

Human being

By [Diane Roth](#)

July 21, 2015

It was a long time ago now—but you don't forget some things, even after many years. It was a long time ago that I lived and worked as a missionary in Japan. I was a stranger there. Although I worked very hard to know and to be known, to learn Japanese, to understand, there were also many other forces that made that difficult. In some ways, I would always be a stranger.

I worked at a Lutheran boy's school, junior and senior high school—and I walked home from school every day to my two-room apartment. (One person should only need one room, in Japanese terms, but because I was a Westerner, the school thought it wise for me to have two rooms rather than one.)

Every day I walked past a dress shop—all of the dresses there were too expensive for me, but, even so, I used to stop in on the way home. I would look at the dresses and talk to the woman who worked at the store. Sometimes she would make me tea. It was that time of the day for tea, usually.

She had a three-year-old daughter, who I also like to visit with when I stopped.

One day, we were visiting, and the little girl looked at me and said, "Are you a gaijin?"

The word *gaijin* is Japanese for foreigner. So, indeed, I was a gaijin. But the word literally means "outsider," anyone who is not Japanese. There is a more polite way to say it, but this is the word I usually heard. One of the most frequent places I heard the word *gaijin* was from small children, unused to seeing outsiders. I would be walking down the street, and a small child would be shocked to see me, someone who looked so un-Japanese, and would point at me and cry out "Gaijin!" Sometimes a very small child might even burst into tears.

So when this little girl asked if I was a gaijin, I was surprised, and so was her mother.

We both laughed, and I said that yes, I was a gaijin, and her mother said that we were all *ningen*—which is Japanese for "human being."

And then we forgot about it.

Sometime later I stopped in at the dress shop again. The little girl was there with a friend of hers. They were playing on the floor. The friend looked up at me, pointed and said, loudly, "Gaijin!" This was to be expected.

But the other little girl, my friend's daughter, replied, "She's not a gaijin. She's a human being."

The kingdom of God drew near for me that day and in that moment. I was a stranger in Japan and I couldn't do a thing about it. No matter how well I learned the language, no matter how well I learned to fit in, I would always be different, I would always stick out, I would always be strange. It was so different than my whole experience growing up, where I was a member of the dominant culture. I didn't think of myself as privileged, but I was. I had the luxury of assuming that when people looked at me they would see a human being before they saw anything else.

Not everyone has that luxury. I don't know how we can deny it. That is why it is important to say that "Black Lives Matter." Maybe it should go without saying, but it doesn't. Maybe we should be able to say "All Lives Matter" because we are all human beings, but Dylann Roof did not treat those nine worshipers from Mother Emanuel like human beings, and the state trooper did not treat [Sandra Bland](#) like a human being when he pulled her over that day.

The nine African Americans did treat Dylann Roof like a human being, though. Was it simply because he was a member of the dominant culture? Or was it because they were praying, because they had learned to see the way God sees, the value and humanity in all of us? Was it because they knew that, since Jesus died for each one of us, we are, all of us, in all of our diversity, in all of our strangeness, worth dying for?

It was a long time ago now—but some things you never forget. I will never forget being pointed and stared at. And I will never forget being called a human being.

*Originally posted at [Faith in Community](#)*