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このエッセイは、伝えることへの苦手意識を持っていた、相手を思いやる気持ちと小さな勇気があれば、見た目や言葉、文化の壁を超えて誰とでも心を通わせられるのだと、そっと背中を押してくれるあたたかい作品です。

### Finding My Voice

"Which looks cuter, the pink top or the black lace dress?" Happy asked. The pink top was short enough to show her belly, and the black dress made her legs look long. Both outfits looked very cute, so I replied simply. "Both suit you well. I think either is fine." "Right, thanks," Happy muttered, looking a little grumpy. She returned to her room. She was angry. Happy was angry. What did she want? What did I do? Why was this 12-year-old girl angry?

Happy is an international student from China. We met a few hours ago and were staying with the same host family. My image of Chinese people often involves a perception of bad attitudes, a reluctance to apologize, and a tendency to put themselves first. She kind of matched the stereotype.

A few days later I was having dinner with Happy and my host sister. My host sister was making plans. "Where should we go this Sunday? Let's all go out together!" I quickly replied, "I'm fine with anywhere!" My host sister looked surprised and she scoffed at me, exasperated. "Haruka, don't you have your own opinion?" "I want to go to the shopping mall to buy some new clothes!" Happy said. I immediately copied her and said I wanted to go to the mall, too. When Happy asked what I usually like to do, I replied, "I love watching movies." She said, "Let's go to the movie theater instead of the mall, then!" We decided to see a movie on Sunday. I was really surprised. Did she realize that I am not good at expressing my own opinions? Her kindness made me want to get to know her better.

Two weeks after arriving in Australia, the stress of the unfamiliar environment – the different culture, the different language, the different spaghetti – had affected me and I ended up with a sore throat. The medicine I brought from Japan was only for fever and stomach pain, so I had nothing for my sore throat. It was Saturday and there was no school, so I stayed in my room all day, feeling incredibly lonely.

"Knock, knock." "Who's there?" Happy opened the door and handed me a cup of warm

water. "Drink this. It will warm you up and help your sore throat." I gratefully accepted it. Feeling her kindness, I realized she was a truly caring person. Normally, people avoid someone who keeps coughing to avoid catching a cold, but she truly understood how others feel. The warmth of the water felt exactly like the warmth of her heart. "Why are you so kind to me?" I asked. "I'm just worried about you, Haruka. You never say your opinion and always hold back. I was worried you were forcing yourself."

I was deeply moved by her sincere words. I was honest and confessed. I always fear being rejected if my opinion differs from others. She smiled encouragingly. "Having a different opinion is a cool thing! It's natural to be different, and that's how we make new discoveries together. Have more confidence! In my country, if you don't voice your opinion, people think you aren't listening to the conversation," she explained.

Her words, bravely crossing the language barrier, resonated deeply in my heart and gave me courage. I thanked her, saying her words gave me real confidence. Happy smiled, looking relieved. I realized that she hadn't gotten angry before, and she wasn't selfish. Maybe instead she had simply thought I wasn't listening to her seriously.

When I drink warm water, I remember Happy. Communication is like a cup of water. It seems ordinary, but it is indispensable to live. Similarly, expressing your opinion is essential to build trust and understand each other. Of course, I know that not all Chinese people are selfish, but making a connection to Happy-chan took more than just seeing through stereotypes. You can't simply rely on the image of others portrayed in the media or online, you really have to talk to them in person to understand what they are truly like. Now, when friends ask where I want to go, I confidently say, "I want to go shopping!"