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It is because no one knows the answer that in research you can confront and find yourself

If he had to choose between the “North Wind” and the “Sun” in Aesop’s Fables, Nozaki says that he is like the North Wind toward his students. He basically leaves them to carry out research on their own initiative because he believes that doing research and “having to really think about things” is an important experience for students who haven’t needed to do this before in order for them to confront and find themselves. What shaped his way of thinking can be attributed to his parents who raised an independently-minded child and a former teacher who prized individuality.

Did you like robots since you were a child?

I often get asked this question. I feel that people expect me to say that I loved robots or that I spent a lot of time in Akihabara, but this wasn’t the case for me at all. But I loved Doraemon, and there is a picture of me looking very happy surrounded by Doraemon picture books (photo).

At any rate, I disliked teachers, and when I was in junior high and high school I would sometimes play truant. My mum and dad had a hands-off approach to parenting, so I didn’t really get in trouble. In fact, when I told them that I wanted to take an exam to get into junior high school because my friends were doing so, they told me not to bother.

I heard you intentionally gave up going to university before getting into Keio.

I was accepted into a university while I was in high school, but taking the university entrance exams got me thinking more about my future. I felt that I had to think properly about what I wanted to do and what will become necessary from now on, and to figure this out, I decided not to enter university immediately after high school and took a year out. It was during this time that I realized that I wanted to study robotics. To find out which universities had a strong control engineering program, a key area when developing robots, I read a book and found out that Keio was first in Japan and ranked in the top 5 in the world. This was why I chose Keio.

However, once I entered university, I completely forgot about this, joined the tennis club, and enjoyed my student life. I went drinking with my friends and I married a girl who joined the tennis club when I was in my second year after dating her for about 10 years.



You hoped to join Professor Kouhei Ohnishi’s laboratory when you had to choose a laboratory, didn’t you?

When we had to choose a laboratory to join, I remembered that I wanted to study at Keio to learn about robotics and applied to join Professor Ohnishi’s laboratory. I wrote my background and reasons for wanting to join his laboratory on an A4 sheet and went for my interview, and when Professor Ohnishi saw that I was from Nakano, he asked if I knew Nakano Ward Momozono No. 2 Elementary School. It turns out that we went to the same elementary school. After that, I talked a lot about our school. I was sure I wouldn’t get in, but surprisingly, he accepted me.

Just before he left the classroom after the interview, Professor Ohnishi asked me if I had drawn lines before writing the document. To write documents neatly, I first draw lines on A4 sheets with a pencil, and after I finish writing, I erase the lines. Even though we didn’t talk about my research at all during the interview, he had read through my reasons for wanting to join his laboratory, and I realized from this that he was able to feel my motivation for applying. I was deeply moved.

What kind of laboratory was it?

He was like the North Wind in “The North Wind and Sun.” By this, I mean that in contrast to those teachers who really take care of their students, Professor Ohnishi was very hands off. It seems that he took this approach out of respect for the students’ individuality. However, he gave us a lot of encouragement.

He once asked us to imagine seeds planted right in front of us. Then he asked what we think should be done to help the sprouts grow once they appear. He said that if you try to make the sprouts bigger by recklessly tugging at them, you will pull them up and they will die. For the sprouts to grow, they need sunlight, and you need to give them plenty of water and fertilizer. He said that if a teacher really wants the students to grow, the most important thing the teacher can do is to provide a suitable environment for them.

He talked about “youth worries” too. He said that we may now be preoccupied with someone we like or our grades falling, but these are things that don’t matter to other people, and are what are called “youth worries.” According to him, real worries are those you have for others. However, he went on to say that only those who have thoroughly experienced such worries in their youth will be able to cope when faced with real worries, and that we should therefore embrace the worries of our adolescence. Thanks to these words, I have been able to overcome my worries many times since then.





What kind of teacher are you?

I also basically have a hands-off approach because I thought Professor Ohnishi was cool. However, there are students who develop more when given attention, so I try to adjust to the students' needs.

I feel that students these days haven't really thought about things for themselves. It can't be helped because for high school tests and entrance exams, they only need to reproduce the answers they have memorized. But I feel they are still living according to the values that are held by the adults around them. Research is one way to break this habit. While studying new things without a single answer through research, students have to confront and find themselves. I think that it's really amazing watching them grow up.

You seem to have had a lot of experiences, such as taking a post at Yokohama National University and setting up venture companies.

I wanted to study power electronics, so I got a post at Yokohama National University for a year. Professor Ohnishi preached that it only takes 3 seconds for the future to change, so opportunities must never be missed. These words gave me a push at that time too. Since coming back to Keio, I have been busy every day with supervising students, as well as putting my research outcomes to practical use and developing products with companies. In particular, there is a big gap between writing papers, the most important thing when doing research at university, and developing products that must make a profit, and I am realizing how hard it is to fill this gap with each passing day. Creating something meaningful for the world while writing papers and producing results is not easy. I always think that I need to remain strong to ensure I don't cut corners in either task.

What kind of place is Keio University for you?

In addition to students who entered the university through the general entrance examination, there are those who advanced from the affiliated high schools and those who came back to Japan after spending some time abroad, making Keio a

university with a rich diversity of students who each have distinct personalities and academic abilities. Watching the students, I can see them mutually influencing one another while growing up. If they have a friend who is good at English, they try to improve their English as well, or if they see a well-dressed student, they also pay greater attention to their appearance.

My son was born in February this year. His name is Yoshihiro, written using the "gi" kanji character in Keio Gijuku, and the kanji for "hiro" from my own name. You may wonder how much I'm in love with Keio, but it is where I, who hated teachers, got my PhD and became a lecturer, which I never imagined I would be, so to me Keio is a place I cherish because it changed my life. I don't want to go home before the students, but sometimes I go home early to give my child a bath. He's very cute. The first stuffed toy I got for him was of course Doraemon. But I'm not trying to influence him to live the life I chose for myself.

◎ Some words from students . . . ◎

- At the interview, I was asked about my determination, to which I replied I will do my best. I'm interested in robots, and I also think this field will develop more in the future. (4th-year undergraduate student)
- I'm very satisfied because I'm allowed to do what I want to do. He's very strict when it comes to doing research, but he is also someone who pushes me. If he's not around, he is often in America or somewhere overseas. (1st-year master's student)
- He's so passionate about spreading robotic technology that it's frightening. At his laboratory, you have to find on your own a research theme that should be looked at but no one is doing yet. I was once told that a theme I chose isn't research. There were times when I was anxious, but carrying out the whole research process on my own has given me a lot of confidence. (2nd-year master's student)

(Interview and text writer : Akiko Ikeda)

For the full text of this interview

<http://www.st.keio.ac.jp/kyurizukai>

**Keio University is the place where
I decided to continue doing research
and become a teacher.
I also want students to find their goals in life.**

Takahiro Nozaki

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