

2017 International Essay Contest for Young People

【Youth Category – 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize】

## Knowledge and the Real Thing

(Original in Japanese)

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For me, surrounded by buildings since I can remember, nature has always been a mysterious existence, nearby and yet far distant.

Many times in our ethics classes, we learned about nature and wrote about nature based on our knowledge—how wonderful nature is, and how human beings have a deep connection with it. Of course, I had never once experienced nature for myself, but I wrote about it superficially based on what we had learned, and I was happy to get passing marks. Before I knew it, ‘knowledge-based nature’ had gone beyond the framework of knowledge and become established in my mind as ‘real nature.’

A turning point came for me when I was 15, during the summer after my first year in high school, when I did a short study program in Australia. I didn’t have a particularly strong interest in studying abroad. When I started high school, everyone was talking about their dreams and setting their future course. I was still uncertain about my future, and spurred on by restlessness, I casually applied for the program, with the idea that I should start by broadening my horizons.

With an indescribable feeling of anticipation mixed with anxiety, I left for Australia. From the airport, I took a bus to the school, and when the bus stopped, the teacher in charge said to us, “This is the school where all of you will be spending the next two weeks.” As I got off the bus and looked around, I couldn’t believe my eyes. A boundless field of grass stretched out right in front of me, and windmills stood in a row. *Is this really a high school?* I thought, at a loss for words as I looked at the natural scenery that stretched out with no end in sight. The inexpressible magnificence of the nature here made me keenly aware of how different it was from the feeble ‘knowledge-based nature’ I had learned. And for the first time in 15 years, I felt in my heart how amazing nature really is.

My stay in Australia began with this shock of encountering the real nature—like a kind of baptism—and continued with a series of new discoveries.

In Tokyo, I spent my time on social media, watching videos, and going to trendy shops with friends on our days off. But in Australia, I didn't once use social media or watch single video. I was doing a homestay, and every morning when I got up, I would go for a walk near the house with the children of the homestay family. After school, I would play in a nearby river, and when it got dark I would return home by starlight. On my days off I went hiking in the nearby hills to a waterfall, and I rode a boat to an island a little ways away, where I swam in the ocean.

I wondered if the time that I idled away in Tokyo could be made this brilliant and wonderful just by mixing in some time in nature. I thought very hard about this.

Compared to the light that seeps out from buildings, the countless stars in the night sky shine much more brightly. Compared to the draft from an air conditioner, the breeze coming off a river is much cooler. Riding on a boat to an obscure island is much more fun than taking a train to a shop that's trending on social media. And a face creased up with laughter after getting covered in sand is much more radiant than a face decorated with make-up. And more beautiful. I believe nature and human beings are meant to live together.

Many people outside Japan have the impression that Japanese people are very punctual. This is a good thing, and an important thing. But through my contact with nature, I realized something else: Japanese people are controlled by time. It is no exaggeration to say that nowadays in Japan, people spend every day worried about time and dominated by time. Many people believe that we have to live our lives by the clock. Actually, for 15 years, I believed that, too. But I learned that it shouldn't be that way.

We human beings should learn about time through real experience with nature, and from tomorrow on, let that understanding guide our lives. It is not our moral understanding of nature, but our real experience with nature that teaches us how time is originally meant to flow. When we learn about time from the great existence called nature, the world broadens, and our options broaden, too. I think this understanding is indispensable to Japan's development from here on.