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暗闇の部屋に入った体験を通じ、障害に対する私自身の見方がどのように変化したのかをこのエッセイに綴りました。		

Who is disabled?

Doors and curtains shut down. Not even a single light reaches the room, and a complete void has been created. Your surroundings are in complete darkness, and it is technically taking away your eyesight. This was my exceptional event in the "Dialog in the Dark", in which visitors explore in absolute darkness guided by visually impaired guides.

Before participating in this programme, I had this one absurd thought: disabled people were "vulnerable and weak", and therefore it was my duty to treat them with gentle care. For me, disability was a symbol of pity, and as Stella Young, the Australian disability rights activist and a comedian, pointed out in her TED Talks, the term 'inspiration porn' – the society has objectified disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people, packaging them as objects of pity or sources of inspiration. But standing in the lightless room, I realised that my mindset was no different; I unconsciously followed how the society classifies disabled people: fragile.

But as we entered the room, the roles between the guide and us inverted. As my classmates and I were panicking and struggling to walk or to grope for something to hold, our guide calmly gave us instructions. The guide led our group with authority, turning our panic into serenity. Though blind, the guides were moving with absolute confidence, as if they were able to see everything when we couldn't. Especially, our guide realised one of our classmates lying down on the turf, astonishing us with the guide's spatial awareness. The guide wasn't reckoning; he literally pointed out the student's name without any doubt when the student was not taking actions except for lying down. At that moment, I came to a realisation that I am not the one to have the rights to feel pity about them but instead feel them with great and genuine respect. They weren't vulnerable; they were a hope to us when we were entirely helpless.

Moreover, the most interesting part I had at this place is when the dialogue happened. As we were in a complete void, we had no idea of the other people's facial expressions or appearances, consequently clearing superficial judgements based on our visual information.

What we had to do instead was to read between the lines by leaning our ears to the voice.

As the dark reliefs, from people's judgements because we can't see each other, our communication became more raw and honest, bridging the gap between us and binding the group through shared trust.

As we held feedback in a place where light reaches our eyes, my perspectives fundamentally shifted. It's funny how the society sorts people as "disabled" because when people who are capable in bright places can't do anything in a pitch-black room, they aren't called disabled. But on the contrary, blind people are categorised as "disabled people". I feel like the society made a massive contradiction when being blind was just a mismatch with the environment.

On the other hand, authentic "disability" lies in the mindedness of the society that constructs a world built solely for non-disabled people and then labelling others as disadvantaged based on assumptions. Equity does not come when you pity somebody, but when we dismantle the society's blindness and open our eyes to look at real capability.

This essay is not here to inspire you, but I hope it serves as a wake-up call for a society that ignores its own flaws.