***Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others. (650)***

How much of your life would you sell? How much would you sell it for?

Grade 10 was a new start for me. I was ready to go the extra miles and achieve ambitious goals in academics, extra-curricular activities and sports. Sleeping at 1 a.m. became no stranger to me and pulling all nighters was a weekly occasion. I would attend an MUN competition every other week while juggling academics and sports. At first, I thought this was what was going to give my life meaning. In reality, I was just running scared.

I was running myself to the ground chasing after self-aggrandizement and didn’t even know it. One day after school, I just slumped down, exhausted. My body felt like lead. While I enjoyed the initial praise I garnered from my peers and teachers, the praises quickly felt hollow afterward.

During this desolate period, a friend recommended Sugaru Miaki’s “Three Days of Happiness.” In the novel, the protagonist exchanged all but the final three months of his lifespan for money, as he would rather live comfortably for three months than suffer his entire life. This sparked a question I could not shake: in his position, would I have done the same? How do I measure the worth of my own life?

Miaki taught me three measures of life: happiness, achievements, and contribution to society. And I was only after one of them.

The novel helped me understand that I had been too narrow-minded. I was looking at success the wrong way. When I started, I valued my life based on how well I was doing in comparison to others. Instead, I should value my life based on how much happiness I produce, not only in myself but also in the communities around me. Having focused on myself too much, now I should focus on others.

Soon, in my search for opportunities to contribute to my surroundings, the increasingly urgent clarion calls for everyone to participate in becoming the solution to climate change turned my attention to eco-sustainability. So, I founded Bumi Bersih (Indonesian for “clean earth”), an organization aimed at contributing to the environment by recycling soap and empowering women in local communities.

At first it was not easy. We pitched, did demonstrations, and cold-email tens of hotels. After 3 months of non-stop attempts, we successfully partnered with Intercontinental Hotel, who agreed to provide 10 kg of used bar soaps biweekly.

I decided to collaborate with women in Pasar Minggu, an impoverished local community, who would benefit the most from the additional income by teaching them how to recycle and sell bars of soap.

Working with these women, I came to know them personally. Mother Irma, for instance, dreamed of being able to send her son to university, as her husband brought barely enough money to bring food onto the table. Although it took her many frustrating attempts before she got the ratio between used soap and water right, she worked through batches and batches of soaps with a proud smile. Getting to know the members of this community personally–their daily hardships, fears, hopes, and dreams, as well as their inspiring courage and persistence–were the tell-tale signs I needed to realize that I’d made the right decision.

I realized, then, even as I spent many sleepless nights working on Bumi Bersih, that I no longer felt the same fatigue, hopelessness, and dissatisfaction when I was merely pursuing good grades and the good opinion of others. I used to only care about improving myself for self gain but now I care about the community.

Knowing that my life, energy, and time can be used to benefit others, selling portions of it would selfishly deprive the people of the contributions I could give them.

So if someone asked me, “How many years of your life are you willing to sell?”

I would answer, “None. I would sell none.”