

2022 International Essay Contest for Young People

【Youth Category – 3rd Prize】

My Values for Living in the 21st Century

(Original in Japanese)

Mei Katayama

(Age 18, Japan)

Koka Gakuen Junior and Senior High School for Girls, Tokyo

We live in a society where things are constantly changing at a dizzying pace. What we believed to be correct yesterday gets disproven, what we thought was invincible gets destroyed, and what we once took for granted is no longer a matter of course. On the other hand, we might be able to do things that we could not do yesterday, or understand things that we did not understand before. These changes can take place on a global scale, or quietly within individuals.

A change takes place in me, for example, when I learn something new in school, when I encounter a new idea in a newspaper editorial, or when I see in the media the current tragic state of poverty in the world, or the stains of a brutal war. Each time, some thought or belief within me might soundlessly crumble, or on the other hand, what had been fragmented and disconnected could suddenly take on a fixed form, and in that process my values have been formed.

When we think of values, we have an image of people believing in something and using it as the basis for all kinds of judgments. However, rather than fixating on one thing that I believe in and making it the foundation of my daily life, what I want is to change the way I see, think, and act, little by little and day by day, to adapt to the times, to different people, and to my own growth. In saying this, I might sound like the type of person who is easily swayed by others and tends to lose sight of themselves. But in this world of dizzying change, rather than stubbornly sticking to one thing, I want to turn my eyes and ears to what's around me, and form my values based on what I think is right at the time.

It was the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has been going on for the past four months, that has made me feel strongly about this. I know from studying world history that there has never been a 100-year period of global peace, yet even still, I thought things would be fine in the 21st century, and so it was quite a shock to see how easily peace could collapse. However, I have recently realized that we who live in Japan tend to view Russia from a somewhat pro-American, biased perspective. Because of this war, many of us have become critical of Russia. We say things like "Russia is..." but I have come to strongly feel that the country and people of Russia itself should not be the target of our criticism.

I studied classical ballet from a young age, and one of my teachers was Russian, so I still have respect and affection for Russian art and culture. In addition, looking at the dialogue between the United States and Russia immediately following the Cold War, I realized that Russia is not the only one responsible for this current war. In studying world history, I found that the different perceptions of ethnicity that have caused problems between Russia and Ukraine can be traced back to the Middle Ages—in particular, to the spread of Catholicism and Greek Orthodox Christianity. In the newspapers, I read that this war has had a major impact on the situations in Taiwan and Okinawa. I also learned that in the European countries' rush to aid and take in people from Ukraine, they did not extend a helping hand to some people of African descent living in Ukraine, and that each country's way of giving aid was determined by its political policies and diplomatic agendas.

These past four months, my head and heart have been filled with all the things happening in the world every day, and each time I see the news, new emotions simmered in me, to the point that I feel shaken by how my thoughts and feelings are changing and evolving little by little, but through this process I have been able to encounter new values within myself. And now, I'm excited about how my feelings and future values will continue to change. Even though my desire for peace and my wish to make the world a better place will never change, I believe that constantly fine-tuning the way I look at the world is a key to solving various problems in a world that is changing from day to day. And in order to do so, I want to value the learning that happens every day, acquiring new knowledge while not forgetting to maintain a multifaceted point of view.