

2017 International Essay Contest for Young People

【Youth Category – 3rd Prize】

A Spirit of Coexistence

(Original in Japanese)

Chika Kiyasu

(Age 16, Japan)

Kanagawa Prefectural Yokosuka High School

My grandparents have a cottage in the woods near the Yatsugatake Mountains. It's a cottage with 50 years of history. When I was younger, my family and I would spend time there in the summer.

I learned many things there. Because the cottage was in the woods, every year a huge number of leaves piled up on the roof and blocked the rain gutters. I loved climbing up on the roof. I would look at the sunlight softly filtering through the leaves and the view of the distant mountains, and feel the breeze on my skin. At night, I would gaze up at the sky, filled with stars as if a jewel box had been turned upside down. Then, in the spring, when I went up to clean out the dead leaves, the leaves would be packed down under the winter snow, like a hard lump of clay, and would not budge. The lumps of leaves stuck in the rain gutters were a nuisance for us, but this 'nuisance' was also useful to people living in the city, as compost for growing flowers and vegetables. I was reminded that everywhere in the forest, there are things that are formed naturally, and we human beings cut them up into small pieces, giving them a certain worth.

I learned other things, too. Each fall, we had great fun gathering chestnuts from the big chestnut tree next to the cottage. But usually, on the days when I went to the mountains, nature was not on my side. Insects would get to the chestnuts before me, and I would find little visitors inside small holes made on the surface. In elementary school, I read a haiku poem that goes: *Chestnut gathering / where an insect / got there first*. In those days, I felt that the insects and I were equals, and that I had just lost the contest to get the delicious chestnuts first. When I recited the poem to my grandfather, he said, "Yes, the creatures of the forest were here first. We came later, and they allow us to live here." Therefore, he didn't mind when mice chewed holes in the mattresses, or moths came into the house. It's true—we came here after them. Rather than using insecticides, it's better if we can patiently coexist. I think my grandfather taught me that.

We tend to feel that we dominate nature with the power of science, but I think what's really important is the sense of humility I learned from my grandfather—that human beings came later and have been allowed to live in nature. I never want to lose the awareness that all living things sustain each other's lives.

These days, forests are disappearing from the world more and more each year. We human beings are creating a world of carbon dioxide, which we cannot breathe, and are breaking the life cycle that has been in place on earth for such a long time. In order to go on living on planet Earth, I think we have to always be aware that we came later and have been allowed to live here. We need to think all the time about finding a balance with our environment, and humbly coexisting with our surroundings. No matter how far science advances, we should always think of living in harmony with others. Between people and nature, among individuals and groups of people, and among countries, we need an attitude of coexistence. People living in different regions naturally have different cultures, and if we don't respect each other's cultures, I don't think there is any future for humanity. No culture can be superior to any other, so a spirit of open-mindedness, where we accept our differences, is needed to achieve world peace. I will never stop wishing for a world where all living things coexist in harmony.