

Father's Life in His Own Words – Part 5

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When I was young, I would think, "What is the name of that mountain? What might be on that mountain?" When I started thinking like that, I felt I had to go there and find out. I always clearly knew what was within twenty li of where I lived. At that time, I knew everything above and below ground. If there was a mountain in front of me, I just had to go and find out what was beyond it. That's the kind of boy I was.

I was involved in a broad range of activity. There was nowhere as far as I could see that I had not gone. If there were mountains, there was no peak I had not climbed. I even had to go beyond that point.

I never stayed in one place. All those natural places in my hometown -- with water and trees, land and spring breezes -- were where I cultivated my emotional feeling for a life of faith. All of my past is still vividly alive within me.

A hometown is a place that provides abundant materials for us to grow internally. As a Korean, I drew upon all the natural elements in my Korean hometown. For example, I used all the animals and the plants as a textbook for internal growth. This is why I always miss the mountains, fields and streams of my hometown. I truly love the natural world.

Observing the plants and climbing trees

When I was young, there was no flower in the mountains I had not touched. There was no flower that I wasn't aware of. Because nature is so great, when I went out to the meadows I always spent time in nature until sunset, without going home. When I became tired, I would fall asleep and sometimes wake up in the middle of the night. There were many times when my parents came looking for me and took me home. I loved nature that much.

I collected several hundred different kinds of plants and studied them hard to find out which were poisonous and which were medicinal. I studied their structure as well. I therefore know all the edible wild greens growing in those mountains. When I went to pick wild greens with my older sister or with neighborhood mothers, I always went ahead of them.

When I was young, there was always some tree close to my house, for example, a chestnut tree or an acacia tree.... When an acacia tree's flowers bloom, their fragrance is so delicate, isn't it? I would not merely stand and look; I had to climb that tree, stepping on each of the branches.

When there was a tree so high in my village that no one had ever climbed it, I just had to climb it. Even if it meant going without sleep at night, I had to climb it.

Near my house, there was a large chestnut tree. It was about two hundred years old, and it was very beautiful. Because I was born in the year of the monkey, I used to climb trees. Whenever I saw chestnuts I

made a stick from a branch and knocked them down with that. It was a lot of fun. I knocked down hundreds of chestnuts like that because those chestnut trees were very large.

I also loved Korean white pine trees. Trees should bear fruit, shouldn't they? Korean pine trees yield fruit. The needles of those trees are in five parts. Centering on the east-west-south-north, there is one central needle. In this sense, I love those trees. Also, they grow very well. They grow straight up and the root grows straight as well. The buds grow straight up, too.

Observing the life of birds

When I was young, I was so interested in observing the beautiful bird life. What does that bird eat? Where does it build its nest and hatch its eggs? Even if it took several days, I had to find those things out by quietly watching the birds.

Everything I could see in the mountains, all the birds that came within my sight, were all still able to fly after going through my inspection. Once, I remember seeing the beautiful migrating birds for the first time. I wanted to find out what the male bird among them looked like and what the female looked like. Was there a textbook I could study to find that out? I had no choice but to go to those migrating birds and study them myself. I waited there a whole week without eating. [Father laughs]

Once, a magpie laid an egg, and I was so curious about it day after day. I couldn't sleep at night without finding out how it was doing. [Laughter] I went up to have a look during the night, and again early the next morning I had to sneak up to look before the magpie came. Because I went up to look day after day, I became friendly with the magpie. At first the magpie scolded me, but since no harm was done each time I approached, the magpie later stayed calm even when I came near. In that way, I was able to observe what the magpie fed its youngsters and everything it did for them.

Oh yes! The maternal and paternal love of animals toward their youngsters is great. At times when I think of this, I feel they are better than I am.

I could study many aspects of nature. For example, with a bird, I could study its life in relation to all other birds, by comparing them each to that particular one. Take the nest of a nightingale, for example. It hangs down from a branch like this. It's very odd when you look at it. Where do they get that silky thread...? Nightingales don't build nests on ordinary branches. Their nests are very high in the tree, in dense areas found usually on older trees. The insect nightingales most like to eat is the pine caterpillar.

When a lark builds a nest, it builds it this big and sits ten meters in front of it. Since larks build nests in fields, you'd think they'd be easily found, but larks build them between fields, on perimeters. Ordinarily people cannot find them easily. You would not notice one even if you stood beside it. They are triangular; they make one side like this with two entrances, like this.

If you look at sparrows -- you wonder who taught them -- the male and female meet and make their nest and rear their young. The mother doesn't eat what she brings, but gives it all to her baby birds. Who was it who taught her to feed them? Who could have explained that to her?

Hunting and fishing

Since I lived in a rural area, I used to catch many insects. I think there is no type I haven't caught. There is also no type of animal I haven't captured. Oh, no, that's not right; I've never caught a tiger! I've caught everything from wild cats to rabbits and raccoons. Interestingly, I thought that these animals lived all alone, but they all had partners. They were all in pairs.

In those days, when it snowed, we went out even at night to a meadow several kilometers wide, to hunt for weasels. During the day, I often hunted rabbits. When there seemed to be no rabbits, I used village dogs as hunting dogs. I made them bark and track the rabbits, shouting, "Catch the rabbit from behind!" [Laughter]

The meat of a sparrow is very tasty. There isn't any type of meat I haven't tried. Do you know the water rail [a colorful marsh bird]? From water rails to pheasants and snakes -- I have caught everything. I caught every kind of snake I ever saw, whether it was poisonous or not. When a poisonous snake bit me, I bit it back. [Laughter]

There are indeed many different kinds of bird's eggs. When I wanted to try to eat a certain egg, I took one home, cooked it and ate it. [Laughter] I treated chicken eggs and all other bird eggs the same. No matter what eggs they were, they got the same treatment.