

Attendees



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The Legacy Dr. Butler Handed Down To US Various Proposals for a Future Japan

Dr. Robert Butler strongly stated some half a century ago that making use of the knowledge and experience of the elderly will create a prosperous society. However he also perceived at the same time that there is a negative image of "old people" in all of us.

Dr. Butler says that instead of offering sympathy, giving the elderly a chance to be active is the key to restoring respect and pride to each and every elderly person. Along with reaffirming what Dr. Butler has advocated, we talked with two others who had contact with Dr. Butler and his teachings, about problems and issues facing the developed yet aging country of Japan from here onwards.

Practicing "Lifelong Activity" himself

Seike: I had only met Dr. Butler at the Davos Conference in January of this year. At that time he was overjoyed to find that the ILC was moving its offices to his alma mater

of Columbia University. I was extremely surprised at hearing of his death and feel deep admiration for this person who himself stayed active all his life.

Dr. Butler pointed out in his latest paper that the financial crisis in Greece has its roots in the

problems of an aging society, and I think it certainly stands out as a symbolic event. Namely, systems used in the 19th Century have slid largely unchanged into the 21st Century, and this factor is in the background of the financial crisis in Europe, as typified by the situation in Greece.

Retirement was once the special right only of some nobility. However, the pension system was introduced at the end of the 19th Century allowing the average person, who once had to work an entire lifetime, to retire at a certain age. Until that time, there was no concept of a right to retire so this choice given to the average person was certainly a sign of progress in 19th and 20th Century society.

However, this situation also created the concept that if the worker had the right to retire that came along with a pension, then one could also say that the employer

had the right to make the worker quit his job after reaching a certain age. Up to a certain period the benefit of having the right to retire at a certain age more than offset the disadvantage that one might be unable to work even if one still wanted to, but this benefit was clearly lost in the 1960s at about the time that Dr. Butler brought up the problem of elderly unemployment.

In the advanced countries in particular, where people have longer life spans, the problem of elderly people losing the right to work even though wanting to continue working has grown larger and larger until reaching the drastic situation we see today in the 21st Century.

More interesting is that not only did Dr. Butler observe this situation from an economic perspective, but he also focused on the sense of loss and personal defeat felt by elderly people.



Mr. Otsu interviewing Dr. Butler in 2008

I think that Dr. Butler's true genius lies in the fact that his approach and ideas toward the various issues in an aging society were consistently people-centered.

Otsu: I think that this point is where we see the true genius of Dr. Butler.

I had the opportunity to interview the doctor in 2008, and on asking him, "What has changed in the 40 years since you first coined the word Ageism?" and his response was, "There has been some progress in the legal infrastructure but the stance versus the elderly in the world at large hasn't changed much. That is what Ageism really is." and this remark left a strong impression on me.

Dr. Butler emphasized that although making laws was important, changing people's awareness and attitude was even more important. This made me think again that "old age" is something that the outside world including us in the media has created. In other words it was us who created "old age."

Even here in Japan, discrimination against the elderly is

being abolished and rather than mere recommendations, laws are gradually changing to legally prohibit it thanks in part to the efforts of Professor Seike, but when I interview people about their real feelings I find there has been no change in the awareness or attitude people have about the elderly.

It doesn't do any good to look for guilty parties, and my saying this might be somewhat self-destructive but I feel we in the media just do not have sufficient awareness or recognition of the elderly.

Simply putting a boundary saying for example that 65 years or more equals "old" does not mean there has been any significant change in the person's body or mind. It is nothing more than a way of grouping the population. While conveying the fact that getting old without letting these things destroy your resolve is quite tough, I also feel that the wrong concepts soaked in somewhere along the line.

Dr. Butler held an annual seminar for all US journalists. He continued it for over 10 years instructing journalists about what the elderly are, what old age is, what

the difference between aging society and long-lived individuals is, etc. I think the doctor understood better than anyone else the power that the media has to alter public awareness and attitudes. I think it also made us strongly conscious of how much people's awareness changes according to how we convey something and the importance of our mindset.

The significance of productive aging

Seike: I myself had previously known about him from when he received the Pulitzer Prize for his book. However, I first actually met Dr. Butler in 1994 at the "Aiming for an Energetic Elderly Society" symposium held in New York. In his keynote address, Dr. Butler again emphasized the concept of "Productive Aging".

He stated that in general when we speak of the elderly we have strong images of a weak person or someone who needs to be protected, but that is definitely not always the case. In other words, getting older or having an aging population does

not mean a drop in productivity.

Getting older can to the contrary make one more productive because one's experience can be put to use. In spite of this, there is a real problem in the possibility of a drop in productivity due to people's way of thinking or systems that can cause this drop to happen.

What impressed me about Dr. Butler's way of thinking was that he responded to goals with a long-term optimism yet short-term pessimism. Productive aging viewed as a long-term goal is an extremely positive concept, yet achieving this goal means facing all types of obstacles in the short-term. In some cases for example, you may have to change people's way of thinking or turn their value system through 180 degrees from what it was, which can be very difficult. However, he had a long-term vision for achieving future goals by meticulously resolving each short term obstacle one at a time.

This outlook of long-term optimism yet short-term pessimism is exactly the right stance to take, and I was impressed that it can also be applied in other matters.



“ Dr. Butler's ideas and approach to the diverse problems of the elderly were always people-centered ”

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However, in order for the elderly to gain fulfillment from life, it is at first important for them to have the chances and places to do this. But if a person's identity is tied too closely to his or her work then this might cause a loss of identity if that person loses his or her job.

I would have liked to have asked Dr. Butler a little more about how he assesses identity and participating in society without financial compensation.

Otsu: Actually I felt the same, and asked him during the interview in 2008. "Though we are talking extremes, how do you feel about bedridden people, can they have a productive life?" The doctor's reply was that the concept of productive aging means being positive about your entire existence whether it turns a profit or not, and positive aging has absolutely nothing to do with whether you can make something or provide something.

In terms of suggestions for Japan, I was told that since Japan was originally a country where everyone worked, he would hope for results in the form of activity on

the part of foundations and the NPO, etc.

Seike: I understand that he had a very broad definition of "productive".

Otsu: The word 'productive' tends to be thought of as something we can see, particularly money. I have to be careful of this when I write articles on the subject. If you think of productive aging as only something for people with health and certain capabilities, then you will be drifting away from what the doctor has been continually advocating.

Seike: The concept of "normalizing" comes to mind here, but living a normal life as one grows old even while having a handicap of some kind is in certain respects a boring story for someone from the media, or even researchers, and isn't a subject you can take up that will immediately hold people's attention. However, Dr. Butler understood extremely well that "normalizing" was very important. He was someone with the talent to convey something as extremely impressive

that we would otherwise think of as boring if he made just one slip.

Founding of the US-Japan ILC and both their presidents

Seike: Dr. Butler had numerous achievements and I think one of the most significant was the founding of the ILC in countries across the world. This has allowed them to mutually learn from each other and recognize the common problems faced by advanced countries with aging populations. This has an especially positive meaning for Japan, so the loss of Dr. Butler is also a deep loss for Japan.

The first president of ILC-Japan, Dr. Hideo Ibe, and Dr. Butler had a lot of respect for each other. Dr. Ibe passed away some 10 years ago and I can't help feeling that we lost an "opinion leader" who had a global viewpoint on an aging population. I only knew Dr. Ibe in his final years but he was someone who viewed things with a totally open mind. He had his roots in the Ministry of Welfare and achieved various goals in introducing social security and

pension plans but was extremely steadfast in his evaluations of his own work, classing good things as good and bad things as bad.

Though he had an abundance of knowledge, he maintained a wide viewpoint without becoming obsessed by that knowledge or a particular direction and thought objectively about the future of Japan's social security system. That would have made a good impression on Dr. Butler and I think the two of them would have worked in a spirit of mutual support. Dr. Ibe was extremely pleased with the report Professor Hideyuki Morito and I prepared which summarized problems in applying America's age discrimination laws to Japan. This meant for us that there was some merit to all of the hard work we did.

Otsu: I think this was the first report of its kind in Japan.

Seike: This report was not the common kind of report you often see that fits the author's own speculations and story. Instead I am left with the impression that it took the position of investigating what it

“ Though a doctor he simultaneously maintained an extremely journalistic approach to things. ”



Talk/ Dialogue

really wanted to know. It verified the facts with no preconceptions and took a straightforward approach to resolving problems based on actual proof.

Otsu: Dr. Butler was also the same in his respect for the actual facts. He reported that on extracting data on the number of elderly appearing in commercial and dramas, and then comparing that figure to their population percentage, that appearances by the elderly were extremely small. Moreover, he also checked and pointed out problems in the contents of commercials that insulated or made excessive fun of old people. His method was based on evidence not preconceptions and so was extremely convincing.

As clearly shown by the examples in these media instructional programs I think that Dr. Butler along with being a physician also took an extremely journalistic approach to issues.

His thinking was shaped by his background

Seike: Dr. Butler was raised by his

grandparents when his parents divorced. The fact that his grandfather soon died and he saw the ordeal his grandmother went through meant that since his childhood he was in an environment where he was close to independent minded elderly people. I imagine that these experiences had a strong effect on shaping his way of thinking.

Otsu: I feel absolutely the same thing. Dr. Butler coined the word “ageism” some 40 years ago and since then he earnestly kept repeating it. But what is highly interesting for me as the interviewer is what his basic reason was for continually repeating this word.

This is my own private guesswork but I think that seeing his grandmother keep on going through her strong resolve and decisiveness even though in poverty was a basic experience for him in life’s lessons and knowledge. However due to his individual experiences, he probably felt strong doubts and anger at the great gap in understanding and recognition of elderly by current society and that

was the starting point for continually promoting the “ageism” theme. If only I could meet the doctor again, I would certainly ask him about what lies at the source of his personal drive.

Seike: The fact that his grandmother, who was nearly left homeless after the hotel they were staying in burnt down, was capable of getting him into medical school at Columbia University speaks of hardship and difficulties that are hard to express in words. The presence of this grandmother who was always able to surmount problems with a strong resolve and constantly positive attitude evoked an image that Dr. Butler felt proud of.

I think the fact that when Dr. Butler talked about the problems of the elderly he not only covered the points of the social security system and economic growth but also emphasized the need for maintaining the dignity of the elderly themselves, is largely due to this type of personal background.

The critical need for a mentor

Otsu: What will happen if we actually try to put to work here in Japan what Dr. Butler kept saying all his life? In Japan we tend to think of the elderly as people under nursing care but in fact most of them lead normal lives. However, the images of the elderly in the media are extremes that show either pitiful old people or a superstar granny and I feel the roots of the problem lie in the fact that media is unaware of this.

Just saying the word, elderly or old person is linked to images of someone who must be cared for unconditionally or someone who increases the burden on a young society which is already overburdened. This tends to cause a rift between generations. Given these types of definitions, the diverse problems of an aging society must be viewed as problems that transcend individual elderly people and generations and that must be dealt with as a problem of Japan as a whole. We are facing an age where both the image givers and image receivers have to get rid of the



“ He saw productive aging in an extremely broad view, in a concept where one is fully positive about oneself.”

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stereotype that being young means being healthy and being old means nursing care.

Seike: Even in politics, there is a one-pattern concept in which young people are somehow thought of as pure and older people, or veterans, as evil-minded. The roots of this are in the same stereotype. In the case of the Japanese government, there has in fact been extreme damage caused by the older generation. I therefore understand the need for a younger set as a remedy for this, but the need for a generational balance and respect for the veterans is also important.

Dr. Butler stated that to the contrary, growing old gives a person more courage to attempt something. Young people have to move carefully because their whole life is ahead of them but as you get older, accumulate experience and find your position, you find that in a sense you don't have as much left to lose and so you can really throw yourself into things.

I think this is why the so-called "mentor" system, where a veteran is paired with a young person, is of

major significance. Here, a young worker and his direct boss are formed as a team in the workplace in a relationship consisting of evaluator and evaluated person, where the young worker can find it hard to ask about things he or she doesn't understand. But he or she can feel secure about asking the mentor about these things because their ages are so far apart. The mentor does not see the young worker as a rival and can pass down all his or her skills without any anxiety.

I think older workers with experience have a big role to play in educating the young workers.

Otsu: In an actual case, a fast food shop employed elderly workers. There was a lot of doubt and discussion about employing them, but when they actually got started, the shop found that the older workers gave advice to the young part-timers, were skillful at conversing with customers, made the shop come alive and in some cases increased sales. They weren't hired with an eye to efficiency but when one sees that both sales and

productivity improve, the elderly staff, far from being a load, turned out to be an asset. I think that this effect backs up what Dr. Butler has been advocating.

We need a society where everyone can participate regardless of circumstances but of course people all perform differently. Some are good at one thing but not at another. We need a kind of universal viewpoint to form an infrastructure where anyone can participate. This would not only be a type of environment where elderly people would find it easy to work, but also serves as a pillar to support society and in that respect prove an extremely essential element.

Seike: Yes, that is perfectly true. We may be told that negative elements will appear as we get older, such as lower efficiency and ability for teamwork, but even assuming this is true, it is essential that we think of some method where the elderly can participate in society. If we do that, we will build up a larger, more flexible and even stronger social infrastructure.

Future issues for Japan

Seike: Dr. Butler repeatedly said that ageism is wrong, and that fixed age retirement is bad. We of course understand this, but on the other hand there is the vexing problem of what kind of standard should we use instead of an age retirement system?

Otsu: That is certainly a large problem. A society that actually prohibits age discrimination would in other words be a strict performance rated society. In other words, it is kind of like a major league baseball where top performers might get high pay but those who aren't probably get fired. Viewed in that way, for those who are working, the fixed retirement system is an indispensable way for the average person to continue meeting life's needs while paying off a home loan or educational expenses.

The corporation on the other hand sees fixed retirement as an efficient method for mass firing and the fact that it can do this allows it to keep hiring young people. So

“ A society where the elderly can live a normal life: We have the duty to keep conveying to others what he kept advocating as a natural outcome. ”



even if you tell companies to quit the fixed retirement system, the reality is that private companies will find this a difficult course to take.

Seike: If you look at it the other way around, abolishing things like employment until a fixed age increasingly results in a system that looks first and last only at performance. If the company doesn't see an individual's performance as useful then they fire that person. Given the mentality of Japanese people I wonder if they will quietly accept these changes.

On the other hand, in a system that provides employment until a fixed age and gives pay raises according to one's age, most people will of course think that working for a fixed number of years is the price one must pay. Which path will society select? That is the single most essential issue for Japan.

Otsu: Yes, it really all comes down to that.

We currently use a performance-based system but that system does not always yield results and sometimes companies use it as a

tool to justify downsizing or restructuring.

There are always issues with firing workers, in terms of fairness, agreeability, transparency. Currently there are no standards that can replace the age scale so canceling the age system and going to the strictly performance system will likely play into the hands of business managers where they can do as they like.

Seike: If we consider the point that all people, not just young people, are always developing and improving, then it would be ideal if we could give people the opportunity for employment based on their growth and then raise their pay.

Instead of suddenly going to a performance-reward system right after employment, I think that in the first 10 years where the older worker teaches the new guy how to do his job, the age-based remuneration system is better. A system is also necessary where the older worker makes higher wages than the junior worker he is teaching. Once this newer worker

becomes good at his or her job, his or her pay can then be adjusted to a flat salary curve.

This may seem like a compromise plan but the all-out performance-reward system in the US may never really work here in Japan, and the thorough measures taken against age discrimination in the US may be impossible here.

Otsu: In practice, it may become a situation just as Professor Seike has said. If that is true then we may reach a time when pay raises no longer come. The problem with no pay raises is that you can't pay for housing and education costs.

It might be a good idea to form some system that makes the burden of an individual's housing and educational costs a public expense so that the country carries the financial burden instead of the corporation. I suppose paying all of one's educational and housing costs just from the company's salary isn't very realistic, don't you think?

Securing financial resources is a problem but even with pay scale that rises on a slight upward curve it is still essential to establish some

type of system where public assets help to ensure one's livelihood to some extent. We have now come to the point where such a model for implementing this is needed, right?

Seike: As Mr. Otsu said earlier, that approach lies in the direction of eliminating the conflict between generations. I wanted very much to discuss this with Dr. Butler and it is truly unfortunate that such an opportunity will now never happen.

The changes going on around us tend to grab our attention, but the increasing numbers of elderly people will naturally make a society where they are not a special phenomenon but people who can live normal lives.

We have to clearly and persuasively convey what Dr. Butler repeated over and over, namely that this aging society is a natural outcome of events.

Now, how will we here in Japan apply and bring to reality the lessons that Dr. Butler left us? We have the duty and responsibility to ponder this question and strive to make things happen.

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