

Gentle Teaching In Japan

-1- 20 Year History

20 years ago Masako Iwasaki invited John McGee to Japan for the first time (November 1994). He visited people in various organizations and gave lectures in Osaka and Tokyo. After these events, Masako (as chairperson) started a so-called Gentleness Center in the Community named Tokajuku in Osaka

From the beginning it became clear that Gentle Teaching (GT) matches perfectly with the Japanese Culture. GT gives the people the possibility to deepen their relationships with vulnerable people and has been based on other-centeredness and companionship. They learned to understand more about the meaning of reciprocal and equal exchange which they already knew intuitively. The first encounter with John McGee was the beginning of the approach of GT in a number of areas in Japan. During the years Masako visited many communities and she gave presentations about the way people could apply GT in their relationships with people with disabilities. In the meantime she also encouraged key people to start Gentleness Centers and asked them to promote GT in their communities. Gentleness Centers have been developed on the main island (Honshu) and the northern island Hokkaido, the southern island Kyushu and the remote southern islands named Okinawa.



People in all these Centers became more involved in GT and therefore Masako decided to start annual workshops in Osaka. People from these centers could present their activities based on GT and could exchange their experiences. During these years John McGee also gave lectures at these workshops and visited people in various communities.

The below quote is from an email that John McGee sent to Masako Iwasaki (June 11; 2011): "***When I recall my last trip to Japan, as well as all visits to Japan over the years and your insightful representation at the last congress in the Netherlands*** (note: more than 30 people from the Gentle Centers in Japan visited this congress) ***much gratitude fills my heart.***

I am humbled by your work and bow to your friends in Japan for all that you are doing .I am deeply touched by your wonderful creative work side by side with my dear friend and your loving husband Anthony Millenaar, both of you, as well as all your colleagues in Japan ,have taught me and many others so much “

To date, 16 workshops have been organized by people of Tokajuku for all the colleagues in the Gentleness Centers in Japan. Moreover people, who are very experienced and knowledgeable about GT, from various countries including: USA; Canada; Belgium and the Netherlands have been invited to give lectures in these workshops. People could learn a lot from these kinds of exchanges from various cultures around the world. “East meets West” with the common basis of GT. This means heart-to-heart.

-2- 16 Gentle Teaching workshops during 20 years

In each Gentle Center people learnt how to build up a community based Center on the 4 pillars and tools of GT. At the nationwide workshops these people meet each other and were able to share their experiences and to create new memories.



Japan is a country, which has had many natural disasters like the earthquake in the northern part of Japan (Tohoku) in March 2011. People of the Gentleness Center in Sendai were a victim of this disaster and their facilities were heavily damaged. Without any hesitation the people from the Gentleness Centers all over Japan started to provide support in various ways. In this way the victims of such a tragedy felt a strong solidarity in the process of establishing new safe places for people with disabilities (PwD). They could feel the real meaning what John McGee always emphasized : “to be engaged “. He also found a way to support these people.

Quote from John McGee from the abovementioned email sent to Masako Iwasaki:

During the sad time of mourning over the tragedy in Sendai, I am especially honored to reflect on your goodness and culture of gentleness that you have nurtured there in recent years. May God`s blessing rain upon every one suffering there. I have filled with sorrow at

the tragedy in northern Japan and the deaths of good and loving people devoted to a culture of gentleness. My sorrow is deep and hopeful. If I might be of any concrete assistance in this time of tragedy please let me know. I have not much to give but what I do have I have give to you: my profound gratitude for your continuing endeavors thanks giving for your leadership, and a deep hope for the alleviation and healing for those who suffer in Sendai and beyond.

John expresses in these sentences the real meaning of sharing which he always taught us in the workshops. This engagement and sharing helped the people to find their culture of life. One month after John passed away two years ago people of the Gentleness Centers all over Japan came together and they could share the sadness and memorized the way John taught them about the deep meaning of GT. In presented part of videos in which John support the vulnerable people, they could hear his voice and see his smile as if he is still present.

Recently some one found a sentence from John, which will ensure that his spirit will continue:

The Things you do for yourself are gone, but the Things you do for others remain as your legacy. (The meaning of 'legacy' in the Oxford Dictionary is: "Something that is left by someone who died.")

As heirs of this mental legacy; this means, people who continue the work of John McGee. People have found the strength to continue Gentle Teaching in so many different places and circumstances.

-3- The 16th Gentle Teaching workshop

- *Go to the next Step- October 2014*

During the past 20 years the participants have created the possibilities to go step-by-step to the next step of GT. They have presented these experiences of GT, which are also compared with other knowledge and findings from other fields. In this context an appropriate theme has been chosen for each year. This year the title is '*go to the next step*'.

In her opening speech Masako Iwasaki explained that it is a basic capacity of human beings to understand what other people feel and that they naturally know what people need. Therefore they know when other people need support. In recent studies in the field of neurology, scientists found "mirror neurons " in the brain. Human beings are basically able to share emotions and understand other`s behavior. Recently biologists found that the hormone oxytocin can generate an empathic action. These findings confirm that GT is not a kind of intuition, but is based on the nature of human beings. On the other hand, people have the tendency to compete and fight. In our relationship with vulnerable people we have to be aware of this. Therefore we have to find a good balance to be empathetic. For this we need the tools of GT to create a new memory.



One of the key-speakers Prof Hiromi Tsuji, presented the learning process for the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy drawing on Prof. Frans de Waal's Russian doll model, which suggests that cognitive empathy develops around the core, which is affective empathy. The nurturing program called "Roots of Empathy", for example, enables young children to learn cognitive empathy by observing babies in a very empathetic atmosphere. Parents can also learn from babies about the basis of empathy. This learning may be important to enable parents to become more responsive so that they provide children with learning experiences for the cognitive aspect of empathy, which requires a greater effort to learn. Research suggests that even adults occasionally make mistakes when they try to take another person's perspective. We need continuous and reciprocal learning (mothers and babies, teachers and pupils, people with disabilities and their caregivers, co-workers and managers) to be empathetic in keeping a balance between affective and cognitive aspects.



Another key-speaker Anthony Millenaar emphasized that adults are also able to develop empathy even when they did not have the possibility to learn this in their early childhood. However even when they have the potentiality they need to be taught continuously by gentle educators in natural surroundings. We recognized this approach in the way that John McGee taught marginalized people with unconditional love. These people learned to feel and understand what someone else feels and understands. That can be the drive to start actions and to support people with special needs. The people in the learning process could also teach other people in a process of co-education. This is the beginning for social action and what is called: *Collective Empathy* .

So, empathy is not only a purely one-to-one human phenomenon but it can stimulate groups in the community and, with good politics, collective empathy can stimulate people in societies. In this way Civil Right Movements have been initiated. Through these Movements people become step-by-step more aware of the equal rights for all people. Now in many

countries the Convention of Human Rights has been signed and ratified; including the Convention of the United Nations for People with Disabilities (PWD). In the process of implementation we found many articles, which are useful for the application of Gentle Teaching. This needs to be realized in daily practice.

After these key-speakers the representative of each Gentleness Center gave a presentation of their experiences with GT over the past year. Some speakers explained how they could change the policy in their Center and how they could show their progress with the results of a Questionnaire. Another speaker presented how they apply Gentle Teaching in the process of the implementation of Human Rights for PwD. He focused on the equal rights which are necessary in positive relationships to create a culture of life.



A psychologist spoke about the way he applies GT in a group training program. He used the group-dynamics to stimulate activities and included the tools of GT to improve the understanding of each other, which was followed by ways in which they could support each other. New memories also were shown in a video- and power-point presentations. One presenter gave a demonstration of the use of a traditional Japanese instrument which she made audibly and visibly clear that, in combination with a gentle attitude, it can comfort people who feel stressed .

A number of speakers present case studies of people with negative behaviors and other difficulties and the ways that they could change this into positive interactions. These presentations were very useful for the other people in the audience to reflect on their own difficulties and how they could find solutions.



Japan is a country with long distances, and many participants came from far away. Therefore the annual workshop starts in the afternoon after lunch and finishes after lunch the next day. This provided ample opportunities to exchange information. In general people from all the Centers learned how to share and make arrangements to maintain contact with each other after the workshop in their own surroundings. This companionship is really fruitful to keep the flow in their own communities.

-4- Reflections

With this report we hope that we could make it clear for people outside Japan, that the people who are involved in Gentle Teaching in many regions in this country ,experienced the real meaning of companionship .



After each workshop all the participants completed an evaluation form in which they could express their thoughts about the workshop. The results of these forms make it clear that positive sharing is not only important but also necessary to stimulate solidarity between the Gentleness Centers. In this way people could continue the work of John McGee and others. (Gentle Teaching; a Non-aversive Approach to Helping Persons with Mental Retardation; 1987) *Although a consistent posture of Solidarity is not the only element that will change the nature and flow of human interaction, it is the Center from which all decisions and actions emanate. It is the heart of the interactional process that leads to bonding. A posture of human solidarity is the key, if bonding is the goal (p 41)*

People of all Gentleness Centers are motivated to go on with GT; to go for this flow. In a continuous process in the “here and now” they feel the Empathy of each other and together they experienced the Solidarity of all people .

Prof Masako Iwasaki; Representative of the Japanese Society for Gentle Teaching

Drs Anthony Millenaar MA; Honorable Member of this Society.

Prof Dr Hiromi Tsuji; Professor in Child Psychology and Key-speaker of a number of Gentle Teaching Workshops.