

I FELT LIKE SOMEONE WAS TALKING TO ME FROM THE PAPER

Hiroshi (80) from the Kanagawa Prefecture in Japan, married, volunteer

LONG WALKS

I take a walk for 1.5 to 2 hours every morning. It's my habit since I was in school. I always enjoy walking to see different towns and sceneries. After the walk, I do some stretches. It's my daily routine. After I come home, I feed my pets, like rabbits and turtles. When the government requested self-restraint, all the activities stopped and I had nothing to do at first. So, I decided to ride a bike to see how my old favorite course had changed. It's fun. Since I ride a bike alone, I'm not worried about infection. So I don't wear a mask. After doing all these things, half a day is already gone.

BRAINSTORMING BY MYSELF

We have formed a group to discuss how to develop our own community. Since the City Office offers a subsidy, around 15 million yen (around 118.000 euro) over 3 years, for initiatives for a greener community, so we've been preparing a plan to apply for that subsidy. But first, I brainstormed by myself. When I did this, time flew and hours had passed before I knew it. I used a big map and developed ideas like, "We can plant something along this street." For example, we can do a lot of things to improve the street near the elementary school. In other, newer neighborhoods, streets near schools are really beautiful and neat, but not in my 50-year-old neighborhood. So, I went to those newer neighborhoods and took pictures to learn from them. Then, I put those pictures on the map and drew sketches. In addition to thinking inside my head and writing things on paper, I also went out to take pictures and did something physically active. So, I never got bored.

WORRIED SON

Time went so fast when I did these things, thinking "What about this way? Wait! Why not that way?" I really enjoyed it. Well, it wasn't always "fun" though. I sometimes struggled too, to find better ways to present something, for example. I can spend hours doing this. So, focusing my energy on this project was what I enjoyed the most. I had worked on this project so hard that my son got worried, saying, "Dad! You've been in your room all the time. Are you all right?" That's how much I was into it. At my house, my wife and son manage a kindergarten, so he comes over here for work and sees me spend time in my room all day long. So, he often asked me if I was all right.

SOMETHING SPOKE TO ME

I knew from the beginning that I couldn't discuss this project with other members because of the COVID pandemic. So, I just kept brainstorming by myself. As I visualized what's in my head by putting pictures, drawings and memos on paper, something spoke to me or hit me sometimes, like when I was taking a bath or after meals. No one had taught me how to do this kind of thing, so I did what I thought would work. But sometimes, after I put some ideas on paper, I felt like someone was talking to me from the paper, like, "No, something is wrong with those ideas." I found that interesting.

THE FINAL PLAN

Based on my draft, we brought our ideas together to make further improvements for the presentation. So, we've been able to do something really productive over the last few months. We created an email group to share information. Two weeks ago, someone from the City Office was appointed to give us advice. Next Sunday, we will take him around the neighborhood so that he can get to know this place and discuss some ideas. In this way, we talk with all different people and develop a final plan. I also show these people the plan I made by myself, so that we can use whatever I did for the final plan.

USED TO SPENDING TIME ALONE

When I was little, I always spent time alone at home in the middle of the mountains, where you could find no exciting events. So, even in summer vacation, although we did have a summer festival, it was only for a brief time. I spent most of the time alone, and I really enjoyed thinking by myself, even when I was a kid. So, I had no problem enjoying myself in the COVID crisis.

WRITING A NOVEL

Now, I'm interested in writing a novel. I used to when I was in senior high school, but I never finished a story. I would start out with so much energy and enthusiasm. But as I went along, I always got confused about how to describe characters. But now, I do develop an outline of the story. This is also something I can do by myself.

ZOOM IS AMAZING

I'm also involved in community development in my hometown in a mountainous area in Shizuoka Prefecture. But because of the COVID crisis, I can't go there now to attend meetings. I wish I could though. But the other day, I was invited to a Zoom meeting organized by the community development group there. It was the first Zoom meeting I attended in my life. I've been studying young tea farmers in my hometown, and I showed their pictures during the Zoom meeting. Then, one of the participants praised me, saying, "You live far from here, but you've been thoroughly studying young people in this community, whom we didn't know about, and you did such a great job giving a presentation about them via Zoom. That's amazing!"

CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR HOMETOWN

Through this experience, I've realized that a lot of people with different skills and knowledge have moved from small towns to the capital region. That means, those small towns can leverage the skills of those who are from the towns but now living in the capital region to develop their communities. This can be useful in revitalizing their communities and many other things. There are so many people who are born in small towns but now living in Tokyo, doing great things in a variety of fields. And quite a few of them would like to contribute to their hometowns. They can see good things and bad things about their hometowns, through their own experiences, and they can communicate those to their hometowns in simple ways. I think it's got great potential.

VALUE OF PARKS

Lately, when I ride a bike to different places, I find a lot of greenery along streets. When I take a walk and play with kids in a park, I can see that young families appreciate the neighborhood. But not everyone is lucky. Some communities are better than others. So, small things like streets and parks can be closely related to our everyday life. I think people have realized that through the COVID crisis. And I think that can be a starting point for each resident to think about what kind of community they like to create. I'd like to discuss with all different people about how we can develop communities. I think I need to approach people in a gentle and sincere manner, rather than acting like a big-headed expert.

Hiroshi's story was shared with us by [International Longevity Center \(ILC\) Japan](#) - 国際長寿センター, member of the ILC Global Alliance, an international federation researching and advocating the vitality and the societal and economical position of older people. In the Netherlands, the ILC network is represented by Leyden Academy.