

My Story

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Me in a Nutshell

I'm a very curious person. If I find something that catches my fancy or captures my interest I'll pursue it even at the sacrifice of sleep. On the other hand, if I'm not interested in something, I give it no time at all. If it's something I have to do, I drag my feet, but do it.

I dislike being cast into some kind of fixed image, so sometimes I do things calculated to change people's images of me.

I'm always cheerful and full of energy, but if something really bad happens and I get depressed, I tend to think the worst and get even more down in the dumps. Still, sometimes I am quite frivolous and carefree.

Growing Up

Preschool years

I was born in 1981 in Osaka. ² When I was born, my father says he was struck with what big, round eyes I had.

I did play with dolls when I was little, but more often I played outdoors. During kindergarten and early elementary school days, my legs were always covered with scrapes and bruises.

I started playing badminton and practicing swimming from the time I was in kindergarten. On holidays, I often played catch with my

father in the park and learned to swing a baseball bat.

Elementary school

I was an active kid who played outside a lot.

When I was in third or fourth grade, my mother took me for an interview at Senri International School ¹ (Senri for short), which she wanted me to transfer. Senri has students from many different national and cultural backgrounds. My mother wanted me to study in this kind of diverse environment, hoping that I would grow up to be a person with a broad mind. I didn't know much about Senri at the time and I wasn't particularly interested in it, so when the interviewer asked me "Who was it who wanted you to come to this school?" I answered, "My mother, I guess." Maybe because of that, I wasn't admitted.

Junior high school

While I was in fifth or sixth grade, a friend named Mai from preschool days who had gone to live in England for three years came back to Japan and she enrolled at Senri. I began to hear stories of how much she enjoyed the school.

The public junior high school that I would have gone to in our district did not have a very good reputation. I also wanted to make friends with students from different cultural backgrounds, so I decided to take the entrance exam to the junior high school division of Senri

International School. My father was opposed to the idea, but my elder sister intervened and said he should just let me take exam. So I did, and I passed. I didn't know why he was opposed to the idea. Every time I wanted to do something, my father always started out by opposing me. I always had to explain why I wanted to do something and persuade him before he would agree. At the time I always wondered why he had to go against me like that, but now I realize that he was testing me. I think he figured that if I gave up an idea just because he opposed it, my resolve was not strong enough.

Sports was an indispensable part of my life in junior high school. When I was in second year, I earned a swimming instructor's certificate at the municipal pool where I had been taking lessons since elementary school. At school I was active in the triathlon club. I was healthy and happy during most of those years and missed hardly any days of school.

High School Life

Half a year off from school

Near the end of my third year of junior high, I found I couldn't get along with several of my classmates. I tried to force myself to fit in, but ultimately it made me too unhappy. There are only two classes in my year, and when the group is that small and you can't fit in, you really suffer.

Around that time, the differences in thinking between my family and the school seemed to be really pronounced. The school emphasized self-reliance and independence. But the culture of my family was dictatorial. My parents

were always trying to tell me what to do, and even when I asked them to leave me alone, my mother would interfere. It was also part of our family tradition that you deferred to the opinions of your elders. At school, however, we were taught that you should assert your own opinions, and in fact, we did express our opinions regardless of the age of the person we were talking to. I do not think one should speak roughly to someone older than oneself, but when you don't agree with something, I think it is okay to say what you think. So that's what I did, even at home. My parents, however, did not seem willing to listen to what I had to say and would just insist that I do things as they had told me. That made me rebellious. I began to feel under a lot of psychological pressure at home. Before long, I was unhappy at home and unhappy at school—I was miserable all the time.

Probably as a result of this state of mind, I am not sure, from the end of my third year, I would suddenly find myself in tears and not be able to stop crying. When your thoughts and emotions get all mixed up, you get so confused that you cannot explain what is wrong. Emotions you cannot control just build up even more in your mind. At times like that, I couldn't go to class and I didn't want my friends worrying and asking me what was wrong. So at such times I would go to see the school counselor. She never asked me what was wrong, but would just hand me a box of tissues and a cup of tea and gently sit by me while I cried myself out. Finally in October of my first year in the high school I filed an application to take time off from school.

During the months I took off from school, I

went to see the school counselor, saw a counselor at a clinic, did some part-time work, commuted to an exercise gym, and sometimes played badminton with my mother. I think my mother may have cried when I decided to take time off from school. Still, while we did have some fights while I was at home, she left me alone more than before. I just did what I really wanted to do. During that time, too, it felt really good to be physically active and work up a sweat. The letters I exchanged with two of my good friends, Aya and Megu, also kept me going.

In the end, I stayed out of school for about half a year. During that time, I didn't come to any particular conclusions or resolve anything special, but for me it was a very important period for resting and reviving my spirits.

Fulfilling high school life

When I returned to school, I dropped back a year, and for a while I felt a little unsure of myself. My good friends from before were still at Senri and I tried hard to contribute to a positive atmosphere in my new class, so I was able to slip back into the routine even more easily than I had thought. From that time on, I got busy every day with student council and club activities and began enjoying myself immensely.

For one year from June of my second year, I served as secretary on the Student Council. The activities of the Student Council consist mainly of planning and overseeing the school festival and the sports festival. I made a lot of new friends and I learned a lot as well. I learned the importance of cooperation, how to convince others, how important it can sometimes be to be willing to compromise, and the difficulties of leading and organizing people. Another big

harvest from that experience was that I also got to know the teachers better and discovered the pleasure you feel when you have achieved a task you set out to do.

I have continued to visit the school counselor from time to time. Now I can talk about anything with her and can even show my vulnerable side. I often talk to her after I've had a fight with my parents. When I tell my friends about these things, they are quick to commiserate with me and offer me solace from my point of view, but the counselor not only understands what I want to say but also understands the thinking of my parents. And somehow I find I can accept what she says without resisting.

My favorite things: sports

Senri International School club activities are based on a seasonal system and their content changes with each season. I was involved in club activities since I entered high school, with badminton in the April to June season, volleyball in the September to November season, and soccer in the November to January season. Before I started high school, I had only tried badminton, swimming, and triathlon, but the more different sports I tried, the more I liked them all.

Also, I participated five times in the volleyball and soccer games held by the Asia Pacific Activities Conference, a sports league formed among six international schools (from Korea, China, Philippines, and Japan). We won the trophy and other prize each time. When I was in second year, I won the all-star member prize in both volleyball and soccer when I participated in APAC games. Those prizes really made me happy.

In my third year, at our school Athletic Award Banquet, I received an outstanding athlete award. The certificate and trophy I received that time are my special treasures.

Unfortunately, since I am studying for the university entrance examinations this year, I can't join any club. I have an awful lot of studying to do, but getting some exercise to work off stress is also important. So this summer I decided to work the part-time job as swimming instructor at the municipal pool that I've been doing since I was in second year of junior high school. I also enjoy playing volleyball as part of my phys. ed. class. I just love getting these work outs and sometimes I'm so happy I start monkeying around.

Sport teaches me so many things—happiness and sadness, alertness, my own physical limits, the importance of teamwork and friendship, what it means to be thoughtful of others. Just like when you study, if you put forth effort, you are sure to be recompensed with good results.

My two cultures

The students at Senri International School come from many different places and ethnic backgrounds. They come from dozens of countries. Before I entered Senri, I didn't think very much about the fact that I was Korean, but when I found myself in the midst of people from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds, the part of me that is Korean began to more strongly assert itself. Still, I have begun to question the whole concept of "citizenship." Among third-generation Korean residents of Japan,³ for whom their country of citizenship and country of residence are different, my situation is

unique because my mother was born in Korea. Most third-generation Koreans of my generation have never been to Korea and they don't even speak Korean. To be categorized as Koreans by citizenship, therefore, doesn't seem to connect with reality. To me it would be more natural if we spoke of people in terms of the culture of their upbringing rather than as citizens of such-and-such a country.

I commuted to a local kindergarten and elementary school, so everything outside my home was "Japan." At home, I spoke mainly Korean and I was raised according to Korean cultural customs and ways of thinking. Home was "Korea." As a result, the two cultures exist side-by-side within me.

My Future

All the first-year students of junior high at Senri are interviewed by the school counselor. For the first time I learned that there was such an occupation as counselor. Over the years after that I got to know the counselor very well and developed a keen interest in her profession. I've decided that I would like to become a counselor like her.

In the fall of my third year, I learned that I could not join the APAC team because I was preparing for my university entrance exams, and I was so disappointed I burst into tears. Around that time the school counselor told me about sports counselors, like the one who advises pro-golfer Tiger Woods. That made me think that if I was so upset and depressed over a little thing like not being able to participate in school club sports, just think of the stress and aggravation that professional athletes must be under all the

time! The sources of stress and worry must differ from one sport to another. Since entering Senri, I had participated in quite a few different sports and had experienced how it feels to encounter a slump in one's feeling about and performance in a sport. It seems to me that I could make use of this experience. More than anything I love sports and consider it an inseparable part of my life. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed that "sports counselor" was the goal I wanted to aim for.

In order to become a sports counselor, I first need to study clinical psychology at a Japanese university. Then, it is my dream to go to the United States, where this field is quite advanced, for further study. If you ask me whether I like to study, I will answer that I dislike it, but if it is for the sake of attaining my goal, I'll give it my best.

Family and Friends

My family

There are five in my family, my parents, my two older sisters, and myself. My love of sports comes from the influence of my family. My father has been a member of an amateur baseball team for a long time. My mother was a medium-distance runner throughout her high school and university days and even participated in one of Korea's national athletic meets. Since coming to Japan, she has been playing badminton continuously. My elder sister is a badminton player and got into both high school and university on a badminton recommendation. ⁴

In my household, it is my mother who scolds us when we mess up. She gets mad even

before my father does, and watching her seems to appease him. When he does get angry, it is really fearsome. I think it is important for there to be someone in the household who scolds, but I do think my parents are too strict and that they interfere in their children's affairs more than they should. For example, although my elder sister is over twenty, if she comes home very late at night, my father gives her a hard time. If a family is too strict, I wonder, how will you know how to regulate your own affairs once you start to live by yourself?

Recently, however, I've begun to realize that while I may think they are being too strict, I am who I am today because of my parents. I am really grateful to them for that. Family, for me, is warm and welcoming.

My friends

When there are things about my friends that I don't like or a friend does something I don't think is good, it is my way to tell them exactly what I think. Since I am completely candid with them, we often quarrel, shout at each other and cry, but I prefer it this way because it clears the air. I hate people who complain about or criticize their friends behind their backs. I don't think we have to always stick close to our friends; a little distance is a good thing. But when I am with my friends, I want to really enjoy being together, so I avoid talking about unpleasant subjects and try not to let my own troubles show.

I feel really secure when I am with my friends. Even if I see them every day or meet them only after a long time, I feel the warmth and caring of friends that is so different from that of one's family and it gives me a strong

sense of inner peace.

My Town

The town where I live, Higashi Osaka, ⁵ is about 15 minutes by train from downtown Osaka. It is a long-established residential area. Since entering junior high school, and commuting to Senri International School in a northern suburb of the city called Minoo, ⁶ I haven't been too attached to my local community. Actually I probably am more familiar with the parks around our school in Senri and with the Namba entertainment district, where we often go for amusement.

I don't go to Nanko Port very often but it is a place I love. The bay is not very clean, but when I'm looking out over the water, I am always filled with awe by the sight of the horizon. My mind empties of all petty thoughts. I could gaze out there endlessly.