

**2021 International Essay Contest  
for Young People  
(1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> prize winning essays)**

**Theme: “What is Life?”**

**The Goi Peace Foundation**  
**[www.goipeace.or.jp](http://www.goipeace.or.jp)**

October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021

# 2021 International Essay Contest for Young People

## List of Winners

Theme: "What is Life?"

No. of participating countries: 161

No. of entries: 28,217 (Children's category: 7,670 / Youth category: 20,547)

\*All ages are as of June 15, 2021.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Prize

#### Children's category (1 entrant)

- *Life is Final*  
Vivaan Kathuria (Age 9, India)

#### Youth category (1 entrant)

- *Learning from the land: What is life and how to live*  
Ha Bich Dong (Age 24, Vietnam  
<Living in Canada>)

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize

#### Children's category (3 entrants)

- *Life Is True Happiness*  
Citra Karuna (Age 8, Malaysia)
- *What Is Life?*  
Ryoya Nakayama (Age 12, Japan)
- *THE UNIQUE PIECES IN OUR MOSAICS*  
Clara Sima Agharazii  
(Age 14, Canada)

#### Youth category (3 entrants)

- *The True Science of Life*  
Hetian Xu (Age 16, U.S.A.)
- *What Sustains Life*  
Ayaka Hasegawa (Age 17, Japan)
- *The Gift*  
Laura Silva Bertoqui (Age 19, Brazil)

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize

#### Children's category (5 entrants)

- *Dazzling Light*  
Hikari Tsukamoto (Age 11, Japan)
- *Fire of life*  
Lara Stancheva  
(Age 11, North Macedonia)

#### Youth category (5 entrants)

- *What Is Life?*  
Yu Nitanda (Age 16, Japan)
- *The Metamorphosis of a Caterpillar*  
Dan Joseph Talle Dillo  
(Age 17, Philippines)

- *My Grandma's Life*  
Riria Yumoto (Age 12, Japan)
- *What Is Life?*  
Saisha Maya Tappoo (Age 12, Fiji)
- *Live to Give*  
Mahashri Ranjith Kumar (Age 13, India)
- *What is Life*  
Nethmi Ishara Fernando  
(Age 18, Sri Lanka)
- *Having a Reason of Happily Dying*  
Prince Bishogo Bashangezi (Age 20,  
Democratic Republic of the Congo  
<Living in Eswatini>)
- *The Life*  
Tecil Puzhimel Jinu (Age 21,  
U.A.E. <Living in India>)

## Honorable Mention

### Children's category (25 entrants)

- Maria Chernuch (Age 10, Russia)
- Sana Nagata (Age 10, Japan)
- Aoi Tsukahara (Age 12, Japan)
- Fathimath Saara Nazeer  
(Age 12, Maldives)
- Grace Mathews (Age 12, India)
- Hinata Hirayama (Age 12, Japan)
- Paridhi Verma (Age 12, India)
- Riku Wada (Age 12, Japan)
- Ahmed Muhannad Madhy  
(Age 13, Iraq)
- Kokoro Motoishi (Age 13, Japan)
- Odey Victoria Ogwihi (Age 13, Nigeria)
- Riko Shindo (Age 13, Japan)
- Aoi Futamura (Age 14, Japan)
- Aubrey Joelle Jackson (Age 14, U.S.A.)
- Celine Leung (Age 14, U.S.A.)
- David Oluwatobi Oladejo (Age 14,  
Nigeria)
- Harpita Pandian (Age 14, India)
- Karen Mochizuki (Age 14, Japan)
- Konoha Hirano (Age 14, Japan)

### Youth category (25 entrants)

- Anna Andreevna Stopyra  
(Age 15, Cyprus)
- Mai Jahad Sha'ban (Age 15, Syria)
- Nanako Tanabata (Age 15, Japan)
- Hirona Kishioka (Age 16, Japan)
- Mohamed Luth Ibrahim Ziyau  
(Age 16, Maldives)
- Walid Mohamed Lakdari  
(Age 16, Morocco)
- Ho Chau Giang (Age 17, Vietnam)
- Ishan Pandey (Age 17, India)
- Tanishka Murthy  
(Age 17, India <living in Japan>)
- Chiara Jo Mari Galan Cimeni  
(Age 19, Philippines)
- Emiliano Rentería Benítez  
(Age 19, México)
- Keita Nishio (Age 19, Japan)
- Pearl Cheng (Age 19, Australia)
- Danna Gabriela Quintero Cristancho  
(Age 20, Colombia)
- Farhan Ahmed (Age 20, Pakistan)

- Mendigaz Zeinolla  
(Age 14, Kazakhstan)
- Ozerova Diana Victorovna  
(Age 14, Belarus)
- Phantharach Natnithikarat  
(Age 14, Thailand)
- Venezia Méndez Chavarría  
(Age 14, México)
- Yuan Matoba (Age 14, Japan)
- Yuiko Ishikawa (Age 14, Japan)
- Karolina Fedorowicz (Age 20, Poland)
- Swastika (Age 20, India)
- Leta Daniel (Age 21, Uganda)
- Marina Prata (Age 21, Brazil)
- Meghali Banerjee (Age 21, India)
- Nada Yousef Qashqish  
(Age 21, Palestine)
- Umida Zayniddinovna Esirgapova  
(Age 21, Uzbekistan)
- Ysiana Agalliu (Age 21, Albania)
- S Priyashini (Age 23, Singapore)
- Rahyara Cristina Oliveira  
(Age 25, Brazil)

### **Best School Award (3 schools)**

- Joso Gakuin Junior & Senior High School, Ibaraki (Japan)
- Fuji Sacred Heart School, Shizuoka (Japan)
- Kagoshima Gyokuryu Junior & Senior High School of Kagoshima City (Japan)

### **School Incentive Award (66 schools)**

- Beaconhouse Sri Inai International School, Petaling Jaya (Malaysia)
- Bookers International Schools, Ogun (Nigeria)
- Brest Gymnasium No 1 (Belarus)
- Bukhara region Karavulbazar district School N1 (Uzbekistan)
- Çağdaş Bilim Anadolu Ve Fen Lisesi, Marmaris (Turkey)
- Chicago Futabakai Japanese School-Saturday School, Illinois (U.S.A.)
- Chitoku High School, Shizuoka (Japan)
- Colégio Guilherme Dumont Villares, São Paulo (Brazil)
- Colégio Vital Brazil, São Paulo (Brazil)
- Drukgyel Central School, Paro (Bhutan)
- Escuela Preparatoria No. 8, Universidad de Guadalajara (México)
- FPT University (Vietnam)
- Fukuoka Jyoto High School (Japan)
- Ghiyasuddin International School, Male' (Maldives)

- Girl Scouts of the Philippines, Manila (Philippines)
- Honjo Higashi Junior & Senior High School, Saitama (Japan)
- Ibaraki Prefectural Koga Secondary School (Japan)
- Ijaiye Housing Estate Senior Grammar School, Alakashi, Lagos ( Nigeria)
- International School of Milan (Italy)
- Iskandhar School, Male' (Maldives)
- Japanese Supplementary School of Middle Tennessee (U.S.A.)
- Jonan Gakuen Junior High School, Senior High School, Osaka (Japan)
- Knewton Global Schools, Sarawak (Malaysia)
- Koka Gakuen Junior and Senior High School for Girls, Tokyo (Japan)
- Kyoto University of Advanced Science Junior & Senior High School (Japan)
- Labuan International School, Labuan (Malaysia)
- Liceul Mathias Hammer in Anina, Caras-severin (Romania)
- Matsumoto Shuho Secondary School, Nagano (Japan)
- Midori Elementary School of Itabashi City, Tokyo (Japan)
- Mindlabs International Institution, Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia)
- Mukogawa Women's University Junior & Senior High School, Hyogo (Japan)
- Nanhi Dunya, Dehradun, Uttarakhand (India)
- Nobeoka Technical High School, Miyazaki (Japan)
- Okinawa Prefectural Gushikawa High School (Japan)
- Omori 6th Junior High School of Ota City, Tokyo (Japan)
- Owada Minami Elementary School of Yachiyo City, Chiba (Japan)
- PECHS Girls School, Karachi (Pakistan)
- Philippine Science High School-Central Luzon Campus, Lanao Del Norte (Philippines)
- Preparatoria num. 11 Universidad de Guadalajara (México)
- Preparatoria Regional de Colotlán, Jalisco (México)
- Rosary Sister School/Marj Elhamam, Amman (Jordan Amman)
- Santo Tomas Elementary School-Annex, Laguna (Philippines)
- Satriwithaya School, Bangkok (Thailand)
- School 11, Cherkasy (Ukraine)
- Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Sri Nipah, Kelantan (Malaysia)
- Sekolah Kebangsaan Minden Height, Pinang (Malaysia)
- Setagaya Junior High School attached to Tokyo Gakugei University (Japan)
- Showa Women's University Junior-Senior High School, Tokyo (Japan)
- SISA - School of International Studies in Sciences & Arts, Punjab (Pakistan)

- SJKC Kong Min Cawangan Kedua, Penang (Malaysia)
- SMJK Chio Min, Kedah (Malaysia)
- SMJK Keat Hwa, Kedah (Malaysia)
- SMK Jenjarom, Selangor (Malaysia)
- St. Agnes' Junior & Senior High School, Hyogo (Japan)
- St. George's School, Brunei Muara (Brunei)
- Suma Gakuen Junior High School, Hyogo (Japan)
- Sydney Saturday School of Japanese, New South Wales (Australia)
- Taisho Elementary School of Omuta City, Fukuoka (Japan)
- Tamana Girls High School, Kumamoto (Japan)
- The Lao-American College (Laos)
- Tokyo Metropolitan Sugunami Sogo High School (Japan)
- Toyo Eiwa High School, Tokyo (Japan)
- VII Kopernik High School, Slaskie (Poland)
- Yamanouchi Junior High School of Yamanouchi Town, Nagano (Japan)
- Yaroslavl College of Industry and Economy, Yaroslavl (Russia)
- Zhodino Secondary School 6, Zhodino (Belarus)

## **International Essay Contest for Young People**

### **Panel of Judges:**

Chairman	Genshitsu Sen	Former Grand Tea Master of Urasenke, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador
	Shinji Hattori	Chairman & Group CEO, CCO SEIKO HOLDINGS CORPORATION
	Koichiro Matsuura	President of The Africa Society of Japan, Former Director-General of UNESCO
	Suzue Miuchi	Cartoonist
	Junji Narita	Senior Advisor, Hakuhodo Inc.
	Masami Saionji	Chairperson, The Goi Peace Foundation
	Shunichi Tokura	Composer
	Kazuhiko Yazaki	President & CEO, FELISSIMO CORPORATION
	Shomei Yoh	Picture book author

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2021 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Children's Category – 1<sup>st</sup> Prize]

## **Life is Final**

(Original)

*Vivaan Kathuria*

*(Age 9, India)*

*Amity International School, Gurugram, Haryana*

The start of the year 2021 was very bleak. My grandma was struggling with cancer. This time it had attacked her nervous system. I can recall my parents' heart-breaking conversations about her treatment. Their numerous visits to hospitals. Her going for scans and chemotherapy. While we were all worried for grandma, she remained positive. She had beaten cancer twice earlier.



Even in her frail state she insisted on doing chores in house.

There used to be days when she was unable to sit because of pain, still she would get up and take a tour of the balconies. That's where her heart was. I remember her face instantly brightening up when she saw her plants. The way she caressed the plants she so lovingly nurtured. She used to tell me their names. I used to help her in watering them and removing dry leaves.

She never let anyone throw leftover flatbread from dinner. In morning that would be broken into small fragments and fed to birds. Earlier she used to do it all alone but in her now deteriorating state, I accompanied and helped her. The sparrows used to eagerly wait for us to come and feed them. Sometimes if we forgot or got late there used to be a chirping mayhem in the balcony. These sparrows would tweet unceasingly and call on us to come end their hunger pangs.

It all ended abruptly in the beginning of February, my grandma passed away unexpectedly. She was getting better by the day and had gone for her fourth chemo but collapsed after

coming home from hospital. We were all with her. It broke my heart to see her go. I had never experienced so much pain. Ever. I kept asking my mother how to revive her. If some doctor could help, to which my mum explained that we can't bring her back. She said, "death is final". It was the biggest blow.

Is death final? and is life just hanging on a balance so delicate that it can tip off any time? If death is final, what is that we live for? What's the point of ever doing anything if it's our final destination? Such questions befuddled my mind for many days. I felt that life is vain. One day everyone will leave, my parents, my friends and then one day I too will be gone. I felt very lonely and terribly missed my grandma.

We were now at the end of February, I clearly remember that day, it was noon, I was reading in my room and heard shrill chirping from the balcony. I went out and there were a couple of sparrows as usual asking to be fed. I realised that it had been many days since anyone bothered to feed them and the plants, they too were wilting and looked lifeless. I immediately went to get some dry bread for birds and also watered the plants. While tending to plants and birds I felt close to my grandma. I felt, she still lived. She lived through these birds who longed to be fed by her. She lived through the plants who craved her care. She lived through me who would carry on her unfinished tasks. She may not be there in person but her legacy, her love for plants and birds will continue to live on as long as I wished.

I now understand and believe that we live through our actions, our deeds. We live through things we create, our imprints. An artist is remembered long after she is gone, through her paintings. An architect through the building that stands tall, years after he is gone. Mahatma Gandhi continues to live on through his cherished ideas on non- violence and peace. My favourite author Roald Dahl is also living. He lives through his funny characters and brilliant stories.

I feel we should strive to create memories that are ever-lasting. Create things, ideas, art, choreography, poems, films, sculptures, melodies, gardens, buildings, books that are immortal. Create imprints in others minds which are unerasable. That should be the purpose of life. That way we can live forever and say- life is final.



## Learning from the land: What is life and how to live

(Original)

*Ha Bich Dong*

*(Age 24, Vietnam <Living in Canada>)*

*University of Manitoba*

September 2020. I walked alongside the Red River, breathing in the crisp autumn air, drowning myself in the sounds of flowing water. From far away, I could see red ribbons being tied to the side of the Norwood Bridge, so bloody red that they blended in with the red hues of the maple trees forest on the riverbank. Each ribbon represented an Indigenous girl or woman who had gone missing or been murdered. *What is life when for hundreds of years and going, Indigenous lives have*



*been taken away at the hands of colonial settlers, who also murder the bison, kill the forest, and poison the land? Are the lives of Mother Earth and her more-than-human creations not as worthy as human lives?* I believe, for as long as we dwell on our colonial, Western-centric understanding of life and human-nature relations, we continue investing in colonial habits of knowing and being, which exploit the environment under the name of development. And so, I turn to the land to learn about what life is and how to live.

I once met an Anishinaabe Elder who taught me to learn about the meaning and purpose of life from the land. Mother Earth teaches us *life is a circle*. Humans are a part of this circle of life—being interconnected to other creations. Life, from this perspective, centers on building reciprocal and respectful relationships between humans and humans as well as humans and nature. Our existence is inseparable from the philosophies embedded in places where the land, the water, and our identities and histories intersect.

When I looked at the red maple trees, the trees taught me that *life is about building community together*. As my eyes lingered on the green lichens and orange polypore

growing on the tree trunks, I was reminded human survival hinges upon our relationships with one another and with nature. In the middle of the climate crisis, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans in the U.S., I've seen members of black, Indigenous, communities of colour standing in solidarity with one another, working together to dismantle oppressive systems. Instead of fighting one another to gain limited resources, we disrupt the current unjust societal structures and violent cultures to (re)imagine futures of peace.

When I stood on the bank of the Red River, the land taught me *life is about connecting the past, the present, and the future*. As a temporary resident in Winnipeg, Canada, I am living on the original lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene people, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. This land carries stories of Indigenous Peoples who have resided here for thousands of years before the arrival of European colonial settlers. On this land, Indigenous Peoples have been living in harmony with the environment. On this land, the lives of many Indigenous Peoples and more-than-human creations were taken away by the colonial settlers whose worldview about life was so narrow that nothing mattered but white men and their wealth and power. On this land, the work of truth and reconciliation has begun to move communities toward relationship-building and peacebuilding. On this land, there are not only pains and traumas but also healing and hopes.

The Western educational systems teach us that life is a characteristic of living organisms with biological processes, but Indigenous Peoples in Canada believe the soil, the water, the rocks, the trees, and other more-than-human creations are also living creations with spirits. This worldview fundamentally changes human-nature relations. If we perceive humans as superior creatures, everything is seen as resources to serve human development. However, if we see humans as parts of the circle of life where everything is connected, we learn to respect all lives and the diversity of lives. We must shift our understanding of development from being a never-ending process of wealth accumulation to a continual process of sustainable peacebuilding.

So yes, life is hard. So yes, life is paradoxical. However, let's stand in solidarity to acknowledge our harms of the past and work together to dismantle the current oppressive societal structures. We are building peaceful, equitable, and sustainable futures for generations to come.

## **Life Is True Happiness**

(Original)

*Citra Karuna*

*(Age 8, Malaysia)*

*Regent International School, Sungai Petani, Kedah*

What is the meaning of life? Well, I am eight years old so I only have eight years of experience and I can't remember much of the first two years of my life. That gives me 6 years plus to sum up what life means to me.

My first ever inclination of what life meant was when I had to enroll in a kindergarten at a foreign country where I can't speak the language or understand anything about the culture. My father accepted an offer to work in Japan and we had to move to Ashiya. I had to leave my friends in Malaysia and enroll in a new school.

Everything was new to me. I felt lost and couldn't understand what the teacher was saying. It was very frightening. I felt lonely and I didn't like the new food. Even the weather was too cold for me. In Malaysia, it was always hot and sunny.

I was very sad and hurt. Although everyone was kind to me, I still missed my home, my school and everything back at Malaysia. Just when I thought it couldn't get worse, one day we had a drill for earthquake. Although it was not real, the sirens blasted like an actual emergency. We had to line up and evacuate. I didn't know what was happening and cried. I remembered my teacher telling me that it is just a practice but I couldn't understand. I refused to go to school the next day.

Then, my parents explained to me that every country was different and although Malaysia has no natural disasters, other countries which were on the ring of fire have earthquakes and it can be very dangerous. People could lose their lives if they didn't follow the guidelines for safety.

At that moment, I realized what life meant to me, that I am happy and lucky just to be alive. I didn't have to be in my birth country to enjoy every second life has given me. Life is change. Life is accepting the reality around me and embracing the difference. Life is learning. Life is also failing and being lost, but in that moment of hopelessness, I can find true happiness. I know things can change for the better.

The next day, I did go to school. I realized the food may be different but my tongue had become accustomed to the new taste and even liked it. I enjoyed learning Japanese and loved to play with my new friends. I didn't feel lonely or sad anymore.

Sometimes, we have upsetting moments, but we should not let that stop us from appreciating the happiness around us. Life only gives us one ticket to board this earth. So, in any moment of despair, we should look at all the other things that gives us happiness and embrace it. We don't need to wait for our hopes and dreams to come true or for adversity to pass to find true happiness. We should cherish every second, to stay connected with people around us, and have true happy moments in every situation.

When I lose a tooth, although I feel sad and used to cry but now, I embrace the moment. I may have lost a tooth but a new tooth is going to erupt and that is a joy. Of course, the process may hurt a little but I can't get my new tooth without going through a little bit of pain.

Even when I fail my tests, I still have a chance the next time and that hope gives me true happiness. Not just pretending to be happy because I have no other choice but being truly happy because I believe, after every storm, there will always be a warm sunshine! So, to me life is true happiness!

## What Is Life?

(Original in Japanese)

*Ryoya Nakayama*

*(Age 12, Japan)*

*Suma Gakuen Junior High School, Hyogo*

What is life? The first thing that came to my mind when I thought about this question was the feeling that I am a living being. Because I have life, I can feel that I am alive. Every day, I sleep and I eat, no matter what. If I couldn't do those things for a day, I would surely feel unwell and I might get sick.

At my house, we have a dog and a cat. The dog is older than I am, and he competes with me for my snacks and for space on the sofa. When the cat was a kitten, we found it dying on our porch. We took it to the animal hospital and it recovered, so it became our cat. The pets and I sleep together and play together—they are important members of our family. However, human life expectancy is about 80 years, while 20 years is a long life for dogs and cats. Whenever I think about that, I get choked up. I know they will die before me, and the time will come when I have to say goodbye to them. It breaks my heart to think about it. At 17, our dog is already quite old. He can't see, and this past winter he caught a cold and had to go to the animal hospital. The vet thought he would pass away soon, but our family nursed him and he managed to recover. When I hold my dog or cat tightly, I can hear the rapid heartbeat coming from a body smaller than mine. At those times, I wish that all lives were equally long, and I pray that they will live as long as possible.

My favorite food is meat. I love *yakiniku*, *sukiyaki*, *yakitori*, hamburger, and steak. But I also love animals. I realized this contradiction when I was in my first year of elementary school and we visited a farm with livestock. They were raising cattle and pigs, and we used the meat to make sausages and have a barbecue. It was my favorite kind of food, so I couldn't turn it down. Without realizing it, I had been eating many other lives.

What did the lives that I had eaten think about being eaten? If I were the one who was

eaten, I would want the life that ate me to live to the fullest, to make good use of my life, and to accomplish something for the benefit of living things. When I eat my meals every day, I now feel that we need to think about what our role is as we live by receiving another's life.

My meals became an opportunity to think about being alive, which I didn't usually give any thought to. I want to try and think about what I can do with the life I have, to feel the happiness of being alive, to value life and not be careless with it, and to cherish not only my own life, but the lives around me, too. Although both people and animals have a life span, we don't know when we're going to die. Every day on the news they announce the number of people who died from COVID-19, and people also die in fires and accidents, and in wars and conflicts happening in faraway countries. I'm sure all of them wanted to go on living. I felt that I want to take care and enjoy the life I have, so that I have no regrets.

In the future, I want to be a person who can solve problems, helping animals and people who are suffering, and finding ways to improve the global environment. How can we reduce the number of unwanted dogs and cats that are put down? How can we lend a hand to people who are poor and don't have enough to eat? I still need to learn more before I can answer these questions, but I want to become someone who makes discoveries that are useful for society and that make everyone happy. When I think that I'm studying a lot of things for that purpose, I can give it a little extra energy, even when my work is hard. I want to continue living in such a way that I do not feel guilty toward the lives I've eaten. Those lives have become my blood and my cells, and they are watching me.

## **THE UNIQUE PIECES IN OUR MOSAICS**

(Original)

*Clara Sima Agharazii*

*(Age 14, Canada)*

When I was ten, I once heard a young woman talk to her friends about what life meant to her. Surprisingly, I still remember her, like it all happened yesterday. It was near an ice cream stand, and the woman had chestnut hair. She talked with fascination, narrating every detail to her friends, completely oblivious to the fact that there was a ten-year-old cautiously listening to her tale. She was talking about her awakening, how she saw everything in a new perspective, how she now knew the purpose of her presence on Earth. Being young, I didn't quite understand what she meant, but her words stayed with me, always followed by an impression of confusion.

Years later, that very moment jumped into my head. Now being able to understand what she was talking about, I disagreed with the woman. Life, our life, is not a still line that we follow blindly, waiting to be elevated to a higher level of consciousness. Life isn't a line, it is a chaotic, complicated, jumble of routes that could have been taken, that should have been taken, that were the wrong or the right choice. Every decision we make has an influence on these roads that form our path. Awakenings or realizations don't happen overnight, they take series of small, almost unnoticeable changes that we barely acknowledge. Every time we read, we draw, we listen, we see, but most importantly, every time we cross someone's path, we awaken.

To me, life is a mess we are all trying to make a sense of. There is no way to tell if we are going in the right direction, making the right choice or even chasing the right ending. To all the people I asked what life meant, some told me to do whatever makes me happy, without caring about others or what they think, because we only live once. I disagree with that idea, we may only have one life, but we should use it to make things better for the people after us.

I often wonder why we lead our life thinking about what people perceive us as. After all, we see them for such little time and eventually forget them. Why should we bother to wonder what they think of us? Maybe it's because we are somehow aware we all have an impact on each other. We live our life, not only walking on our complicated road, but we also intertwine with people's path. Everyone on this planet has admired, imitated or thought like the ones they met, even if it was only for a few seconds. We take after our parents, our friends, the people we see through our screens or even a chestnut-haired woman near an ice cream stand. We do our beds in the morning because our parents taught us to, we cook with our grandparent's recipes because they told us it was the best, we tell the jokes we heard from our friends, we smile when we see others do it too. We all have an impact on people, whether we want to or not. Since we are young, we are always told we are our own person, unique, with flaws and talents, but we are so much more than that, we are a mosaic of every person we ever met. Life does not only belong to ourselves, life is shared with whoever we come across or even think about. We do not only exist for ourselves, we exist to support each other, to love, to make our world better.

One day, we will all be forgotten. The memories others had of us will have faded away just like our life did. Memories may not be permanent, but to me, life is about leaving an impression onto someone, our own unique piece in their mosaic. That is the reason I try to stay kind, the reason I study and work hard for a better future, the reason I am writing these words now. The memory that we once existed will certainly fade with time, but the impact we had on the world, on other people, that will never be forgotten.



## The True Science of Life

(Original)

Hetian Xu

(Age 16, U.S.A.)

Amador Valley High School, Pleasanton, California

“What is life?”

That’s the big question my biology teacher asked last year. At the time, we got a tidy list of textbook answers and I thought nothing more of it than just something to memorize for a test. But several months later, when the coronavirus pandemic descended upon us and the world was caught between life and death, that old list resurfaced in my mind, begging to be revised. Stuck at home, COVID challenged me to dig deeper beyond plain biology and find the meanings of life.

Life is full of milestones that change a person. For me, COVID’s the one.

The outside world went through a drastic change when the pandemic struck, but important elements of my pre-COVID life still kept me grounded. Stuck at home, my family gave me unwavering support with delicious meals and warm hugs. My teachers at school worked overtime to adapt to Zoom and still ensure an engaging learning experience. My friends kept me laughing with their hilarious texts and messages. As the pandemic drags on, I’ve now gained a new appreciation and gratitude for all these encouraging people in my life. *Biology dictates that life is about balancing internal conditions despite constant changes in the external environment, but in reality, life is about cherishing every unwavering constant balancing all the outside turmoil.*

COVID was still hard, especially for the new ninth graders at my high school. One such friend of mine confessed that she was really struggling - most of her classmates kept their cameras off and microphones muted on Zoom, so it was challenging to make new friends and stay motivated during lessons. As I talked with other students, I realized many of them

shared the same problems as my friend. I wanted to change that by starting a school club to support new students through a mentorship program between upperclassmen and underclassmen. *Biology dictates that life is about responding quickly to new stimulus in an environment, but in reality, life is seeing something wrong and doing something about it.*

Yes, I was just one single teenager, but I was not alone. Numerous friends and classmates eagerly joined my team, where we spent hours discussing potential project and workshop ideas. Many of my school's teachers, counselors, and administrators jumped in to lend a hand to get the club going. With all this support from the people around me, our club AVMentors was born – AV standing not only for our school name, but also the word “avail,” which means “to help,” our ultimate goal. One person may not make a big difference, but society is made up of many people for a reason. Together, we can make a difference and change the world, one step at a time. *Biology dictates that life is about being made up of many cells, but in reality, life is about realizing that there is strength and support in numbers.*

AVMentors made it our mission to help bridge the gap between middle school and high school, build stronger connections between students of all grade levels, and provide all students with strong study resources. Since our conception, we've held a variety of different events, focusing on fostering a sense of community between students online, improving mental health and self-care, and addressing recent anti-Asian hate crimes. Over the past year, we've reached and helped over two hundred students in my district. *Biology dictates that life is about metabolizing and using energy, but in reality, life is about invigorating you and others with the energy and motivation to try.*

As this year's generation of freshmen continues to grow, many have been inspired by their upperclassmen to become a mentor to next year's ninth graders. We are also reaching out to other schools in the United States to expand further and help more students. As seniors graduate and freshmen join us in a never-ending cycle, we have confidence that AVMentors will be kept strong by the passion and kindness among all the students. *Biology dictates that life is about passing on traits and DNA, but in reality, kindness is the DNA of life and life is learning to pay it forward.*

## **What Sustains Life** (Original in Japanese)

*Ayaka Hasegawa*

*(Age 17, Japan)*

*Toho Girls' Junior and Senior High School*

Over the past year, my family adopted two dogs as pets. They do not live in the wild—rather, they live like us human beings, as members of our family. They get fed, they play together, they get their teeth brushed, and they have their waste cleaned up after them. Without us or their companions, they wouldn't be able to live.

We human beings are the same, both children and adults alike. You might say that's not true, that human beings can do anything all on their own. But is that really the case? In Japanese, we have terms like *ippikiôkami* (lone wolf) and *hitoribotchi* (loner), which are used to express someone who likes to be on their own. But even those people have family waiting for them at home. Or, if they don't, they have people who care about them, like the people who welcome them when they go to eat at a restaurant.

A 'life' is something to be cared for, and the more caring thoughts that life continues to receive, the longer it can be sustained. In my life, there is someone who is doing his best to live as he receives our caring thoughts. That person is my grandfather.

Twice it looked like my grandfather did not have long to live. On both occasions, my grandmother, my mother, and my mother's siblings were called to be with him. Due to the ongoing coronavirus situation, my sister and I weren't able to visit him at the hospital, but we could still send him our thoughts. As I continued to think about him, I felt sure that he would go on living.

My conviction was right. After that, my grandfather's condition quickly improved, and he recovered to the point where he was able to walk on his own. Even now, I continue sending him loving thoughts, in the hope that he will remain in good health.

On the other hand, there are people whom I want to let know that I'm thinking about them, but my thoughts don't reach them. For example, people protesting the tax reforms in Colombia, and people affected by the bombings in Palestine. They are desperately trying to survive, and they need sympathy and support from others. It's difficult to talk to them directly or send them letters, so I signed online petitions and made donations, hoping they would make a difference for those people. I wanted them to know that a lot of people are concerned for them.

Showing concern for others in this way is not one-sided. My grandfather is always praising me, and whenever we see each other, he looks so happy. He thinks about me, too. I also received a thank-you email from the organization I donated to, letting me know how my donation was used. And the online petition I signed made good progress, and I received a message saying "thank you for your support." The people on the other side have never seen my face and know nothing about me, but they showed thoughtfulness in the form of gratitude. I never expected to feel so happy being thanked by people I don't know. The thoughtfulness I showed to them also came back to me.

Caring thoughts can be shared between individuals, or between an individual and an organization. Sometimes, we can even receive kind thoughts from someone we've never actually met. Regardless of whether someone is a family member or friend, or even if we have never met them, we can receive their kindness and compassion.

However, all living things will eventually come to the end of their life. When we die, does our life cease to exist? Are the lives of those we care about bound to disappear? I don't think so. Even when someone is no longer living, we can go on thinking about them, and in that way, their 'life' continues to exist. When we continue thinking about someone even after they have passed away, their memory doesn't fade, and we become a living witness to their life.

If we keep it in our mind that life is about caring for each other, and that continuing to think about someone lessens the grief we feel when they are gone, we will become more thoughtful towards the people around us in our daily lives, and we will create a society that is overflowing with kindness and compassion. Sustaining life with caring and kindness is the first step to a peaceful world.

**The Gift**  
(Original)

*Laura Silva Bertoqui*  
(Age 19, Brazil)

Dear Death,

I think I finally understood the meaning of all that. I mean, you've been taking many of us, and I tend to believe everything happens for a reason. Then, this is an apology, from me, from all of us.

I always thought life was the only thing in the world completely mine, and for God's sake, Death, how I went wrong. I believed that it was like a secret between the Universe and I and, because of that, it was a solitary thing. After all, life always goes on, and we go through it alone.

I thought I was lonely when I fell madly in love and dove into the shallow water for losing my love. After he was gone, I went on by myself. I had to. I thought I was lonely recalling those Saturday nights filled with laughs with my friends before they went to college, which I didn't do. I stayed and I went on. I thought I was lonely when my grandpa, my companion of Sunday afternoons with movies, died two summers ago and I screamed, Death, like a little gloomy child. However, despite all that, I went on.

But then I got sick, and with half of my lungs taken, I realized that my life is not just mine. Because, although we walk through it alone, life is constantly altered, influenced. Each little piece of it is completed by someone else until it isn't only ours anymore.

Then, I believed that my life also belonged to my mom, who calls me everyday asking me if I feel better, even though she knows I will not get better. It belonged to my father, who holds his tears on the phone, because none of them will be able to enter the hospital to say goodbye before you take me. It belonged to my little cousin, who made me promise to play

hide and seek with him when I leave here. He still doesn't know I won't keep my promise, Death. My life belongs to all of them, just as my grandpa's was mine.

However, life is not something shared, is it, Death? I was so naive, it took me so long to realize that. When I finally thought life was not so solitary, I noticed that it wasn't even mine. Life is yours.

I thought I owned my life, that it was the only thing no one would ever take away from me. But I forgot about you. You lent me life and now you come to claim it back. You've been taking many of us lately, and, honestly, I think I have found out why. I guess it's because we let you down. We are selfish, greedy. We are destroying our homes. But mainly, Death, I think it is because we are taking your role, trying to delegate death, choosing who deserves to live. We are killing daily for food, diseases, weapons, prejudice, money...

We should have fought against that.

And that is why you came, Death, I get it, we don't deserve your gift. Because this is what life is, isn't it? A present. A chance. And we have wasted it. Life is a present because you simply thought we deserved to be happy and cry and love.

Life is a mix of disordered actions and memories. Mine is filled with the memory of my first kiss, of the smile on my friends' faces, of my grandpa sleeping on the couch in the middle of a movie, of the smell I feel in my parents' hug, of losing a game on purpose just to see the shine on my cousin's eyes for winning. But it's also about breakups, distance and death. Life is everything, and life is also death, a gift from Death. You just came to claim mine earlier.

Finally, dear Death, I would like to say that I appreciate your gift and I am sorry I haven't fought as hard as I loved, as I laughed, as I screamed, as I lived. Therefore, I apologize on my behalf, and on everyone's behalf for not having honored our gift. I hope one day you will give us another chance.

Thank you.

## **Dazzling Light** (Original in Japanese)

*Hikari Tsukamoto*  
(Age 11, Japan)

I have a memory from when I was born. Everything around me was dazzlingly bright. The brightness was the radiance of lives yet to be born, all the stars in the universe, and all the souls living in those stars. At that moment, I spoke with another soul. I don't remember who it was. We spoke in the words of fellow souls. It is difficult to put it into Japanese, but I was asked something like, "What kind of life will you be born into?" and I answered what kind of existence I wanted to be, and how I wanted to live.

I was born in order to be happy. One part of my happiness is to live joyfully with my family. Another purpose I have in life is to convey many things to my family. Everyone is born with their own important purpose. That purpose is not always something that others would see as amazing or wonderful.

When I was in grade 1, our class grew morning glory flowers. I wondered if I could talk with the flowers, and I spoke to them often. I felt that the flowers were happily saying, "Thank you." The morning glories made beautiful blossoms, and after producing lots of seed pods, they withered and died. But as they died, they seemed to be smiling happily. Therefore, I felt that they were satisfied with their life.

In grade 3 we grew summer vegetables. The eggplants I grew made blossoms, but they died without producing any fruit. Some of the children cried because the plants died when they were still small, with only two true leaves on them. However, the plants didn't seem to be complaining that they were dying.

For example, when we see a plant that doesn't sprout, we may think that its life ended prematurely. But I see that plant as a life that was able to become a seed. I have no idea what the life purpose of the morning glories or the vegetables might be. But no matter how

small something is or how short its life is, I think everyone and everything accomplishes its purpose.

Human beings seem to unconsciously assume that some lives are worth more or less than others. When I fail at something or I can't do it as well as others, I sometimes think that I'm no good and that the kids who can do it are great. In my life, there are people who get down on themselves, and kids who make fun of others and laugh at them. But actually, I don't think there's any difference in the value of life. At times when we forget this, I want to say over and over, to myself and to everyone, "Everyone is amazing just for being alive!"

I believe that not only human beings and plants, but also animals, the earth, the oceans, rivers, and all living things are of equal value. We tend to favor certain people or think only about what benefits human beings, but I hope we can create a world where everyone cares for each other and all lives coexist together. If all of us can think this way, I believe that we will all be able to see, in this world, the radiance that I saw at the time of my birth. I am sure we can do it. After all, originally, each one of us is radiating dazzling light.



## **Fire of life**

(Original)

*Lara Stancheva*

*(Age 11, Macedonia)*

*OOU Lazo Trpovski, Skopje*

“In the world there is a greater hunger for love and respect than for bread”

- Mother Teresa

Life is a journey from which there is no return. I know because my grandparents did not return. Some will travel longer and some will travel shorter, like my unborn twin. But they live now as I write about them in this essay. On this journey we will visit beautiful places, but sometimes we will see ruins. On this trip we will meet bad people but also good ones, like me who met the homeless man with a big heart.

One afternoon when I was returning from school in our small park I saw a homeless man. He was sitting in the grass and with his old fingers he was crushing his last hard piece of bread. He threw the crumbs around and immediately a few pigeons land on the grass. His face was smiling, he was happy that his friends came, at that moment he was no longer alone. I took my snack out of my bag and handed it to the homeless man. But he did not take it, he pointed his finger at the old woman who was selling flowers. From that day I gave my snack to the old woman.

People who have a lot of food can be unhappy if there is no one around them. If you share something with someone you will never be sad and alone. Happiness is not only when it is given to us.

I wish he could write what life really is, share when you do not have it, warm up when you do not have a home, be loved when you do not have a family, be needed when you do not have money.

This month, the pigeons came to the park every day and waited for their friend to feed them. But he did not come. I found out that he got sick of COVID-19 and the doctors were fighting for his life. He had no money to buy a mask to protect himself from COVID-19.

If life is a priceless gift, then it is equally important for the rich and the poor. Therefore, every creature on the planet should have a dignified life with respect. The sick to be healed, the hungry to be fed, the refugees to be accepted. I hope that our good doctors will save the man with a big heart, because his friends needs him. We all need each other.

In front of our building we have a young mulberry tree that makes a big shadow. Here on the bench my old neighbors are resting. That's great, the tree was taller than me. When I was 3 years old we were the same height. My family and I gave it life, we planted it and take care for it.

We are not a rich family but we participate in an auction with framed fishing flies and donate it to children with cancer in hospital at Munich and Paris.

My friend and I were moving the small trouts from the lower to the upper reaches of the river because they can not jump enough high, there is a big cascade. I give my clothes to my friend from the village. My boots keep running on the meadow, and my coat will keep Mila warm in the winter. What is unnecessary for us for someone else may be very useful.

Feed a bird it will give you a song, help the old people they will give you wisdom. Take care of our unique mother Earth, she will give us eternal life to all creatures of the planet.

Life is an unfinished book, an untold story. And when my mother's loving voice is gone, I will take the book of life and continue to write and tell it. I will dream with my eyes open for a planet in which the life of all creatures will never go out. Life is fire. Our goal on this journey is to help life on our unique planet Earth continue. Do not let the fire of life go out.

## **My Grandma's Life** (Original in Japanese)

Riria Yumoto

(Age 12, Japan)

*Joso Gakuin Junior & Senior High School, Ibaraki*

After losing a lot of people in the war, Japan entered the Heisei period (1989-2019). During this period, computer networks expanded, and new conveniences were introduced.

Following this came the Reiwa period. In the second year of the Reiwa period, a pandemic broke out that no one in Japan or anywhere had ever experienced before. It was caused by a new coronavirus. Amidst all this, one young girl overcame the grief of a sad moment in her life.

One day, out of the blue, this girl's mother told her: "Your grandmother has COVID-19." The girl couldn't believe her ears. How could her grandmother, who was so healthy when they saw each other just last month, be infected with the virus? It was unbelievable. The girl asked how her grandma was doing. Her mother said, "It's serious. I don't know if she'll get better. So, we have to be careful, too."

*It's serious. I don't know if she'll get better.* The girl couldn't believe what her mother had just told her. Her grandmother had cared for her since she was very young. She had talked to her about the war, saying, "War is never the way to go. Listen to me. Taking a person's life is easy. But that one life is filled with the spirit of the person's mother, father, friends, and all the lives that person has eaten. Do you understand?" Her grandmother said this so often, the girl was sick of hearing it. *Grandma, are you going to die?* Many times the girl asked herself this question.

The next day, her mother told her, "They said they're running out of ventilators, so they want to take grandma off it and give it to someone younger." The girl thought, *Don't be silly. Why is a young person's life worth more than hers? Is it because young people are of more use to the country and to others? Aren't all lives of equal value?*

Then, the girl found a card. It was her grandmother's organ donor card, and with it was a letter that read: "If I become ill and will not recover, I wish to be allowed to die for the sake of others." *What was my grandma thinking about when she wrote this?* the girl wondered. She wasn't sure, but she had the feeling that her grandma wanted to make use of her life right until the end. She faced the prospect of her grandmother giving up her ventilator. Surely, her grandma would have said that she wanted to do this. Some days later, her grandmother passed away.

The girl was very sad. She missed hearing her grandmother's gentle voice. Because her grandma lived through the war, she must have known from the time she was little what it's like to lose someone. We have only one life. If we lose it, we don't get to live again. Our future is gone. We can no longer eat delicious foods. We can no longer talk with our friends and family. We can no longer laugh or have hopes and dreams.

People may have different values, but life should always be cherished. Whether it's a baby, a young person, an old person, or even an animal, a fish, an insect, or a plant, all lives should be equally precious. That is how the girl felt.

The girl had the idea that she wanted to help people who got sick like her grandmother, so she decided to become a doctor.

Thank you, grandma. I will live well for you, too.

## **What Is Life?**

(Original)

*Saisha Maya Tappoo*

*(Age 12, Fiji)*

*International School Suva*

Life is a gift. Life is an experience. Life is an opportunity.

It is a gift and a blessing because it is a chance for me to serve others and do good things for the world. It is an experience because it gives us all a platform to grow, do great things and see the world for what it really is. It is an opportunity to discover what lies within me and in the world.

Although I am just 12-years old, I know that life shouldn't be wasted. I know that in my life, I would like to achieve my dreams. I dream of serving others, helping the environment, embracing my true divinity, and standing up for what's right.

In 2019, I experienced something which changed my life. I was in a hospital where a group of children, younger than me, were admitted. They had all been diagnosed with congenital heart disease, which meant that these children had holes in their hearts. To survive, they would need to be operated on. Without intervention they would die. These children and their families had no hope as there were no local specialists that could operate on them. They could not afford to go overseas for treatment as they could not afford such an expensive procedure. However they were saved with the help of an NGO called Sai Prema Foundation who organised for specialists to come and operate on these children for free. A new gift of life was given to these children.

Seeing what these children had gone through was a life changing experience for me. But seeing what it meant for their parents made me realise - the gift of life!

We often take everything for granted, but I believe that it is a privilege to have access to water, food, clothing, education, healthcare, and a roof upon our head. And it is such a blessing to have a healthy, and happy body.

The trivial ups and downs shouldn't matter. Life shouldn't be wasted.

The advent of covid has taught the world a lot of things. It wasn't a long time ago when we could instantaneously do what we wanted. Many of these luxuries have been taken away from us.

Covid has taught us to cherish this gift of life. Covid is also teaching us that we can't be selfish - as individuals, as a society, as a country or as the world. Everyone on this planet is interlinked and the whole world needs to come together as one. What is important is love, compassion and gratitude. This attitude of gratitude will radiate positivity and kickstart the process of global invigoration of life.

I have realised that these cannot be mere words. So how do I plan to radiate this out to the world? By giving back in whatever way that I can. One person cannot do everything but everyone can do at least one thing. I want to help sick children. I have seen the devastation that heart disease causes in children and especially upon their parents. I want to become a Medical professional, a pediatric cardiologist with the sole aim of alleviating the suffering of poor children. Along the way, I would also like to make a difference to the rights of children and animals.

I have been taught by my parents to prove things with my actions and not to just dream or speak about it.

Four years ago, my mother inspired me to become vegetarian. She took this step and I followed because I believe everyone and everything deserves a chance to live, breathe, and be happy. Killing these beautiful animals to satisfy our needs and desires is not something I want to do. There are so many sustainable plant based alternatives which are better for us and the environment.

If everyone develops this oneness, compassion and gratitude, then there will be no wars - only peace. The world will live and cherish. The natural process of invigoration will begin with these winds of change.

Life is a gift. Life is an experience. Life is an opportunity.

## Live to Give

(Original)

*Mahashri Ranjith Kumar*

*(Age 13, India)*

*The Indian Public School, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu*

I knew a man once. He was my icon, my mentor, and my best friend – my *Thaatha*, as we call “grandfather” in the Tamil language. Spending time with him was like living life to the fullest. Whenever I got picky, he would urge me to value and enjoy even the little things in life, because not everyone has everything. *Thaatha* always volunteered in orphanages and old age homes and he stood as a role model for everyone – including me – who was amazed by his doings. He always emphasized, “To live is to give.” He believed that the meaning of life is to spread happiness, love, peace, harmony, and all forms of positivity. And he was able to do so by helping others. Through his endeavors, *Thaatha* opened up a whole new world to my young eyes.

One spring morning, I'd rushed to *Thaatha's* room to usher him out to see our blooming garden. But he laid on his bed – breathless. It felt like the end of the world; the sky went grey and home seemed lifeless. My only recollection of that day is of my loved ones' mournful faces and tears – lots of tears. His absence made me realize the true significance of one's life.

Whenever I think about *Thaatha*, his voice resonates inside my mind, “You must not only be alive but also live a meaningful life.” These reflections made me wonder, ‘Is running back and forth attending classes and fulfilling family and social obligations called life?’ Perhaps I was being alive, but not living. Is this what every youngster faces? A feeling of stress, confusion, and emptiness, but moving on and calling it life? These questions provoked me to start a small initiative called “YOUunity.” I gathered some pals and shared my ideas about uplifting youth lives to make for a better future generation to cherish. With the guidance of the elderly, we initiated stress-relief activities, food and cleanliness drives, and an eco-friendly neighborhood. Through this initiative, we built each other to become better people

while also giving back to the community. It delights me to know that we youth have a role to play in ensuring a bright future for all lives.

The recent pandemic pushed many young people to recognize the importance of life and drove them to lend a helping hand, and some did so through YOUunity. We bought goods locally to aid farmers, helped the elderly and differently-abled, and started a community fundraiser. During this time, the Earth, too, began to flourish once again without the hustle and bustle of the daily rush. Birds chirped, trees swayed, and animals enjoyed freedom. It gladdened my heart to witness how harmoniously these lives lived. Perhaps it's a lesson to learn - to not disturb or harm, but protect Mother Nature and all lives will bloom on their own. With so many people dying around me, I realized the meaning and value of my own and other lives, and how each moment is an invaluable blessing.

I've now figured out that this life of ours is the greatest of journeys, the most daring of adventures, and, beyond all, the most priceless gift ever. The beauty of life is for everyone to explore their own meaning and purpose of it, however heroic or mundane they find it to be. I for one, have discovered my own meaning of life; it's to simply give life itself a meaning. It's not only to exist, to survive, or to be alive, but to explore, to give, to live.

Life, in its simple sense, is a journey. One must live the journey to give life meaning, not merely just exist. I'm exceptionally grateful to *Thaatha* – the man with hair of silver and a heart of gold; the one who inspired me to explore the real meaning of life; the one whose words directed me to create a meaningful difference in others' lives. For my part, servicing and helping all lives is the one thing that helps me attain complete meaning for my life; it gives me energy, purpose, and the drive to live. In the eternal words of Albert Einstein, "Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile."



2021 International Essay Contest for Young People  
【Youth Category – 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize】

## **What Is Life?** (Original in Japanese)

*Yu Nitanda*  
(Age 16, Japan)

*Kagoshima Gyokuryu Junior & Senior High School of Kagoshima City*

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.

## **The Metamorphosis of a Caterpillar**

(Original)

*Dan Joseph Talle Dillo*

*(Age 17, Philippines)*

*New Era Senior High School, Dasmariñas City, Cavite*

Have you ever been through a situation where you think life doesn't make any sense at all? As if those burdens were too much to uphold? For years, I keep on searching the purpose and the meaning of life for I've lost myself in a place of total darkness. I pity myself! I couldn't find my own light. I was a pathless teen withstanding all the pressures in my academics, juggling a series of self-insecurities and going through breakdowns, all of which are getting out of my young mind. My remaining life seemed to drift every time and all I could feel was the pain of agony.

Year 2018. It was a summer vacation to our province—Leyte, located in Eastern Visayas, Philippines where those ideologies of mine started to crumble. I was really hesitant to go there, but still, I took part on that trip with the hope of finding my life and light. After such a long ride, we soon arrived at an old-wooden, mid 1900s house that has an undeniably eerie ambiance.

Sunrise and sunsets have passed by, my life would have been the same if I didn't come across a caterpillar, it was thriving and devouring on a tiny guava tree in a wooded part of our backyard. I had a new thing to do now and that is to wonder how long it takes to become a butterfly. Day by day, the caterpillar seemed to get bigger and bigger. But still, I don't get why it has to go through stages when it could just become a butterfly in an instant. Then, the moment I've been waiting for happened, that was when I saw a cocoon. Days turned into several other days, I was getting impatient. I thought I was just there for nothing. It took a really long time for me to witness its true color, but it all paid off when I saw the first glimpse of its body to the first flap of its enchanting wings. Little did I know, I already found the meaning of life within its metamorphosis. That caterpillar is my light. It teaches me that life has to crawl through phases and hardships before we could glow and

learn to fly. I know, I have my own time and I'll become the butterfly of my own life.

As I began to discover life, the end of our vacation rolled around. The sun was shining, the weather was warm and meadows were waving, as if nature was saying goodbye to me. I was delighted to go back to the place where I came from knowing that the hope of finding my life and light before that trip is not only a hope. I don't pity myself anymore! This is the time that my life officially starts and this is just the beginning of my long journey.

Five years from now, I promise to become a biologist. Even if education is uncertain, especially nowadays, I am still eager to study and to be a part of the solution to the worldwide environmental issues. And even as an ordinary youth of the planet Earth now, I can still make an impact on life to this planet. In fact, in my group of friends, I started sharing my knowledge about lessening single-used plastics and switching into more sustainable products and alternatives. Nature helped me to find life and so, I will help nature to sustain its life—this is my purpose, my battle and my life and I will continue doing it until the end of me.

From here, I can see a much more magnificent, sustainable and peaceful world when all lives on this planet unite and cooperate in one mission and altogether amplify nature conservation instead of conversions. With such solidarity, we are allowing future generations the right to live and eyewitness marvelous life in this world.

Until now, even though 3 years have passed by, I sincerely thank that little creature for creating a big change in my life. If I could only share my light to everyone out there who feels lifeless and bring them back to life it would be all worth it.

## **What is Life?**

(Original)

*Nethmi Ishara Fernando*

*(Age 18, Sri Lanka)*

Life is your being, your existence and your will to go on. Life used to be welcomed and exciting in the good old days our parents keep talking about, but today...here in 2021, life is hard and exhausting. It is ceasing to exist. Despite the technology, despite the effort, despite everything we've done, life hasn't gotten easy. It is hanging on by a thread.

We humans took the life we've been given for granted and now we are suffering the consequences, yet no one can pinpoint a single finger and blame one entity for it. For it is we that cut the trees, pollute the waters, kill the turtles and then warm the earth with the poisonous gases from our industries. Life is fighting to survive as I write this essay, begging for awareness.

We took and took from life until it had nothing more to give, now it is payback time. We as the superior organisms, the top of the food chain we thought ourselves undefeatable yet a microscopic barely living fragment of a cell is out there taking millions of life in front of our very eyes. So where is the technology we sacrificed everything for in this time of need? Two years now we've been living our life on red notice and it has come to a point that this is no longer abnormal but a part of our everyday life. It shouldn't be like this, life shouldn't be taken for granted just because it was given to us freely.

What is life? For me, life is Earth, our home, our planet and our responsibility. If Earth doesn't exist, there would be no life. Now that very Earth is suffering due to the dire consequences of our actions but it's not too late! We can still save our life, we just need to take a stand. We must raise awareness and act on it because change can only happen if you take the initiative. So let's grab our gloves and clean our beaches, reduce, reuse and recycle. Let us substitute the single-use plastics with biodegradable instruments and sustain this earth, our life. We must reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stop burning fossil fuels.

We must invest in a sustainable future, let's educate ourselves and work on hydrogen-powered vehicles, biodiesel and smarter technology. Let's harness solar power, wind power and water power, we must use these freely given reusable resources without taking them for granted or polluting them. We got options! But no one is willing to invest or educate themselves on the matter. If we go on like this, we may not have a place to call home, a life. Instead of researching on another planet to ruin why don't we invest those billions of dollars to save the one we already have? It is not a lost cause.

If the polar bears, the penguins and the rising sea levels in the Arctic and Antarctic regions don't cause concern for you, at least think about yourself and your children's future. In five or ten years, there may not be a life for you or your child to live. Because we all know, living on mars is not an option for people barely making ends meet. Unless you and I take a stand, life will cease. Earth will die.

My voice within these words may be tiny, but I hope these words, limited to 700, transcend pages and make a difference. If Greta Thunberg can take a stand and make a thunderous wave of awareness, we too can rise higher and not just protest but actually, make a change. Because life matters, Earth matters. We need a sustainable future for life to go on. Appreciate the life you're living and please protect it. Life is worth saving so take the initiative today. Earth is life.

## **HAVING A REASON OF HAPPILY DYING**

(Original)

*Prince Bishogo Bashangezi*

*(Age 20, Democratic Republic of the Congo <Living in Eswatini>)*

*United World College of Southern Africa Waterford Kamhlaba*

As long as we avoid falling into 'aberration', no life will be lived on earth. Respiring and all other life processes will still remain void; bare of the big thing on top of biology for us to have the true life.

Life means having a purpose. Purpose is what makes life worth living. It materializes the creation of value in the world. It is the life compass. Every human being has a duty of leaving the world better than how they found it. If today not everyone is doing that it is because not everyone is living with a purpose, not everyone has life. They are born, grow up, use earth resources, 'enjoy life' and die. They do not live. They were just creating harm. Having a purpose gives us what we fight for and are ready to die for, making clear what issues and deficiencies make us angry. What makes us envying having superpower to contribute to the betterment of mother earth. That is life.

I personally always feel having a sacred duty on Earth. The duty of not only consuming what the world has to offer me. But bringing positive contributions to what it already has. I would heavily rue it if I die without leaving any legacy behind me. I would have not lived. Have only come to harm the world. I would feel contrite about my time and presence on the earth. Because I would have not accomplished my sacred duty.

Losing my whole family in 2015 to tribal conflicts paved a road to losing the reason to continue living because my family was my motivation and source for happiness. I needed to continue living. But with a meaning. I reflected on what was making my days bright. What was making me feel that I had to continue being there. It was when I would have helped someone, in small or big ways. I found the meaning to my life. Living a meaningful life does

not necessarily mean being happy. Because looking for happiness mostly involves how much I have and receive. The sugarcoated process of desperately gaining it often negatively affects us and other living beings. But living meaningfully is more about how much I give to people. How much I offer. I also found that meaning through transcendence.

I also found that meaning is created by having a sense of belonging. Feeling connected to other people and nature. This sense has always been looked for from families only; that is why we easily lose it because it is not sourced from something big. Connecting to people means feeling them. Connecting to nature means feeling it and understanding and using its neglected power. Mixed up sacred scriptures interpretations have proscribed us against our own belonging to nature in plethora. As a result, we coin every practice necessary to connect to nature as unsaint. We have been coerced to refute the power and energy mother earth can offer us to fully live our physical spirit potentials as human beings. We are enervated.

We now live in societies filled with bane systematic oppressions fragilizing our lives' safety and retrograding the standards of living. Caring and making lives on the earth better summon me to first know my own identity, strengths, weaknesses and values; there is no way I can impact other people if I have not understood myself. Then I will seek to understand my communities; its mostly unseen assets (skills and talents), resources, and problems.

Getting out of comfort zone to effect changes and to fully explore one's potentials for an impactful life has been a slogan in our generations, but only a few people realistically achieve this. Few people seek to live differently from the disenfranchising traditional ways (school - job - possible start-up). Few people seek to learn what our curriculums do not require. To see what is forbidden to be seen. To hear what is forbidden to be heard. Few people's education is not stopped by schooling. Few people seek to discover the magic in studying what they would study if curriculums did not exist in the world. The magic of life lies in untraditional and unpopular lifestyles.



## **The Life** (Original)

*Tecil Puzhimel Jinu*

*(Age 21, U.A.E. <Living in India>)*

As time passes by, answers to many questions are found but some questions are timeless, revealing new dimensions each time they are asked. I was forced to ask myself one of these questions a few years ago. That day, I was randomly watching a few videos. One of them touched me in a way that I couldn't comprehend at first. It was a video where a man decided to talk to some beggars in various parts of the city where he lived. It was his interaction with one of those beggars which stunned me. As he approached the beggar who was basically a young man, he greeted him and the young man returned his greeting with a smile. He sat down with the young man on the subway and they began to talk. The young man didn't mind being on camera. He disclosed that he was brought up in an orphanage. Once he became an adult, he took refuge in the subway. People would pass him by and some would give him food to eat. This was his life.

But none of these was what rend my heart with a force which even I couldn't comprehend. As the man was about to leave, the young man urged him to stay a bit longer. He told him with a tinge of sadness that he was lonely. He even offered the man some food just to make him spend some more time with him. The man himself was really surprised and said that his food would get over fast if he took it. The young man told him that someone would always give him food but no one would stop to just talk to him. I could see that he was really depressed and lonely even though he was very sweet and well mannered. After some time, the man bid him goodbye and proceeded to talk to other beggars in different places. Once the video was over, I felt as if my heart was totally numb. A few minutes later, I started crying so uncontrollably that I astonished myself. Reflecting back, I understood what hurt me so much was not just that he was lonely and depressed but that in the world that we proudly claim to have advanced so much, we have also come to a point where even beggars are ready to give food just to get people to talk to them. The idea that a beggar would trade his food for a little bit of love and concern to be shown to him is just plainly

shocking. This hard reality was what pierced my heart. This made me ask the question - what is life?

Is it advancements and progress at the cost of relationships and quality time with family and friends?

Is it just speaking about how meaningful our own life is supposed to be and living it out to satisfy ourselves and our loved ones alone?

Is it just about supplying materials to refugee camps and boasting about it to the media and in newspaper articles?

Is it just about donating a few articles and taking photos with those people for your own publicity while at the same time destroying their self esteem and diminishing their image in the eyes of others?

Life is a service. It is a service given to make others realize that they are truly alive, not as statistics but as real persons of irreplaceable worth. It is to serve people without letting them feel in any manner that they are a burden and that it is costing us a lot just to care for them. It is not about making them feel dependent and tightening their mental and emotional chains. It is to offer a hand to lift them up so that they will be equipped to do the same for others without a condescending attitude and to help them realize what it truly means to be human. A selfless life that seeks to help while at the same time takes care to preserve the dignity of the other is a life worth emulating like that of Mother Teresa. This is life, to serve considering it an honour and not a duty.