost a shock to me, because somehow, I had the impression that politics is a delicate matter and shouldn't be talked about in public. At least, I had never heard my mother talking about it even with her close friends.

What surprised me even more was that these two ladies were supporting different candidates. You would think that there is going to be a big argument, right? But, no. They were simply sharing their thoughts with each other, and were listening to and accepting the opposing point of view. I could see that both my host mother and her friend had the confidence to speak out their minds, but they were definitely not being aggressive or self centered. Even though they didn't agree on their favorite candidates, they did not deny or reject each other. They were open to different ideas and opinions, and were willing to listen. I think this comes from trust and respect that they have for each other. And that, I feel, is the key to an ideal communication.

From listening to the conversation between my host mother and her friend, I realized that there is a big difference in the attitude toward politics between Japan and America. I noticed that in America, everyone talks about politics as a part of everyday conversation. It is no different from talking about the weather or the weekend plan. In Japan, it seems like only those who are seriously interested and involved in politics would talk about it. If you voice your opinions about politics too much, people might not feel comfortable talking with you. But is this right? This really made me think. As a citizen, I think that each one of us really should show more interest and enthusiasm in how our country is going to be governed. We should treat politics as something that is much closer to us ---something that really matters to us. After all, it affects our lives. It affects our future.

Recently, the voting age in Japan was lowered to eighteen years old. That means in five years, I would have the opportunity and responsibility to make choices and changes in political issues. In order to actively participate in politics, we need preparation. We must care, learn, and know enough about politics to form an opinion. We should exchange thoughts with our peers without feeling shy or uncomfortable. And most importantly of all, we need to use good communication skills to express ourselves with no fear but with care.

So...what are we waiting for? Let's talk about it!