

2021 International Essay Contest for Young People
【Youth Category – 3rd Prize】

What Is Life?

(Original in Japanese)

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Here, I will write my thoughts on the topic of ‘What Is Life?’ When I ask myself this big question, two events come to mind.

One is the first time I attended a funeral service. Last year, my uncle, who I’ve known since I was very young, passed away. He loved my siblings and me like we were his own grandchildren. He had always had a slender physique, but once he got sick with cancer, he started losing weight very quickly. Every time I went to see him, he had gotten thinner. I felt a little afraid to see it. But even when he was not well, he never showed that to us—he was a strong person who always greeted us with a smile. He fought to the very end, but finally his body, which had become all skin and bones, was laid to rest in a coffin, like a burnt out matchbox.

He lived in the countryside, and often took us to the ocean during our summer vacations. He made his way through the bush to a special place that only he knew about, where he taught us how to fish. During the New Years and O-Bon holidays, he would prepare a feast for my family, and always waited with a smile for our arrival. At the funeral service, as I listened to the chanting of Buddhist sutras, I thought about the good times I spent with him. For the procession, we put flowers in the casket around his sleeping body. When we said our goodbyes, many people were shedding tears as they touched his cheeks. However, I couldn’t bring myself to touch his dead body. I was afraid to feel his death in his body temperature. I had the feeling that I would be touching something dreadful that covered his body, so I hesitated. I was disappointed

in myself for not being able to properly say goodbye to my uncle whom I loved. Hiding this bad feeling in my mind, I paid my last respects to him.

The second event that came to mind is a memory related to my birth. My siblings and I were born as triplets. Unlike my siblings, my birth weight was only 1,500 grams (3 pounds, 5 ounces). It seems that I didn't get well nourished in the womb, and my body was underdeveloped. When I was in early elementary school, my mother showed me a photo of me sleeping in an incubator at a neonatal center. I could see how small my body was in comparison to my mother's hand, which is holding me in the photo. A thin red and yellow tube is coming out of my nose, and other thin tubes connect the back of my hands and top of my feet to the equipment. I was told that each of the tubes was directly providing me with nutrition. In the photo, taken just after I was born, my skin is wrinkled and inelastic, with a grayish color. It seemed like my life would just fade away if those tubes were removed. I felt like the fact that my life was feeble and fragile was being thrust at me. I remember crying out loud because I seemed like such a miserable and pitiable little baby.

There is a Buddhist saying that all things are impermanent. It means that everything in this world is constantly changing, and is never in the same state even for a moment. This is a truth of nature. Everything that lives is sure to perish someday. Even a flower's beauty is not eternal. That is why the beauty we see in front of us right now is so precious. All of this is expressed in Japanese in just four characters. Life is beautiful because it is fleeting.

Today, I am healthy, and I don't feel that death is close by. But both my uncle's life and my life as a newborn taught me the importance of living consciously while enjoying the present moment. I think this might overlap with the answer to the topic of 'What is Life?' This is because our lives, which will someday come to an end, are a succession of present moments.

We tend to imagine death as a world of darkness. But it is because of that darkness, I think, that life is all the brighter. Because life is finite, we need to cherish and live

radiantly in this present moment. I feel that a powerful light has just emerged in my heart right now.