

## Standing Up for Humanity

WHEN I learned that the mother of a Pittsburgh member recently died, I hastened to extend my condolences to him and his family. A few days later, I received a beautiful letter of appreciation from him, in which he shared some details of his mother's life. I asked for and received his permission to share them with you. He told me that his mother had always been very active in civil rights and had been arrested and jailed for a few days in 1951 for distributing a petition protesting any possible use of atomic weapons (by the United States) in the Korean War. He also told me how readily she supported his own efforts for peace when he joined the SGI in 1971. She witnessed firsthand the tremendous impact that practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism had on his life. In 1985, she also became an SGI member.

A number of thoughts came to mind as I imagined this courageous mother. I thought of the degree to which SGI President Ikeda praises women — how he has said that women are the original pacifists. I thought of how women instinctively understand the barbarous nature of war. They are the ones whose husbands and sons have been slain on battlefields all over the world throughout time.

I was also struck by the fact that I received this letter at the same time the Japanese tabloid *Shukan Shincho* questioned the accuracy of comments made by SGI President Ikeda regarding his friend and peace activist the late Dr. Linus Pauling. In 1958, Dr. Pauling wrote a petition calling for the cessation of all nuclear weapons testing. That same year he delivered his petition to the secretary-general of the United Nations with over 11,000 signatures of scientists from forty-nine countries. In fact, it was the last public document signed by Dr. Albert Einstein before his death.

Testifying before the Senate Internal Security Committee, Dr. Pauling was threatened with arrest if he didn't turn over the names of the people who had collected those signatures. Standing on principle, he refused. He told the chairman of the subcommittee, "I could protect myself by agreeing, but I am fighting for other persons who could not make a fight themselves."<sup>1</sup>

When President Ikeda commented on this episode in Dr. Pauling's life, the *Shukan Shincho* reporter wrote that "in the democratic United States, they don't go around arresting peace activists." Totally ignorant of the peace movement within the United States, this sarcastic reporter was trying to tarnish President Ikeda's comments honoring his late friend.

AS a journalist by training, I was outraged by such irresponsibility. To put one's personal freedom at risk to fight for one's beliefs is at the very heart of America. From the heroes of the Revolutionary War to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from the many scientists and artists and ordinary citizens who refused to cave in to Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous House on Un-American Activities Committee to the university protests against the Vietnam War in the '60s, Americans have unhesitatingly risked jail for the principles they believe in.

It is also a global phenomenon. I think of President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic, Guatemalan Indian rights activist Rigoberta Minchú and Aung San Suu Kyi, who has withstood years of house arrest in her native Burma; the image of a young Chinese student facing down a tank

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in Tiananmen Square comes to mind. And it was also the spirit of countless nameless people like our mother from Pittsburgh.

It is the spirit of the first Soka Gakkai president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, whose refusal to submit to the authority of the Japanese militarist government led to his arrest as a prisoner of conscience during World War II; and of the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, who joined Mr. Makiguchi in prison and forty years ago made his famous declaration denouncing the satanic nature of nuclear weapons, urging that they be banned from the face of the Earth. It is the legacy upon which the SGI-USA stands, one that pulsates in the heart of every member of our great organization.

In his 1997 peace proposal, President Ikeda states:

Nichiren Daishonin, the thirteenth-century Buddhist sage whose teachings we at SGI follow, said, "Life is the most important of all our properties." This respect for life is the essential inspiration of the Toda declaration. Herein lies the reason we at SGI aspire for the inner revolution of all individuals—the human revolution—that will establish the respect for all life as the basic norm of human society. Life is the world's supreme treasure. There is no value that is worth preserving at the sacrifice of life.... Our efforts are inspired by the conviction that we cannot sit by and overlook the crises occurring everywhere on the Earth.<sup>2</sup>

President Ikeda concluded his peace proposal, saying:

We at SGI, firmly committed to that conviction, will further expand the network of solidarity based on renewed humanism through our Buddhist-oriented movement fostering peace, culture and education. Working together with people of good throughout the world, we will rally courage and pool our wisdom to overcome the crises of civilization, the greatest challenges humankind has ever faced, and open the door to a third millennium where the sanctity of every individual life shines with hope and glory.<sup>3</sup>

This month we celebrate May 3, the day we acknowledge the significance of our relationship with the three presidents of the Soka Gakkai. So I will temper my outrage at one reporter's sarcasm and embrace the legacy of our presidents, Mr. Makiguchi, Mr. Toda and Mr. Ikeda, and deepen my prayer as I redetermine to do whatever I can to stand on the side of all people who face persecution in the name of peace.

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1. Hager, Thomas, *Force of Nature, The Life of Linus Pauling*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1955, p. 521.
2. Ikeda, Daisaku, "New Horizons of a Global Civilization" (1997 Peace Proposal), April 1997 *Living Buddhism*, p. 26.
3. *Ibid*, p. 29.