

Sitting At The Table

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Prompt:

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Self-doubt presses against my throat as I turn the computer screen, displaying my Google Slide presentation, toward my skeptical, but amused, family members—grandpa, grandma, mom, and dad. Skeptical because they have decided my recycling efforts are frivolous; after all, they are South Korean immigrants constantly struggling to put food on the table. Their busy schedules relegate climate change to a luxurious concern. Amused because they love me down to their bones; they have *jeong*—a Korean word for deep emotional bond reserved for friends and family—for me, as I have for them. And I have tremendous respect for their immigrant perspective on pragmatism and frugality. Their mantra is to upcycle and repair, rather than buy. Old clothes become puppets and kitchen rags. Food containers are cleaned out to become vases and pencil holders. Cardboard boxes become playhouses and gardening beds. They unknowingly have given birth to a spirit of conservation in me, which, to their chagrin, now leads to this presentation.

I click on my title slide “Why We Should Recycle More” as I remember why this conversation is important. It's for Southern California and Earth, who have raised me with all the senses. A scene of towering red cedar trees next to a frigid, still lake welcomes us to Big Bear many summers. At Santa Monica Beach, I feel the warm, soft, doughy sand caress my toes. I taste the air that smells so salty. Our town's Botanical Garden boasts roses whose silky, yellow petals whisper melodies that can lift the world's weight off my shoulders for a divine split second. I observe that its leaf's intricate veins mirror my own blood vessels. And when I fall off my bike during a single-track run, the Anza-Borrego Desert shrubs give

me a prickly, chastising hug. California fondly interconnects my past with nature.

Before I speak, I take a deep breath. *Breathe*. It has been something I couldn't do so freely at times due to California's droughts and wildfires, made annual by climate change. During the Station Fire [1], I remember how the sharp tang of smoke stung my nose and how the frightening, cackling flames burned my eyes. And as an asthmatic, declining air quality and fires have forced me to trade in my cherished mountain bike for the indoor wrestling mat. Even indoors, I depend on air purifiers to filter out the remaining outdoor air, lest it strangles my lungs into tight wheezes.

Unexpectedly, nature's rich diversity has offered me healing through *Han-yak*, traditional Korean medicine. Unlike Western medicine, which often relies on synthetic drugs, *Han-yak* harmonizes the body's energy with the elements of earth, fire, water, metal, and wood. Astoundingly, it uses more than 600 different herbs and roots, each species blessed with unique biochemical properties that, once lost, cannot be replaced [2]. Instead of using finely-tuned chemicals to treat individual symptoms, *Han-yak* treats the human body and nature as interconnected systems, as though the vasculature of xylem and phloem continue into my own veins and arteries.

True to his *jeong* for me, grandpa has brewed a special mixture of *Zizyphi fructus*, *chrysanthemum*, *Ginkgo biloba*, and ginseng root to help my asthma. This daily, dark, bitter blend, with its heavy terrestrial aroma, is known for its anti-inflammatory properties. Grandpa explains that it quiets the *bul* (fire) energy in my body. This complements the quick relief provided by my chemical-based albuterol inhaler, which targets the airway's smooth muscles. Both *Han-yak* and Western medicine have unfurled the poisoned strand around my chest, now able to freely expand with air. My improving health and ever-maturing insight into my heritage depend not only on scientific medical knowledge but also on nature's generous pharmacopoeia.

I nervously move on to the slide featuring the importance of not contaminating our Blue Recycle Bin by separating food-stained cardboard from the clean ones. I wince as my grandpa expectedly interrupts with, "This would be a waste of my time; I'm too busy to do that." Grandpa grew up during the Korean War and survived only through stark practicality and sheer toughness. He once told me a boyhood story when his backyard was the vast Samak-san

mountains. Exhausted after battling a river's current and miles from home, he was close to starving when he found a yasaengkong plant (wild legume) to voraciously consume. He felt as if nature, through this edible plant, had extended *jeong*, as if the plant were his own mother.

With much love and respect, I respond that proper recycling not only honors the original tree but also preserves nature's biodiversity. I ask him to please imagine a world where he cannot find that yasaengkong plant or where I cannot benefit from *Han-yak*'s rapidly disappearing ginseng. This scarred future will soon become a reality due to climate change-induced heat stress and *bul* strangling these plants to death [3]. I ask, "Grandpa, where is Nature's '*Han-yak*'?"

Nature's richness provides more than food and medicine; it gives us *jeong* and allows us to share *jeong* with others. How can we not broaden our affection to include the Samak-san mountain, Big Bear, and the deserts? We must also realize that we are not the generous ones integrating nature into our tribe, but rather that it is nature that is adopting us into its tribe.

I conclude the presentation with a final revelation, "You think that I am presenting to the four of you, but there is actually a fifth person sitting at the table. That person is Nature itself, who loves us like family."

I gently close the computer. The room is silent except for the hum of the air purifier. There is an electricity of contemplation and a slight nod of understanding. Perhaps, in sharing my *jeong* for the earth, I've sparked a view that nature is a living, breathing, and multifaceted companion intricately linked to us, and that we must use our equally complex bodies, cities, and cultures to protect it. Nature is sitting next to us, hands folded, waiting for our next move.

Tags:

First Piece

Competition

Shortlisted

United States

Environment

Footnotes

1) Cardine, S., & Nguyen, A. (2019, August 22). 10 years on, the station fire remains burned into the minds of locals and fire officials. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/socal/la->

canada-valley-sun/news/story/2019-08-21/10-years-on-station-fire-still-burned-into-minds-of-locals-fire-officials 2) Bradley, H. (2023, June 26). Traditional korean medicine. The Soul of Seoul. <https://thesoulofseoul.net/traditional-korean-medicine-hanyak-sasang/> 3) United Plant Savers. (2022, November 4). Taking the Broad View: How Are Wild Ginseng Populations Faring. United Plant Savers. <https://unitedplantsavers.org/taking-the-broad-view-how-are-wild-ginseng-populations-faring-and-when-does-conservation-policy-need-to-change/>

Message to Readers

Thank you in advance for your feedback! I have a heavy heart about climate change but small acts can lead to big changes. My proudest accomplishment so far has been making my family understand the importance of not only recycling but also proper recycling so that the batch doesn't get contaminated. This takes thought and time, but it's worth it.

Other Pieces by Author