‘Good Morning.’

After greeting other people in the classroom, I sat down in my seat. Here in this room, every Sunday we have lectures at around 10.30 in the morning for about two hours. The lectures are run by the Kichijoji Sonritsu Zatsugaku Daigaku. This unique name means, ‘A learning place created by people who reside in the community of Kichijoji’.

The town of Kichijoji, where I live, was developed by the people who escaped from the Meireki fire that occurred in central Tokyo during the Edo period. Today, Kichijoji is a large shopping district. The school was established for the purpose of appreciating and recognizing the origin of the town and also to create a meeting place that would foster friendship.

The administration of the school is not overseen by the local government, but by the citizens of Kichijoji. Because of this, there is no charge for anything. The travel agency is letting us use a room on the second floor of their building and lecturers volunteer to speak there.

The lecturers vary from an elderly woman teaching how to make her ‘special’ homemade pickles to a world famous spider expert talking about his specialty. These lecture programme has been running for twenty-nine years, and today is the 1401st lecture. To listen to the lectures, you do not need to go through any procedures or submit any paperwork. You just have to write your name in the attendance register.

The first time I attended a lecture was three years after the school started. The lecture was entitled, ‘How to Brew Good Coffee’, and was given by the owner of the Café Mocha that is in the town. At the end of the lecture, the café owner provided free coffee for the forty-odd
listeners. The café was famous for making rich coffee. I remember I went to the lecture with my own coffee cup in hand.

One day I talked about ‘The History and Uses of Tea’. I chose this theme because I have enjoyed the tea ceremony for a long time. To prepare for the lecture, I went out to a second-hand bookshop in Kanda. I looked for an old book and collected materials. Together with my university student daughter, we provided powdered green tea while wearing kimonos and were well received. We gave the audience the sweets for the day which were dried persimmons that had been sent by my mother who lives in my hometown. I also added some sweet chestnuts that I had made.

Since then, I often listen to the lectures and, once or twice a year, I also give lectures on topics that interest me. I only do this after thorough research. I usually don’t try to understand things I am not interested in, but if I attend these lectures, I absorb information even without meaning to. Because my curiosity is stronger than other people’s, I have been going regularly to the lectures.

My husband, who is seventy-three years old and going to work only three days a week now, has started attending the lectures as a result of my recommendation. When I can’t attend, he goes alone. When he comes home, he tells me about the day’s lecture with great animation and feeling. His friends from the lectures have become his irreplaceable ‘best’ friends without his noticing.

The people attending the lectures are mostly men. There are usually about fifteen people in the audience and sometimes there is someone who falls asleep, but that is allowed. After the lecture is finished, there is time to ask questions. Each story, such as T-san’s about her unimpeded trips to sixty-three countries, or the ninety-year-old man’s about his business trip to Australia to purchase sand, has its unique personality. There is always cultural exchange between lecturers and the audience and that is also very interesting.

Today we have a special university class. One of our students, Tatsuzo Murakami, is going to be given a ‘Degree in random knowledge’. He will also give a lecture to commemorate the event. He comes out in his cap and satin costume. They give him his degree and flowers and he starts to speak. The theme of the lecture is: ‘ Dwelling