

Empty... からっぽ…

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Runners struggling through a marathon are just about to pass in front of you, what do you say to cheer them up? I can't help shouting out "Ganbare!" Every time in such a situation, I feel I can give my power to them with this word. But is this always the case? The other day, a friend of mine seemed to be struggling, just like those runners, so I did as I usually do and gave her a "Ganbare!" I meant to cheer her up and expected the usual reaction of "Thanks!" or "I will!" However, my sympathy was met with anger. "Leave me alone!" "I don't need your empty words!" Empty words!?! How could she hear it as "empty"? Now *I* was the one who was angry. "If you don't want my help, fine!" I said and stormed off. I was only trying to support her. I thought to myself, "How could my words of encouragement hurt?" What could be wrong with "Ganbare"?

According to Dr. Adam Kaplin, an associate professor of psychiatry and neurology at Johns Hopkins University, telling someone who is unhappy, "Cheer up!" can make things worse because if it were that simple, they would be able to do it on their own. Instead, he argues the best thing we can do is listen to them, and agree that it is difficult because it gives them validation. Moreover, after the 2011 earthquake, Usui Mafumi, professor of social psychology at Niigata Seiryō University, said that volunteers should avoid using certain phrases with the survivors. At the top of his list was "Ganbare." He argued that the imperative form distances the speaker from who they are talking to. It makes it sound like the problem is *theirs* to solve alone.

"Ganbaru" means to face a problem with determination. That's all well and good if you have a solution, but need determination. However, if you don't know how to even face the problem in the first place, then the word certainly can seem empty. The runners from before know how to run, they just need some motivation. But what if someone is in a race and they can't even run? Then telling them "Ganbaru" isn't addressing the problem at hand.

So, what should we do? I'm certainly not saying to stop using "Ganbare," rather I would suggest we take the time to figure out if it's appropriate to the situation. I later learned that my friend was not merely feeling down, but had been suffering from anxiety attacks. The stress of exams had overwhelmed her and her mental and physical health had been suffering. My "Ganbare" had probably rung hollow as she was feeling lost and alone. The next time I saw her, I decided to just talk to her, and listen; allow her to vent and let her know that I was there to support her in any way I could. When we parted ways, I hadn't solved all her problems, but she left with a smile, knowing she wasn't facing them alone.

Every word has a meaning. Nevertheless, they can lose that meaning and become empty when they don't live up to the task at hand. Take the time to assess the situation and find out what the right words are. And if the situation calls for it, then by all means, share a "Ganbare!"