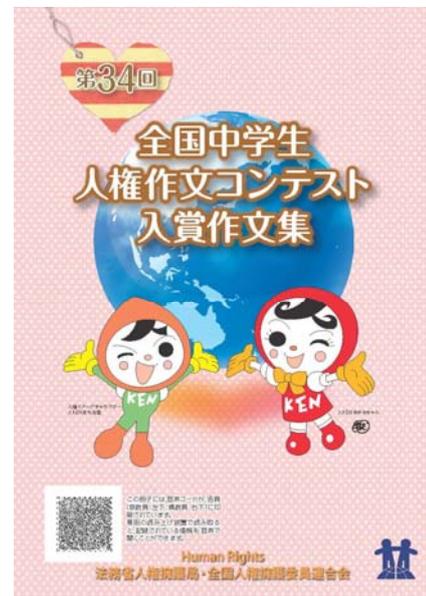


Introduction to Outstanding Essays from the National Human Rights Essay Contest for Junior High School Students

The Ministry of Justice has co-organized the annual National Human Rights Essay Contest for Junior High School Students since 1981. This program aims to help junior high school students, who will be major players in the next generation, to deepen their understanding of the importance and necessity of respecting human rights, and foster awareness of human rights, through writing essays on human rights issues. Each year, a collection of award-winning essays is compiled and distributed. In 2013, based on three outstanding essays were selected from past award-winning essays, three dramas were produced and compiled into a video titled “*Watashitachi no Koe, Sannin no Monogatari* (Our Voice, Three Stories)”, which has been uploaded to a website and can be viewed online. In this way, this essay contest program plays a major role in publicizing the importance of human rights.



Video “*Watashitachi no Koe, Sannin no Monogatari*”



Collection of award-winning essays

(Click below to read past award-winning essays in Japanese.)

- <http://www.moj.go.jp/content/000119343.pdf> (In 2013)
- <http://www.moj.go.jp/content/000116345.pdf> (In 2012)
- <http://www.moj.go.jp/content/000116346.pdf> (In 2011)

(Click below to view the video in Japanese.)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQW5zjbnkNA>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxqW-6AN0tY>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8Tc9BRtRJg>

In 2014, the contest received a record 953,211 essays from 7,083 schools across the nation. Almost one in four junior high school students in Japan submitted an essay. From this overwhelming number of submissions, 36 award-winning essays and 65 encouragement-prize-winning essays were selected by an impartial panel of judges,

including writer Keiko Ochiai and film director Yoji Yamada. Students whose submissions ranked among the top three were invited to the awards ceremony held at the Ministry of Justice.



Award-winners (three in the middle of the front row), their families (back row), and judges



Award-winners and Justice Minister Yoko Kamikawa

Here are the award-winning essays. The winners look at human right issues with fresh sensitivity and a sense of purity special to junior high school students. Readers will be deeply impressed by their essays.

We hope that as many people will read these essays and understand that Japanese junior high school students seriously think about human rights. It is also our hope that this program will help promote respect for human rights across the world.

(Click below to read award-winning essays in 2014 in English.)

- Prime Minister's Award : "The Person Suffered and the Person at Fault : Both Sides"
- Justice Minister's Award : " Passing down the memories of the war to the next generation"
- Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Minister's Award : "Remaining Pure at Heart"

Prime Minister's Award

The Person Suffered and the Person at Fault : Both Sides

Junta Hiraki, Seventh grade (first year of three grades)
Saga Prefectural Takeo Seiryō Junior High School in Saga Prefecture

There is a famous song titled "*Tsugunai* (atonement)," written and sung by Masashi Sada¹. As an elementary school child, I heard about this song from my mother. This was when I accidentally hurt my friend. That happened while we were playing. I never intended to do it, but he was injured near the eye.

On a mid-winter's day, as soon as my mother was informed I was the child at fault, she called the family of the friend to apologize. Then, taking me with her, she rushed to the hospital where he was to receive medical attention. In a cold hospital corridor, we waited calmly, standing upright until the consultation was over. Looking me straight in the eye, she calmly said,

"If he were to lose sight, you would not be able to live your life for yourself. You should live the rest of your life as his eye."

As she said these words, a flood of tears ran down her face. Standing next to her as she was so cool, I felt my body become cold. "I never did it on purpose. I never expected such a serious consequence." Overwhelmed by a sense of failure, I became blank. Without knowing it, we were both weeping bitter tears openly.

When my friend and his mother came out of the consultation room, my mother bowed her head many times before them and apologized. She said to my friend's mother,

"He might have to give up tennis, which he enjoys so much. Even worse, the injury might cause an inconvenience in his daily life. I can imagine how much you and your husband have devoted yourselves to raising him so far, and how high your expectations are for his future. Please let us make as much atonement for you."

As far as I knew, the two mothers had always got along with one another, since their children were good friends. So I never expected my mother to apologize using such a formal form of speech. His mother snuggled up to my mother and said,

"Fortunately there was no injury to the eye. There may be a scar, but it was an accident. So stop crying, Junta." She also stroked my shoulder gently, which made me weep even more. My friend, who I always joked around with, had a gauze patch on his left eye, and remained silent. I felt very awkward, and could only manage to say, "I am really sorry."

That night, my mother had me sit beside my father, who had returned home, and explained to him what had happened earlier that day. Then she told me the story of the song "*Tsugunai*":

¹ A well-known Japanese singer-song-writer

“Yu-chan” accidentally killed a man in a car accident. Every pay day, he rushed to a post office. His colleagues sneered at him, saying “Your only hobby is saving money.” In fact, he had been transferring money to the wife of the person suffered every month. One day, he received a letter from her.

My mother continued, “The letter said, ‘Please return to your own life.’ Of course, it was never permissible. What I want to say is that you can never put your rights before those of others by infringing on their rights. You did not intend to harm him. But it is true that you failed to pay enough attention. If he should lose his vision, you would work for your life and spend your money and time to restore his right to have eyesight back. While you are a student, your father and I would do that in your place. The whole family would have to sacrifice many things throughout our life. That’s what it means to atone.” Listening to these words, I could not do anything but nod solemnly.

The next day, I was scared to see my friend at school. Will he forgive me? Should I expect to be forgiven in the first place? Gripped with such anxiety, he spoke to me. “Good morning. I’m sorry for yesterday.” Even now, I cannot not express how I felt in words. I felt like something huge and dark had been suddenly lifted off my chest. Maybe, by speaking to me, he tried to avoid that I would hesitate to speak to him, and that we might drift away from each other. I believe that this momentary considerate act of his helped us to continue our relationship in a natural manner, although I cannot go so far as saying that it was like nothing had happened between us.

That weekend, since we were informed his wound was healing well, my parents and I decided to visit him to apologize again. At the time I was dressed in a soccer uniform, since I had just returned home from a training session. I was about to go out in the uniform, but my father told me to change my clothes. He stopped me and said in an unusually stern tone, “You should be considerate of his feelings. He has missed tennis practices because of the injury you caused to him.” I realized that this little consideration for him was another form of atonement. I immediately took off my uniform.

Later, his wound healed completely, leaving almost no scar. We advanced to different schools that we had each wanted to attend, and eventually drifted apart. However, in my room I still have a photo of us with our arms around each other, taken at our graduation ceremony. This commemorative photo is displayed because he is a valued friend of mine, of course. In addition, this picture serves as a reminder of that incident. I learned the wrongness of any kind of behavior that infringes on the rights of others. The incident also taught me that any behavior that causes an injury to other person, even by mistake, could spark terrifying consequences not only for the person at fault, but also for his or her family and others close to the person.

Justice Minister's Award

Passing down the memories of the war to the next generation

Mina Gyotoku, Ninth Grade (third year of three grades)
Kurume Municipal Tanushimaru Junior High School in Fukuoka Prefecture

“You...old man who has failed to die!”

In May of this year, these words were shouted at a story-teller who survived the atomic bomb by junior high school students during a study tour guided by him while they were on a school trip. I could never understand how anyone could voice such heartless words. I have a great-grandfather who went to war. During the war he sustained severe injuries and was able to return to Japan. I decided to ask him to tell his story of the war, since I thought, by learning more about the war, I might be able to accept in myself those who experienced the war.

Born in 1918, my great-grandfather is now 96 years old. In July 1939, during the Second Sino-Japanese War, he received a draft card, so-called “akagami”, and joined the Army’s air force information corps in Tachiarai. Entering his second year of married life, he and his wife were expecting a baby, the first-born boy—my grandfather. To my great surprise, I learned that my great-grandfather had been on active service in the field for as long as six years until the end of the war. He performed his duties in China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Burma (present Myanmar). As soon as he detected enemy aircraft, he transmitted telegraph messages to the ground as a member of air force information corps. Since enemy airplanes were heavy in the air, he was very busy every day. He carried out his duties in the presence of the fear the aircrafts might be shot down. One day, when he was at an airfield in Burma, a bomb was dropped near him. He suffered severe injuries to his head and hand in the blast. The blast was so powerful that it lifted the entire body of a man off the ground. The painful scars still remain on my great-grandfather’s face and the back of his hand. He talked me not only about the fearful and sad experiences that he went through, but also about the brightly colored banana and pineapple fields and the egg-laying behavior of sea turtles that he saw in the Asian countries. These small things must have given him some strength and anchorage in days of hardship. When telling his story, he talked little about how he felt in those days. However, the frown that appeared occasionally on his face while talking showed the extraordinary pain and horror the war had inflicted on him. Another sight that stands out in his memory was a wall drawing that he saw when he was talking with local people. The drawing depicted a man who resembled Urashima Taro¹. Idly wondering if the turtle Urashima Taro mounted to the bottom of the sea was a turtle from Burma, he often thought about on Japan from the

¹ A character in a famous Japanese fairy tale. According to the tale, the fisherman rescued a turtle and hitched a ride on the back of the turtle to an underwater palace.

far-away land. I supposed that he was hoping the war would end soon, and that he would be able to return to Japan.

In May 1946, the year after the end of the war, my great-grandfather returned to Japan. He felt deeply perplexed, since more than a dozen young men in his neighborhood had been killed in the war. Standing alone at the side of the path to his village and looking over the hamlet, he wondered what kind of face he should have as he returned home. As he had expected, the community received him with frosty eyes.

“Fortunately I was able to come back.” After saying these words to them when he went back home, he did not speak very much. This episode broke my heart. This made me realize that a war could take away even the warm bonds of a community and the close ties of family.

As the last question for my great-grandfather in this session, I had planned to ask him what he thought about the alarmingly abusive remarks, “failed to die”, toward the story-teller. However, I changed my mind. By hearing his stories, I became sure that he would never be a person who has “failed to die.” He is an admirable person, since he survived the horrible war and continued to suffer hardship. We owe Japan’s peace today to those who endured such hardship and struggle, and those who had to lose their precious lives in the war. I asked him, instead,

“Do you have any message for us ?”

He said,

“We should never engage in war.”

I felt that the weight of these words could be considered to be the weight of life.

I am really glad that I was able to hear the stories from my great-grandfather. Nearly seventy years after the end of the war, the number of those who have experienced the war has decreased. There are many of us, a generation that has not experienced war, are indifferent to war, or seem to have a misunderstanding of war. I had an opportunity to hear wartime memories from my great-grandfather, someone very close to me. This experience has enhanced my awareness of peace and war, and helped me become a person who can convey the silliness of war to the next generation. If it was not for people who told their stories of wars, Japan could have been involved in war again. Do you still execrate those people who are working to pass on the memories of the war to younger generations as “having failed to die”? Passing down such memories is the first major step toward creating and preserving a peaceful world. We need to ponder, understand, and bear in mind the preciousness of peace and life, which is being forgotten now.

My great-grandfather’s message “We should never engage in war” impressed me strongly.

Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Minister's Award

Remaining Pure at Heart

Takuto Gorai, Seventh grade (first year of three grades)
Hitachi Municipal Kuji Junior High School in Ibaraki Prefecture

Tatchan was already at my house when I was born. He got rid of weeds, put out garbage for collection, kept the store clean and did other duties. He was only able to count up to five on one hand. When he was sent on errands to buy six or more items, he would return with five. Tatchan was mentally challenged. More than fifty years ago, my grandfather took him into our home as a worker, since he had no relatives. Even beyond the age of 60, he could pick up a 30-kilogram rice bag without effort. He was the strongest man at our place.

According to my mother, Tatchan loved me and my elder brother very much. When we were babies, she used to have us play in a baby walker on the lawn. While doing yard work, Tatchan would watch us with delight. When I was a kindergartener, he gave me various species of insects he had caught in the yard, such as Japanese freshwater crabs, mantises, butterflies, stick insects, long-horned beetles, lacertid lizards, earthworms, green caterpillars and even centipedes. When my brother and I played in the water, he would gently pour water over our shoulders using a water pot. My mother said she could feel his gentleness as he took care not to splash water on our faces.

Tatchan could not throw anything away. He was often scolded by my father for storing old dishes and clothes that were supposed to be thrown away into his room. According to my mother, however, it was only natural since he grew up in the age of scarcity. His appetite was large. He always felt the urge to eat, despite that he had the same meals as anyone else. When loquat fruits were ripe, he would climb the tree to pick and eat them, without any fear of falling out of the tree. When he saw mature persimmon fruits, even the astringent type, he would eat them without hesitation, for which he was scolded.

Tatchan called my brother "Ri-kun," and me "Ta-kun." He stuttered,
"D-d-did you make a friend?"

and

"You are s-s-so cute and a g-g-good boy,"

patting us on the head. As toddlers and preschoolers, we wanted him to play with us. After we reached school age, however, it was Tatchan who wanted us to play with him. When having running races, we ran at a deliberately slow pace so that he would not fall over. When playing catch, we threw the ball gently enough so that he could catch it. On windy days, we enjoyed the feeling of air on our faces. We ate ice cream together. I loved to see Tatchan getting goodies gratefully, looking very happy.

One day, Tatchan was gone. I heard he was hospitalized with an illness. I missed him

very much. In our living room, a photo of Tatchan and us laughing together is displayed. My brother said he had a pure heart. Mother said he was a fine person and dedicated worker. Father said Tatchan was a valued member of our family.

I do not like the term “people with disabilities.” Tatchan had an intellectual disability, but he had pure heart more than anyone else’s. He worked, ate and lived a life of honesty. He never hurt anyone. He loved creatures. He embraced small living things. He was always smiling.

I think that there are many people like Tatchan in the world. Despite that they are working and doing a lot of good for others, they are often discriminated against. This is truly a shame. Tatchan did not hurt anyone. I cannot, either. I do have hard feelings about a person who was mean to me, but I cannot throw hurtful words at this person. I had thought that was because I was weak. But my mother said it was because I was always around Tatchan and my brother, who are tender-hearted. Tatchan, who had a childlike heart, sometimes got scolded. When scolding him, my parents used understandable words as if they were speaking to a young child. After being scolded, he would feel down for a while. But, with treats, he would soon regain his cheerfulness. My family members never hurt weak persons.

Without even knowing it, this feeling has been instilled in me.

On a final note, to write this essay, I learned about fundamental human rights. According to the Constitution, rights that we basically have simply by being a human should be respected, and should not be violated. The Constitution also maintains that the right of equality is the right not to be discriminated against. Is this right protected in Japan today? Aren’t people with disabilities discriminated against?

Knowing Tatchan, I realized the greatness of working earnestly. I think Tatchan was an wonderful person, who remained pure at heart throughout his life. To refer to people with disabilities, the term “the weak” is used. I would rather use “weak persons” than “the weak.” I sincerely hope that all people will be kind to weak persons. I want to be an adult who can reach out to people in need of help.