

**Recollections With Leading World Figures**  
**By Daisaku Ikeda**  
**President José María Figueres Olsen of the Republic of Costa Rica**

IN any undertaking, I have always asked myself what my beloved mentor, Josei Toda, would do in my place. After his death, in times of both tranquillity and tempest, I have deeply pondered what he would think, what he would say, what he would do if he were here. I have carried on an unending dialogue in my heart with my mentor.

I can still hear Mr. Toda's impassioned voice: "Revolutions always stir up persecution and criticism. Fear nothing! If you are prepared to give your life for your beliefs, what can there be to fear?... In two hundred years, you will be proven right."

"I entrust everything to you," he said before he passed away, and those words have become the core, the totality of my life.

PRESIDENT José María Figueres Olsen of the Republic of Costa Rica took office two years ago, at the young age of 39. During my visit to Costa Rica at his invitation [in June 1996], I told him: "Being young is a tremendous strength. Youth is an invaluable treasure. I was also young, only 32, when I succeeded my mentor as third president of the Soka Gakkai."

The Costa Rican president's father was José Figueres Ferrer (1906–90), the father of modern democracy in Costa Rica and a great humanist known affectionately by the people as Don Pepe. In the period of chaos following World War II, he helped bring down the corrupt regime and establish a new democratic government. With a clear vision for the future, he abolished the military.

The money saved by the elimination of the military was all redirected to education. Don Pepe laid down the basic guidelines for Costa Rica's development as a nation of peace, culture and education. Though a highly educated man who could speak five languages, he would proudly declare that he was simply a farmer.

At an official function shortly after his inauguration as president [in 1948], Don Pepe wore a tuxedo, but refused to wear the patent leather shoes that had been set out for him. "These are just fine," he said, pointing to the riding boots he had on.

"Your father was a great man," I said to the President. "I know he is watching over you. I hope that, as the years go by, you will grow into a truly outstanding leader of Costa Rica.

"Your youth itself is a great hope for the future. A long time ago, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and Soviet Premier Aleksey N. Kosygin said that they held me in high regard because I was young and the future still lay ahead of me. Dr. Arnold J. Toynbee, the British historian, also honored me with his trust, treating me as if I were his own grandson."

"If I remember correctly," remarked Mr. Figueres, "you were about my age, in your early forties, at the time of your dialogue with Dr. Toynbee [published

under the title *Choose Life*]. The content of that dialogue remains wonderfully relevant even to this day.”

President Figueres is a remarkably humble man. His entire being emanates with the desire to learn from others. He is not the least bit arrogant or affected. He is the very picture of earnestness and sincerity.

AFTER visiting Cuba, I arrived at the airport outside of Costa Rica’s capital, San José [June 26, 1996]. I was astonished and deeply humbled to find that President Figueres, First Lady Josette Altmann de Figueres and the president’s mother, Mrs. Karen Olsen, were all there to greet me. The president also accompanied me on my departure, riding in the same car. He returned from an official trip out of town especially to see me off.

When I got into the car, he placed his hand on the door frame so that I wouldn’t hit my head as I sat down. I was very moved by his kindness and consideration, and I felt as if I had caught a glimpse of the fine upbringing his parents had given him.

President Figueres, who received an honorary doctorate from Soka University [on May 23, 1996], wore his Soka University badge the entire time I was there [from June 26 through 29]. With a friendly smile, he told me that he was proud of his association with Soka University.

In his speech at the opening ceremony of the SGI exhibition “Nuclear Arms: Threat to Humanity” in San José, the president said: “I esteem all people and organizations, wherever they may be, who have contributed for many long years to the great river of human harmony. I would especially like to single out for mention the founding fathers and contemporary leaders of the Soka Gakkai. They are an excellent example of such individuals. There have been times when the Soka Gakkai has been persecuted and attacked for its love of truth and freedom, yet they have never succumbed to such pressure and have continued to fight.

“In Japan and around the world, the Soka Gakkai employs that most excellent method—education—to build a foundation for world peace. It is nurturing a new culture for peace. Its leaders have striven with courage to achieve these difficult goals.”

ON another occasion, he even suggested that Costa Rica and the SGI form an alliance of humanism.

These words of commendation from one of the leading nations of peace are ones that I specially wish to share with all our members who have worked so hard.

The “Nuclear Arms: Threat to Humanity” exhibition was held at the Costa Rican Center for Science and Culture, atop a hill in San José. The building used to be a prison, but it was closed and turned into an educational center, which incorporates a children’s museum. The dark steel bars at the windows still testify to the structure’s past.

I remembered Victor Hugo’s assertion that one who opens the doors to schools

closes the doors of prisons. Who becomes a criminal by choice? When we are born, when we are children, all of us are overflowing with hope; we are like little angels, wanting nothing so much as to grow, to be good and to be loved by others. Poverty, lack of affection and cruelty distort those happy natures. There are so many children in the world who, though they know it is wrong, have to steal just to survive. We must provide all children with a positive education, so that no child need resent others, so that no child be made a victim of violence and driven to thoughts of suicide!

Surely Don Pepe must have shared this wish.

There is a famous story about the former president. It took place in December 1948, not long after his inauguration. The skies over San José were a clear, bright blue. Some 4,000 feet above sea level, the winds of the high plateaus blew through the Bellavista Military Barracks.

The barracks were filled with people—cabinet ministers, judges, elected representatives, high-ranking church figures, ambassadors and diplomats from various countries, labor union leaders, and many reporters and other media people. A brace of cornets rang out in a fanfare, followed by a roll of drums.

Don Pepe came up to the microphone at the podium and declared: “From today, the Republic of Costa Rica has eliminated its standing army.” After that brief statement, he walked to the wall behind the podium, picked up a sledgehammer, and swung it with full force against the wall.

What was he doing? The audience was astonished. The stones of the wall creaked and a part of the wall fell away. Everyone gasped. With a crash, the stones tumbled into the empty lot beyond. As one, the assembly released its breath.

Don Pepe returned to the podium and declared that the army barracks would now be turned over to the Ministry of Education and funds allocated to convert it into a beautiful museum. Let us throw away our weapons and redirect those resources to the education of our children, he urged. This dramatic display is indicative of Don Pepe’s character—his humanism, his boldness, his eloquence, his wit, his ability to touch the hearts of others. Not to mention his meticulous attention to detail—for, in fact, he had worked on the wall the previous day so as to ensure that it would crumble in one go when he struck it.

HE then denounced the way dictators throughout history had used the military to crush anyone who opposed their rule and to threaten and oppress their fellow citizens. But he and his administration, he declared, did not fear the people; therefore, they had no need for weapons to preserve their rule.

During World War II, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the first president of the Soka Gakkai, was incarcerated by the Japanese military authorities and died in prison. My own mentor, Josei Toda, was imprisoned along with him and harshly maltreated.

On the islands of Okinawa, the Japanese army, which ought to have been the residents’ ally and protector, slaughtered countless innocent civilians. Though there were dire food shortages, military commanders ordered the people to hand

over all their supplies, threatening to shoot anyone who resisted. They even took food from the mouths of little children. When hungry babies cried, the soldiers ordered their parents or guardians to kill them lest the cries warn the enemy of their hiding place. When the soldiers wanted to take cover from air raids or hide from the enemy in the many caves found on the islands, they forcefully evicted any civilians who happened to be there first, so that they could fit inside. They shouted at the people and beat them with sticks, showing no regard even for the elderly.

Violence begets violence. Hate breeds hate. War makes war. Don Pepe was determined to break this destructive cycle that has existed for as long as humankind has walked this earth. When he struck down the wall of the military barracks, a new world of peace and culture was revealed.

President Figueres also said in his speech at the opening of the “Nuclear Arms: Threat to Humanity” exhibition: “I believe in the power of the human spirit to vanquish evil.... Peace cannot be based on the power of guns; it will grow from the serenity of the hoe that cultivates a field. Peace cannot be sustained by the arrogance of the military or the powerful; it can only be sustained by the friendliness of the farmer. The people of Costa Rica firmly believe that the greatest defenses are reason, equality and solidarity.”

In other words, the only way to create peace is to prepare for peace. The only way to establish the garden of peace is to plant the seeds of peace. To prepare for war in order to realize peace is a fundamental contradiction in terms.

Based on that conviction, since Don Pepe’s time, Costa Rica has spent thirty percent of its national budget on education. It has created as many teachers as it once had soldiers: One in every ten Costa Ricans is a teacher. The sight of students in their neat uniforms on the streets of San José is striking. There are no children forced to make their living on the streets because they are too poor to attend school.

Although he has been working to further reform the educational system, President Figueres is still not satisfied. Says the Costa Rican leader: “In these last two years [since becoming president], I have built thirty-five new schools. One is on a tiny island. Before this new school opened, the children who lived on that island had to get up while it was still dark, take a boat for about two hours, depending on sailing conditions, and then travel another two hours by bus to get to school. They were getting up in the middle of the night! I almost wept when I heard this. That is why I decided to have a school built on that island.

“One thing strikes me about all of the developed nations. They have forgotten what it means to be thankful for what they have. It won’t do to forget that one can study in school because society as a whole has made a sacrifice to make that possible. In the developing countries, there are many children who can’t attend school, much as they would like to. They would give anything for the opportunity to study. We must not forget such people.”

I constantly stress that those who attend university must work for the sake of others who wanted to attend but could not. They were able to study because they had the support of the people, of their fellow citizens. If one forgets that truth,

what use is one's learning? If our elite become inhumane people who look down on others, our educational system is profoundly flawed. Education that does not teach a sense of values turns people into mere robots filled with data but with no understanding of what it is for.

PRESIDENT Figueres' mother, Mrs. Karen Olsen, told me that her husband, Don Pepe, used to say that what our abilities are is not as important as how we make use of them. These may seem like simple words, but aren't they actually a perfect solution to the problems facing education in Japan? Since her husband's death, Mrs. Olsen has continued to support her son, the president, and serve the people of Costa Rica.

"Around 1973 [during his third term as president]," Mrs. Olsen continued, "my husband often said to me that he had two worries concerning our nation. One was poverty. The other was wealth. He feared that, if in the future Costa Rica became a wealthy country, it might come to rely on its wealth alone and become corrupt and lacking in spirit."

That is precisely the problem. Is a nation that, though wealthy, allows those with power to violate the human rights of its people a truly peaceful nation? Is a nation in which children imitate adult society by bullying other children and even driving them to their deaths a truly peaceful nation? One child described bullying as "a miniature war." Some even say that our schools have changed from places that give children hope to places that give them despair. Where did Japan go wrong?

A friend of mine once related the following story. Right after the end of World War II, he was working at a repatriation center for Japanese soldiers who were abroad. Every day he was forced to tell the soldiers' families and relatives who visited him, "Your husband died in the war," "Your son died in the war." It was very painful for him.

One day, a girl of about 10 came to the center, leading her little brother by the hand. "My mother is sick and can't get out of bed, so I've come in her place. Please tell me where my father is." He asked her father's name and looked for it on the list. The little girl's father was dead, killed in Southeast Asia. He couldn't bear to look up from the papers in front of him. But the little girl was gazing directly at him, biting her lip.

"Your father..." he began, but the words caught in his throat and he couldn't go on.

"I still think about that girl and her family even now," he said to me.

Having experienced such tragedy, Japan vowed that it would become a land of peace and culture, never allowing war to happen again. How did that Japan become this Japan, where children take their own lives because they are bullied by their classmates?

AT the opening of the "Nuclear Arms: Threat to Humanity" exhibition, the award ceremony for a Costa Rican children's essay contest sponsored by the First Lady's Office was held. Written on the contest theme, "Building a World

Without Violence,” the prize-winning essays contained such statements as:

“Why can’t we stop hurting people? Why do we always have problems with somebody else? Why can’t we walk down the street without pushing someone out of the way...?”

“There are two kinds of abuse: physical and psychological. Physical abuse is where a child is beaten or hurt physically. Psychological abuse is where a child is caused mental suffering—for example, telling a child he is stupid, a failure or a good-for-nothing. When a child begins to understand that such things are being said about him, he becomes a coward and is left with no courage to do anything. When he grows up and has children, he will most likely treat his children in the same way...”

“I’m a human being, I’m not an animal nor a toy.... Please, I’m a human being; I cannot endure any more violence.”

“We know our parents teach us values when we are small so that we will respect the lives of others when we grow up. But I think very few people have learned these values properly, because not many put them into practice. I think only a few countries enjoy real “harmony,” and if we do our bit, perhaps we can be one of them.... Let’s strive to make a better world—one that all of us can be proud of. And let’s resolve all misunderstandings peacefully.”

An educational system that doesn’t teach people to respect others, but, rather, to push others out of their way, is a breeding ground for violence.

THE exhibition opening ceremony was held adjacent to the Children’s Museum. Through the partition, we could hear the happy voices of children playing. Laughter. Children calling their friends. The excited shouts of yet some fresh discovery. The delightful, innocent clamor of children running joyfully about swept in waves into where we were gathered.

At the podium, I declared: “The sight and sound of these youngsters, boisterous and full of vitality, are the very image of peace. It is here that we can find the power to stem the tide of atomic bombs. It is here we can find hope.” President and Mrs. Figueres nodded their assent. These happy, carefree children are surely the future that Don Pepe envisioned.

Don Pepe also eradicated the long-standing laws that discriminated against Costa Rica’s English-speaking black minority. He spoke to these citizens in their own language, danced with them, kissed their babies and engaged them in dialogue.

When Don Pepe learned that the country’s National Symphony Orchestra was small and poor, he asked, “Why should we have tractors if we can’t have violins?” To him, the purpose of the economy was to provide for cultural pleasures. Eventually the orchestra, staffed by many new talented youth, became one of the leading in the world and even performed at the United Nations.

Costa Rica is the only unarmed nation in Central America, a region of constant conflict. “We are all alone, alone,” mourned Don Pepe. But after his death in 1990, a leader of neighboring Nicaragua said: “I would like to leave the same legacy of peace to my country that Don Pepe left to Costa Rica. In the 1990s, I

would like to make Central America into a region of peace and cooperation. The world is changing.” The moral power of Costa Rica has earned the respect of the world and is beginning to influence it in a positive way.

Mr. Makiguchi predicted that humanity would evolve from military competition to political competition and on to economic competition, and then finally to moral or humanitarian competition. I feel that Costa Rica, a truly advanced nation in terms of its commitment to humanism, is setting an example for the rest of the world—an example of what we should strive toward in the twenty-first century.

Don Pepe was a visionary leader. He was a leader with a passionate love for his fellow human beings. One day, a hijacked plane carrying hostages was forced to stop for refueling at the San José Airport. When he learned of this, he sped off to the airport with a single-minded determination to free the hostages himself if need be.

He was a lion of a man. He loved the people, and he lived for their sake. He named his farm Lucha sin Fin (Struggle Without End), and that was his motto.

NOW, the lion’s cub has risen up to take his father’s place. With earnest sincerity, he vows to fight, to protect the people his father loved so much, to further develop the land of peace his father built.

When one has made the firm resolve to dedicate one’s life to the people, short-term results are not important. That profound determination becomes a seed that will without fail bring forth brilliant blooms in one’s homeland.

When I articulated this conviction, the President drew up his chin, as if confirming the commitment he holds so dear. In his office, a painting of his father in his later years looks over him, guarding him with fierce fatherly pride.

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