

Column: “The pleasures of Aging Gracefully”

About the Nobel Prizes



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On October 7, 2014, it was announced that the Nobel Prize in Physics for 2014 would be awarded to three Japanese scientists for the invention of efficient blue light-emitting diodes. These three became the 20th, 21st and 22nd Japanese Nobel Prize laureates following Shinya Yamanaka, a Kyoto University professor, who received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for 2012 for his discovery regarding induced pluripotent stem cells (iPS cells). I am very glad because this is a testament to the high scientific and technological capabilities of Japan.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Nobel Prizes are one of the most internationally renowned awards. I took part in the International Exhibition for Young Inventors (IEYI) 2014, held in Jakarta, Indonesia, from October 30 to November 1. In a speech delivered in the opening ceremony, the speaker encouraged the audience by saying, “Let’s aim for the Nobel Prize in the future.” The children in the venue shouted back in unison, “Yes!” This was an impressive sight, suggesting that the Nobel Prizes are known to almost everyone in the world who is interested in science and technology.

The Nobel Prize was established by a Swedish chemist, Alfred Bernhard Nobel, who is famous as the inventor of dynamite. He invented dynamite in 1866. By patenting it in 50 countries and commercializing this invention, he built up enormous wealth. Nobel came up with the idea of using his money for these annual prizes after his brother died in 1888 and a French newspaper mistakenly printed an obituary for Alfred himself under the title, “The Merchant of Death is dead.” The article described him as a person who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before. This unusual incident made him recognize the obvious fact that how a person will be remembered by people after his/her death depends on what that person does during his/her life. In 1895, when his heart disease was worsening, he wrote a will leaving most of his fortune to fund annual prizes named after him, to be awarded without regardless of nationality to those who made the greatest contributions to mankind. He died the following year. Based on the Nobel Foundation was established several years later, and has awarded Nobel Prizes since 1901.

Most researchers probably do not conduct research with the aim of winning a Nobel Prize from the start. They must have purer motives, such as a pursuit of truth and taking up the challenge of a task that no one has ever accomplished. In almost all cases, researchers suffer some setbacks along the way. Among those who, suffering numerous setbacks, only a few lucky ones can reach their goals. Among the fruits of the research achieved by these fortunate ones, only a small handful of achievements are recognized as being useful in the real

world. The Nobel Prize then goes to very few of them. This is why it is said that one of the most important things for researchers is to never give up.

Again, researchers do not conduct research hoping to be remembered by many people after their death. I would bet that Nobel simply focused his efforts on the task at hand, which was to find an easier and safer way of handling nitroglycerin. Dynamite, like the use of nuclear energy, was never intended for mass destruction.

However, after Nobel realized that he had been dubbed the “destroyer,” he did all he could for the researchers following him.

It may be true that Nobel established the Nobel Prizes because he wanted to be remembered after his death as a good man who encouraged many researchers to pursue their dreams and have hopes, instead of being as a destroyer. However, I would rather believe that what he really wanted to do was not simply to leave his name, but to give hopes and dreams to many people.

It is undeniably true that a person is remembered by people for what he/she did. However, this does not mean that no one will remember you unless you make a great achievement. Instead, if you are always kind to the people around you, your kindness will live on in their hearts far beyond your lifetime since those people, even if small in number, will remember you for the good you did. Most people do not earn a place in history. However, a person of good character will be remembered long after his/her death by those close to them.

We all have different abilities, different characters and different weaknesses. Nobel Prizes are not awarded to all of us. There is no need to compare ourselves with others in the first place.

Each one of us comes into the world as a unique existence, lives a life, and eventually dies. We often compare ourselves with others, having feelings of superiority in some cases and feelings of inferiority in other cases; we reproach others, blame ourselves, and worry about various problems. What a shame it would be if these things were all we did in our lifetime. Stop comparing yourself with others, respect yourself and live the best life you can. This could be the key to a richly rewarding life. Those who live this way can be kind to others and will be remembered by people after their death.

It is important to live one day at a time. And when I die, I will praise myself for living the best life I could and give myself my own imaginary Nobel Prize medal. I believe this is the way we should live.

