

- "Nai-Mono-Wa-Nai": Ama Town's Concept of Sufficiency and Message to the World

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Human activities are far exceeding the capacity of the Earth to support us, and this excess is leading to climate change and other environmental problems. Despite this, most people still tend to believe in the growth-based economy. I believe that developed countries in particular seriously need a perspective on happiness supported by a new sense of values.

From that perspective, a town on a small, remote Japanese island offers us an important concept that could make a big difference in the world. Ama Town on the island of Nakanoshima in Shimane Prefecture has a population just under 2,300 people, and in 2011 the town adopted the slogan of *Nai-mono-wa-nai*.

["Nai" means "nothing" or "not" and "mono" is "thing."] Directly quoted, this phrase in Japanese is something like saying, "*A thing that is not here is not here.*" But actually it has two meanings. The first meaning is a simple statement: "What is *not here ... is not here*" and, the underlying message is, "We don't have it here, so just accept the situation." A second meaning is that, "There is *nothing* that is *not here.*" Did you get that? In other words, "*Everything ... is ... here.*" You may think that all of this sounds very contradictory. But let me show you how this concept works in practice in Ama Town.

Ama town is on the small island with 33 square km with beautiful rice paddies and sea. The town is almost self-efficient in staple food, fish and to some extent vegetables. But Ama has no department store, no convenience store, and no movie theater.

There have been no fancy bars and clubs for the young people to enjoy in Ama. Thirty years ago, youth group activities became very active because of it. Rather than lamenting about not having something, they said “If there is nothing fun to do here, let’s create it.” And so they started a series of their own initiatives, like creating their own beer garden and organizing a tug-of-war competition for the whole island and much more! This means sharing a lot of time together and sharing both the joys and pains. So when they achieve something they have a big sense of achievement, and this fosters solid relationships of mutual trust. This really means good “connections” between people, and those connections are like a platform that leads to tackling the next challenge. It is out of *nai-mono-wa-nai* that creativity, innovation, and strong connections are born, and these human interactions create a dynamic community without depending on money or external input.

Next example, vending machines: At a typical ferry terminal in Japan, like many train stations, you will see a long line of automatic vending machines selling beverages and other products. But when you arrive in Ama Town by ferry, not a single vending machine is there to greet you.

A new ferry terminal was built in 2002. At the time a decision was made not to install any vending machines. They do offer convenience and efficiency, but Ama was determined to encourage face-to-face sales, which require more effort and interaction.

For the town, it is not “efficiency” that is important, but rather, “interactions” and “encounters” with fellow islanders and island visitors. And that is why there is no vending machine at the ferry terminal. However, it is exactly because of it, there is a lot of talking, smiling, and energy.

Another episode that symbolizes *nai-mono-wa-nai* is the High School Miryokuka Project, which could be translated as “project to improve the appeal, attraction or charm of the high school.” Ama town is home to the Dōzen High School. This is the only high school in the Dōzen region which has three island towns.

The number of its students was dropping as the islands’ population declined, and there were concerns that the school would have to close if the trend continued. If that happened, population would further drop with many implications for the local economy and future..

At the time, there was a strong assumption that a small island school had only disadvantages compared to schools on the mainland. But to escape from the threat of a school closure, the Dōzen High School Miryokuka Project, launched in 2008, decided to turn their disadvantages into advantages. Ama Town doesn’t have many things that big cities have, then why not to make full use of this situation and what it has. In Ama, they have nature, traditional culture and local industries that big cities don’t have as well as local challenges unique to local towns. The Dōzen High School is now trying to make a greater use of the local challenges facing the island, such as population decline, a dramatically declining birth rate and aging population, and financial pressures. Since these issues are Japan’s nationwide challenges, the Dozen High School is in a position that help to develop the human resources for pioneering a new future for Japan.

It is exactly because they had the spirit of *nai-mono-wa-nai* that this counterintuitive thinking was possible.

The Dōzen High School and its unique education have attracted much attention from around the country and now they have students from all over Japan as well as abroad. Today the program is so popular that it is quite competitive to get in. The number of students literally took the form of a V-

shaped recovery. It was an epic turnaround from the threat of a school closure.

As you know, Japan is facing a sharp population decline and the population of Ama Town dropped from nearly 7,000 in 1950 to below 2,300 today.

But today, with these initiatives and development, Ama has become a popular town for young people who want to migrate to this island. The total population is still declining due to natural attrition, but the number of people moving here to live is on the rise.

The secret attraction for these people is the spirit of *nai-mono-wa-nai*.

There are also many examples of *nai-mono-wa-nai* in day-to-day life.

- There are no babysitting services, but neighbors will take care of local kids any time.
- There are no “disco” clubs, but all of the townspeople can dance the traditional dance along with the “Kinyamonya” local folk songs.

- There are no security companies, but people do look after each other, so no one worries about that.

- There are no flower shops, but lovely flowers are growing outside many homes.

- There are no movie theaters, but there are many local video nights.

From the experiences of Ama Town, I think we can find three messages or benefits of *nai-mono-wa-nai*.

(1) Positive acceptance: Move from the defeatist thought of “We don’t have it here, but we just have to live with the situation.” to “We don’t have it, and that’s OK.”

Not forced acceptance but this positive acceptance is the starting point and the basis of *nai-mono-wa-nai*.

(2) Second point is a sense of sufficiency.

“*We already have everything that is important*”. There are no babysitters on the island. But you can always ask your neighbors to help watch the kids. There are no big stores to sell everything imaginable. But if you ask your neighbors for a particular tool, it will always turn up. This is all possible because of the capacity to be self-reliant, willingness to share and to make or create whatever you need. Ama Town has an enormous amount of social capital, because many townspeople know each other and have shared many experiences.

(3) The third factor is the attitude of “together, let’s create whatever we are lacking and enjoy the process!”

A society of mass consumption offers a convenient lifestyle but it is a society that has forgotten the joy of creating something together, instead of just buying it.

When I look at what is happening in Ama Town, I realize that in a mass-consumption society it is hard to get a sustained sense of happiness and feeling of abundance that comes from realizing that what you have *really* is enough.

The ecological footprint of humanity today is the equivalent of 1.7 planet Earths. In particular, the footprints of developed countries are enormous, and if people around the world had the same lifestyles as people in Japan [and other developed countries], we would need almost 3 Earths. However, if the scale of economic activity gets above a certain threshold, the level of happiness will not necessarily increase, even with further economic growth. The “Easterlin Paradox” looks at this phenomenon.

Despite this, studies by my Institute for Studies in Happiness, Economy and Society (ISHES) found that many people in Japan still believe economic growth is absolutely necessary.

For our planet Earth and for people’s happiness, developed countries need to free themselves

from the models of mass production, mass consumption, and forever chasing after economic growth.

I think the *nai-mono-wa-nai* concept of Ama Town is a new model that can help us accomplish that.