

2019 International Essay Contest for Young People
[Youth Category – 3rd Prize]

Being In It Together (Original in Japanese)

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We know that kindness means helping to resolve someone's difficult situation. I felt this all the more strongly in relation to my grandmother, who lost her will to live after my grandfather died last year.

My grandmother is eighty-six years old. After getting married, she continued working, and she remained independent both mentally and physically. But despite this, I was surprised to see that, after my grandfather died, she became very gloomy and was complaining all the time. We brought her meals, helped her to deal with my grandfather's things and take care of her daily needs, took her out to the movies and on excursions, and looked for hobby groups that she could join. But far from accepting these things cheerfully, she often rejected them. Our attempts at kindness didn't work on her at all.

While she was taking care of my grandfather, my grandmother talked about her hopes and plans, saying, "When I'm free, I want to do this and that." So, why did she become so listless? My view is that when she was caring for my grandfather, even though she felt restricted, it gave her energy for living. Now, she no longer had that energy and willpower. Perhaps human beings cannot be truly content when they spend their time and effort only for their own enjoyment. If so, I thought, then maybe the kindness I can give to my grandmother is to fulfill her inner desire to feel needed by others.

It takes several steps to make an elderly person like my grandmother realize that she is more than someone who needs to be cared for. First, I began holding regular gatherings with other women in the neighborhood who had recently lost their husbands. They would share their feelings and talk about how they were doing at

present. The purpose was to make them feel that, even though they were living alone, they had friends in the same situation.

After a few gatherings, the atmosphere became more relaxed, and I asked a question of the group: In Japan, even in old age women are the primary caregivers, so how does it feel when you suddenly find yourselves alone? It is quite a hardship for an elderly person to care for and lose another elderly person, so it would be a waste, I thought, not to draw on their experiences.

For example, when a woman is caring for her elderly husband, someone from social services comes to check on their physical condition and mental state, and both the husband and wife can feel that people are concerned about them. But as soon as the husband passes away, no one even makes sure that the wife is alive, let alone looks after her condition. If she doesn't have any relatives nearby, then she suddenly finds herself all alone. And yet, this issue is not well recognized in society. When I explained it in this way, everyone was able to feel that there is value in sharing their experiences.

After that, I explained how to post these experiences on an online blog. I have always thought that social media and other networking tools are especially useful for people who are physically disabled or constrained in some way, and it was with this in mind that I had created 'Grandma's Blog' a few years earlier. At that time, although my grandmother didn't show much interest in it, I posted pictures of the green peas ripening in her garden, and wrote about topics like new exercises at her seniors' swimming class. Over time, I had created a collection of posts that were heartwarming to look back on. Now, when I showed them to my grandmother, she not only felt joy in looking back at her life, she was also surprised to see that people she did not know personally had viewed the blog posts thousands of times, and sometimes even left comments. The other women in the group were also keenly interested in it, and said it was like a big wall poster that people can read and write responses. Then, they put forth the idea to make the blog not just a record of past memories, but a way to share what it's like for elderly people after they have cared for and lost a loved one. Everyone's face came alive!

Human beings may seem separated by differences in age, gender, and circumstance, but in reality, it is just that our situations are a little bit different, and there is no distinction between givers and receivers of kindness. In everything, I think, it's important to get involved, remembering that 'we are all in it together.' In order for

more people to realize this, I want to enthusiastically recommend creating a blog to share the experiences of our grandmothers and our elderly neighbors. There are some issues to consider, such as connecting to the internet, but it is interesting to think about these issues together. It gives us a real sense of being in it together, and for me, that is a new definition of kindness.