



Dr. Ibe, the first president of ILC-Japan and Dr. Butler



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Dr. Butler's Messages to his Readers

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In 1975, Dr. Robert N Butler published “*Why Survive? Being Old in America*” which won him a Pulitzer Prize and changed the attitude toward and public policy for old age in America. Then, in 2008, at the age of 81 and only two years before his death, he published his seminal book titled “*The Longevity Revolution*,” after more than three decades of active involvement in the field of aging as a physician, scholar, government official, and educator. By reviewing these two books, I hope to identify Dr. Butler's message to the public.

From 1978 until very recently, Dr. Butler was a frequent visitor to Japan where he enjoyed the friendship of many Japanese in academia, industry, and government, particularly, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. The last section of this essay is devoted to trying to identify what Dr. Butler wanted to communicate to the Japanese.

Dr. Butler 's Message in *Why Survive?*

Why Survive? begins with a personal recollection. Dr. Butler's parents divorced before his first birthday. He went to live with his

maternal grandparents on a chicken farm in New Jersey. Living with them during the Depression, he learned about the challenges faced by as well as the strength and endurance of the elderly.

With this as personal background, Dr. Butler tells us in *Why Survive?* that old age in America is often a tragedy.

“Few of us like to consider it (old age) because it reminds us of our own mortality. It demands our energy and resources, it frightens us with illness and deformity, it is an affront to a culture with a passion for youth and productive capacity.” (p. xi)

Dr. Butler advocated drastic changes in the attitude toward old age as well as policies for healthcare, pension and housing. Over the following decades, Dr. Butler challenged law makers, scientists and medical students to consider how to create a society in which Americans could grow old gracefully. As a result it has become a common perception in America that aging should be considered a positive.

He was aware of the enormous challenges to be faced but remained optimistic. Reflecting on the strengths of his own grandparents, his

ultimate message was that old age does not need to be a tragedy: We can create a society in which Americans grow old gracefully. These messages are convincing, especially when they are told with his resourceful grandparents as a backdrop.

Dr. Butler 's Message in *The Longevity Revolution*

In *The Longevity Revolution*, Dr. Butler continues his argument initiated in *Why Survive?* The central purpose of his 2008 book is “to describe the origins, challenges, and adjustments to advanced longevity and the aging of populations and to question contemporary assumptions about later life.”

Dr. Butler's basic stance that aging should be considered a positive experience and that there is much need for change in the policies addressing older persons did not change over these years. However, he expanded his argument in two areas.

One, he advances the concept of “responsible aging.” In contrast to his previous emphasis on expanding the “rights” of older persons, Dr Butler says,

“I wrote this book for the thoughtful public. ... Because I believe in the activism of an enlightened citizenry, the general thrust of this book is toward an agenda for action and the presentation of a body of knowledge to support it. “

On a personal level, he writes: “If we truly enjoy long life, we must have good health that naturally supports independence and vitality and, by extension, facilitates the contributions that older persons make to society. This requires more than good genes, money, and fine medical care. It requires that individuals take responsibility? for their own well-being.” (p. 191-192) He encouraged exercise, abstinence from tobacco, and healthy nutrition.

Another new message of Butler's 2008 book is a grave concern, “Could we lose the longevity revolution?” He recognizes various “threats to longevity” such as environmental destruction, diseases (e.g. AIDS, pandemic flu), nuclear weapons, and our own life style. “(p.373) He elaborates his concern: “The effects of the scientific-industrial revolution threatened the Longevity Revolution it helped create. They include industrial pollution



and environmental spoilation by depletion of the ozone layer and by the greenhouse effect that causes warming of the earth, as well as the dangers of nuclear, chemical, and biological warfare and terrorism.” (p.362)

Dr. Butler's Message to the Japanese

Dr. Butler was a frequent visitor to Japan. Beginning in 1978, he visited Japan nearly every year for conferences and interviews. What were his views on aging in Japan?

In 1990, Dr, Butler co-authored an article titled “Planning for Old Age: How Japan is Looking Ahead”^[*1] in The Washington Post and wrote, commenting on the just announced Golden Plan, " Japan has been preoccupied by the challenge of dealing with an aging work force and rising healthcare costs, compensating for its limited resources." And he concluded, “Both nations have populations that are steadily aging. Japan is acting on the challenge with all deliberate speed. The U.S. is not.”

In *The Longevity Revolution*, his references to Japan are only few, probably because the volume's

primary focus is aging in America. However, with respect to Japan's declining population, he has the following comment: “Those countries that worry about declining population, such as Italy, Germany, and Japan should take heart that their dwindling numbers may further enrich their people, their culture, and quality of life...Zero population growth would help balance population size with manmade and natural resources.”

Dr. Butler pointed out that “most of the world's governments have policies pointed toward the reduction or stabilization of their populations.” (p. 339)

His understanding of population challenges faced by Japan as well as his admiration for the long-term vision of Japanese policy makers continued throughout his life. As late as in June 2010, at the Boom Academy (a week long seminar on aging for journalists held at ILC USA), Dr. Butler emphasized the importance of long-range policy planning. Waving a slim 140-page volume of “Japan in the Year 2000: Preparing Japan for an Age of Internationalization, the Aging Society and Maturity” published by the Japanese Economic

Planning Agency in 1983, he commented, “As early as in 1983, in planning for 2000 and beyond, the Japanese government articulated population aging together with internationalization and technological innovation as the core factors to be embraced in strategic planning. This is a beautiful example of a long-range vision we should all aspire to.”

In a similar vein, in the Global Aging Report published by ILC Global Alliance in 2009, he emphasized the Japanese government's stance on public policy on population aging : “Up to now, no nation has fully embraced the challenges posed by population aging and advancing longevity with the possible exception of Japan.” (p. 12)

In Dr. Butler's death, Japan lost an important friend who understood Japan's challenges as well as its potential.



[*1] “Planning for Old Age: How Japan is Looking Ahead” (with Masako M. Osako), The Washington Post, June 5, 1990.