

Shijo Kingo—"My Story" **By Fay Hovey, Maui, Hawaii**

What follows is part two of a story based on what is known about Shijo Kingo, a samurai who was one of the Daishonin's chief disciples; he was converted in 1256. His full name and title are Shijo Nakatsukasa Saburo Zaemon-no-jo Yorimoto. Kingo is an equivalent of the title Saemon-no-jo.

Imagine how it must have been for him, responsible for his lands, serving Lord Ema. He was a physician, a warrior, a family man and a person who commanded respect in his region.

DID I say something before about my first wife? Fine details are often lost across the centuries, folding one onto another like the creases of a fan. We were both so young. Children, really, for that was the custom. The betrothal was arranged by our families so that favorable conditions would prevail within the clan. As a youth, I was preoccupied with the world of men. Immersed in the military arts, I lived with the smell of horses, the clang of steel on steel, testing myself against others, hardening myself for the battle sure to come, avidly listening to the war tales of my grandfather and father. In all of the dreams I had for myself, I never saw this shy young girl, soft as flowers that scatter on stones in the spring.

We were in the custom of the times married and that is how I learned about love and the loss of it. We had our brief time and she gave me sons. Death visited every house that year. It seemed the very birds ceased to sing out of respect for the dead. Pressing my wet face to the tatami mat next to her body, wrung lifeless by the plague, I felt the hard stone of helpless grief settle over my heart. I found out what it was to be a husband. Later, warring would teach me what it was to be a man.

Perhaps it was for the best for a woman's greatest wish then, aside from the health of her children, was to die before her husband. And, of course, we had no idea how the scroll of life would be written and what was to come.

My mother took charge of the children. And my father went to war, throwing himself into every fight he could find. It was, after all, a time of great impermanence, and we believed that the world was on a steady, horrible decline with incessant warfare the obvious result. And if you were to die, better to die on your horse, galloping at full speed, with an enemy in sight. No wonder we samurai loved swords so much we honored them with names. They were our great deliverers. One great arc over the head and all sorrow, doubt and desire would roll away, leaving whatever was left for the looters and crows.

Yes, I could ride, and shoot with my bow and drink with the best of them. And I did. I enjoyed a bit of a reputation, was known to swagger and was quick to venture my opinion even when it wasn't asked for. I liked my sake and the company of friends.

Eventually I married again. A woman whose husband had died in combat. Recalling my own dead wife, I knew what it was to face this world without someone to stand by me. No longer a girl, she was a woman who could make me come home at night. Each time the plague swept across the land, I pulled her

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closer to me as she slept and I lay awake, determined that death would not take this one. Not without a fight.

I learned medicine. I learned how to make poultices of herbs. Later, I studied the Chinese methods: moxibustion and the art of prescription-making and diagnosis. How to tell the condition of a person's liver or kidneys by the tiny pulses in the wrist. The lines of the face, the shape and color of the tongue. I can't say I saved as many as I've lost. But one does what one can in the face of such calamity. And, as in any age, another skill can prove handy and might further one's career. I could be summoned to the humblest dwelling or to the hushed and gilded apartments of government officials. I was a man who could be relied upon. I had a lot to lose and nothing to be gained by being foolish. But, as is often the case, a woman can stand on the far shore before a man even knows the tide has changed.

My mother's face had taken on a new bloom. The deeply grooved sadness at the corners of her mouth lightened and we saw her smile more. Heard her humming again while cooking or sweeping the kitchen. Her back, bent by years of unyielding adversity, began to straighten. Perhaps it was her renewed interest in religion. Whatever it was, my heart was happy to see it.

Meanwhile, the world outside the walls of our residence could not have been worse. Palaces and government buildings burned to the ground; floods and the food shortages that followed them. The plagues carted off thousands. Earthquakes. We seemed to live on the chattering lid of a pot full of boiling water. To say nothing of vice and every sort of beggar, bandit and ill-meaning folk. It wasn't safe to go out at night without one's escort or sword. It made me yearn for the old times of hard fighting and simple living.

So when I first saw the priest Nichiren, I joked with my companions on the road home that someone so outspoken wouldn't live to the end of the year and offered to wager my best saddle on it. For some reason I had no takers.

Reaching my residence, I stabled the horse, joined my family and pretended to listen to their talk. But it was his voice I was hearing. My wife, with a worried frown, left me sitting over a cup of tea staring into the garden. I felt he had read my entire life in one glance and yet we had never met. I felt the walls of my life falling in and falling outward at the same time. I must have paced up and down the veranda a hundred times before falling onto my futon in restless slumber.

Hours before dawn, I arose to pace again, my tea still cold from the night before. By the time my family woke up, I was already on the road, questions crowding out all thoughts of caution, a high excitement in my blood.

Walking slowly up the steps of his hermitage outside Kamakura, I was not surprised to see he was calmly sitting at a small table as if he had been waiting for me. I bowed deeply and sat down. He offered me rice and tea. For one so familiar with death, I was finally ready for life.

You have to understand the time I lived in. When I was 16 years old, avid for battle and glory, 500 warriors committed suicide at Hokkedo Monastery rather than submit to the Hojo family. Life meant nothing, really. Death was always at my shoulder. The code of my class was severely laid out, honor, bravery, loyalty, pride in our birth, the protection of my lord. "If you think of saving your own

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life, you better not go to war at all," it was said.

As I climbed the steps of the hermitage at Matsubagayatsu, my life at 26 lay heavily on my shoulders as my battle armor. If this man offered hope, I was ready to drink his tea.

At first, I sat stiffly. I had so many questions and yet it would appear rude to blurt them out. We drank tea quietly while the first birds began to stir, the mist rising from the tops of the hillsides around the small valley. He sent someone to take care of my horse, and I waited. It's humorous now, but at the same time, I was deeply puzzled and embarrassed. I was a brash person, you see. Speaking my mind had never been a problem before. In my haste, I'd even forgotten the customary offerings one would bring when visiting a priest. So there I was empty-handed without words to match my feelings. I must have looked like a village fool!

"I noticed you yesterday in the square. I knew I would see you again. You have the look of someone with a hot temper, I better not make you angry, eh?" He looked at me seriously, yet in his eyes I could see a glimmer of humor.

"I myself have quite a reputation for hot words. Some would say I am a radical and a troublemaker and there are numerous people who would like to see me dead and my bones thrown to the crows...so," he smiled, as he poured more tea for me. "You and I may have some thoughts in common. What brings a man to my door before the cold dawn?"

I admit it, I was rattled. His informality threw me off. Priests were not always this direct. And most of them lived fairly well. The hut where we sat was of the humblest style, his robes plain. "I haven't slept at all...," I ventured. "I...I don't know why..."

"And you still don't know why," he said. "That's good. Very good. I have a lot of people who come here thinking they know everything— more than I do—so it's a pleasure to meet someone who has the good sense to admit they don't know. We're off to a good start already, my new friend."

He questioned me at length about my family, my life. He seemed so genuinely interested, I felt myself warming up to him. He didn't preach to me and it was a good thing he didn't for I had little patience with the ravings of priests. He listened deeply, nodding with understanding, and as I spoke, I felt a familiarity. He seemed more like a father or friend or trusted uncle and something more I couldn't grasp.

"You've had a vigorous and worthy life as a samurai. And yet, there is a deep inner sorrow. You suffer in ways that others don't see. Why is this so?" He looked me in the eyes and I felt the walls of my life quaking again. So I spoke to him of my first wife, my first love and how she died. Death by plague is a long and drawn-out process. One can barely speak of such suffering without weeping.

"From that time until now, I have felt myself become so calloused over and cynical. I understand that death can come at any moment. For myself, I don't care. I am trained and ready for it. But what of my family, for my innocent wife and children? Why are we born anyway, if only to suffer and die as if we never existed at all?" This question came from the very bottom of my innermost

thoughts.

Straightening his body and placing his palms on his knees, he said, "Do you think you would have come here to me if there was no suffering in your life whatsoever?"

He pressed on. "You are a physician. Do people come to you when they are well?"

"No, of course not. They come when they are sick or injured... I don't understand, I...!"

"Out of illness arises the mind that seeks the Way. Without suffering, most likely you would not have ever made the ride to this hermitage to ask such a question, would you? Surely idle curiosity did not keep you awake last night!"

Do not think I was an easy convert. I had more questions that day and in days to come. Many times I would visit. I continued to feel drawn to go and I brought my friends. Five years later that simple hut in the valley at Matsubagayatsu would be destroyed by hundreds of warriors and my mentor, Nichiren, banished to Izu. Regardless of the landslides, floods, earthquakes and famine that ensued, those were happy times when he lived close by. He taught us how to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I began to feel a joy I'd never experienced before.

It is interesting how one sentence of truth can change the direction of a life. The right medicine at the right time. In the profoundest of ways, my life was begun again as my questions flowed from me like a river with no beginning and no end. □

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