

2016 International Essay Contest for Young People

【Youth Category – 1<sup>st</sup> Prize】

## **Dreams and Abundance** (Original in Japanese)

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“What is your dream?” the interviewer asked me during my high school entrance examination. As if I had been waiting for the question, the words I had prepared flowed smoothly out of my mouth. But in contrast, my heart was saying: “You don’t really have a dream like that, do you?”

There are about 35,000 suicides a year in Japan, the highest of any developed country. If Japan is so wealthy and prosperous, then why are so many people taking their own lives? I had been asking this question since I was a child. But after entering high school, I felt that I understood the reason why. I had no dream.



In junior high school, when I said to my teacher, “In the future I want to be a doctor and help children in developing countries,” my teacher answered, “Good. That’s wonderful.” But I didn’t fail to catch the little scornful laugh he made as he said it. Time after time, I gave up on an occupation that I aspired to, thinking that it was impossible for me. I threw away my dreams, and gradually my heart became hollow.

That was when my turning point came. In grade 11, I saw a poster advertising volunteer work at an orphanage in Indonesia during summer vacation. Since I was a child, I had always dreamed of participating in international cooperation efforts, and I immediately decided to go.

When I got to Indonesia, I found an environment very different from that of Japan. But my enjoyment of the time I spent there far outweighed the harsh conditions. For me, living in Indonesia was everything that my life in Japan wasn’t. Whereas in Japan, my parents were often late coming home and I would eat by myself, here, my ‘family’ of 60 people sat together

around a big dining table. Waking up in the morning used to be a bother, but now I woke up with a good feeling, listening to the children's beautiful hymns.

The 50 children in the orphanage each had their own circumstances that brought them there, and they were living their lives as best they could. I learned more things from those children than I can possibly count.

However, after a good deal of time had passed during my stay, something happened that gave me quite a shock. It happened when we celebrated the Star Festival (Tanabata) with the children. The children were asked, "What is your dream?" and they were given cards on which to write their answer. I was very surprised when I looked at the cards that came back. Among the 50 cards the children handed in, only five occupations were written. When I asked an orphanage staff member why this was the case, he replied, "The children's world is very small, so they can only choose from occupations that are familiar to them. And even for the occupations they know, their dream won't come true, because they are too poor." He also told me that 30 percent of the children in the orphanage go on to commit crimes.

This is what poverty is, I realized. It was quite a shock to learn this, after I had been living with the children for a month. I realized that being poor meant that the children would have very few dreams to choose from, and I was taken aback by this.

How about in Japan? Certainly, Japan is a very wealthy country. It would seem that we have unlimited choices for our future. But is that really the case? When I talked about my dream, I was told that it was impossible for me. When we are growing up, we are told that 'happiness' means going to a good school, getting a good job, getting married, and growing old.

When I went to the orphanage and met the children there, I felt a kind of happiness that I've never felt before. The happiness of sitting together with the entire family to eat meals. The happiness of being able to share even what little you have with your brothers and sisters. The happiness of giving our full attention to the people in our lives. Could these things be called 'happiness' in Japan, I wonder?

Both Japan and Indonesia are poor, because in both countries, the choices for one's dream are narrow. In Indonesia, it's because of money. In Japan, it's due to our narrow concept of happiness.

At present, I am writing a book. It's a book that introduces 200 different occupations and all the countries of the world, and it's written in Indonesian. I'm planning to have this book reach the orphanage in August of this year (2016).

After that, I want to open a 'classroom of dreams,' to teach children how big the world is and introduce the vast number of options available to them. I think this kind of 'dream education' is the education that is needed to build a better future—a future where children can have a dream and make progress toward achieving it. This, I think, is needed in both developed and developing countries.

I now have a dream—a dream to broaden the choices available to children. And for the first time in my life, I am spending every day filled with hope.