

Celebrating Youth

AMONG my greatest joys are my frequent opportunities to interact with young people throughout the SGI-USA. I find their refreshing enthusiasm and unbridled optimism awe inspiring. What energy they have! I think of when I was in my teens and early 20s. Of course, I wanted to stay young forever. I thought that if I ever reached 40 or 50 years of age, it would be the end of my life. I was sure there could be no happiness associated with such an age. But now, quicker than I could have ever imagined, 50 is behind me. What happened to the time? I joined the Soka Gakkai thirty-six years ago. But it seems like only yesterday.

As I think about those years, I realize that the foundation for my life was established then—in the young men’s and student divisions. It has been said that eighty percent of what you experience during your youth is what makes up your life; like putting up a fine wine. Wine makers start with young grapes full of potential. Once it’s put up, a fine wine can age for years and years. The wonderful taste you enjoy years later is not because something new has to be added to the wine; it is made up of nothing more than what was put in the bottle in the first place. But the grapes had to survive the rigors of climate and terrain before they’re good enough to be made into wine.

I remember when I had been a member for about a year. I was asked to give a lecture to my district, which meant talking in front of about a hundred people. I still remember that it was on the life of Shijo Kingo. I was terrified. How could I give a lecture? I didn’t understand a thing. I was sure they could find someone far more capable. What I realized later is that my leaders hadn’t expected me to be an expert. Rather they had given me an opportunity to grow.

But how do we maintain our youthful spirit as we age? I started this essay saying it seems like only yesterday when I was twenty. That’s what my mind says. My body knows exactly what time it is. That’s the reality of our physiology. But if we allow our spirit to age with our body, that’s when we get in trouble. The point is, whether we are physically young or old, the life-condition of Buddhahood is eternally youthful. It finds expression in the compassion we have for others. The determination to never give up, always facing the next challenge with optimism. That was the life-condition displayed by Nichiren Daishonin, when he retired to Mount Minobu well into his 50s.

I’VE noticed that the older SGI President Ikeda gets, the more active he is. Now 70, he is a model of what one can achieve with a youthful spirit. Last month I had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Rosa Parks when she attended a youth gathering at the World Peace Ikeda Auditorium in Santa Monica. What a wonderful example of youthfulness. Though she is already 80 and has a difficult time getting around physically, she has the spirit of a teenager. She told me that the secret to her youthful spirit is that she always tries to meet and talk with young people.

When all is said and done, Buddhahood knows no physical age. Our practice

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of faith offers a lifetime of youth. The fountain of youth that writers have romanticized and adventurers searched for can be found right here in the heart of the person who embraces the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin. Once we've discovered it, all we need do is nurture it through our heartfelt practice for ourselves and for others.

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