

## **Lady Nanjo: "My Story"** **By Fay Hovey, Maui, Hawaii**

*Ueno-ama Gozen (Lady Ueno or Lady Nanjo) was a key figure among the disciples of Nichiren Daishonin. One of her nine children was Tokimitsu, a model believer, and another was Ren'a-ni, who became the mother of third high priest Nichimoku. Despite a life of many tragedies, she maintained her faith in Buddhism throughout her life. In the September issue, the study material ("A Letter of Condolence," p. 6) was a letter to her from the Daishonin, consoling her over the sudden loss of her youngest son, 16-year-old Shichiro Goro. She had already suffered the loss of her eldest son and early in her marriage, her husband. In this fictionalized first-person story, Fay Hovey imagines the thoughts of this woman who raised her family as a single mother in thirteenth-century Japan and who was a strong supporter of Nichiren Daishonin.*

IT was the hell of all hells.

I had been visiting with Tokimitsu's wife and beaming over the newest grandson born just ten days earlier. Such joy we experienced—a happiness had settled over my heart with this new birth. Life indeed was good in spite of its trials and sufferings. I touched my cheek to the soft and fragrant skin of his face. To see the face of a younger Tokimitsu in him already made me feel young again. This is the great wonder of being a grandparent: to see oneself in the story of humans, continuing onward, flesh to flesh.

Like a dark cloud that suddenly covers the sun, blotting out all the vividness of landscape and sky, one of our servants, throwing himself upon the mat and crying in misery, told me that my 16-year-old son, Goro, was dead. "How can this be?" my mind careened. "This is not possible! He is wrong, he is mistaken!" I clung to that thought as we made our way to him sprawled where he fell.

"He is only sleeping," I said through my tears. "See, he is in a deep sleep! Come now, Goro, stop playing with us. Open your eyes now! You have us in a panic, enough is enough!" And still he would not open his eyes. My son Tokimitsu joined us and taking Goro into his arms, he shook him and said to him roughly: "Goro! Wake up! Wake up!" And there was confusion and wild sounds of crying. We sat in the grass, our hands helpless, shoulders rounded in despair. I looked into my young son's still face and Tokimitsu gently closed the eyes that had reflected the trees and skies but no life. Eventually I asked to be alone with him and I sat, talking with him under the whispering trees, told him how much I loved him, what a wonderful young man he was. I sang him songs I'd sung when he was a baby. I patted down his hair, straightened his limbs and clothing. I held his hand as it grew stiff and cold and I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo until I could not recognize my own voice. All the while, I kept expecting him to get up or that I would suddenly wake up and this would have been a horrible dream, nothing more. The first evening star appeared as I sat chanting and soon the rest of the family came, helped me up and tenderly, we walked home with Goro, chanting and weeping every step of the way.

We placed him upon a pallet in the main room of the manor house and lighting candles and incense, we chanted our evening gongyo sitting shoulder to shoulder in

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a sorrowful huddle. How quickly heaven had turned to hell. How swiftly the bright eagerness and vigor of life is doused. Like the snuffing of a candle or the brief life of a butterfly, life in all of its animation is gone. My husband had died when Goro was a little one in my womb. I wanted to die then, wanted to follow my husband, but knowing the baby would need me kept me alive. And now, the impartial hand of death lay coldly upon our family once again. My heart grew cold and numb with a grief so deep and wide I believed I would never be able to cross back over the abyss to normal life. The sounds of our solemn gongyo and daimoku rose on the curls of incense smoke as we chanted on into the night. We chanted all night long. And when the morning sun rose, we offered our morning gongyo.

Many of our neighbors came, kneeling on the veranda outside our hall, and chanted with us. They brought food and took over the tasks of running the manor while we pulled together to plan his funeral. The first of the Daishonin's messages to me soon arrived. Like us, our mentor was in deep shock and could only express his disbelief. From deep within the recesses of Mount Minobu, his letters came. I cannot tell you how I clung to them, rereading them, chanting to understand the meaning of life and death. As the Daishonin could not join us, we performed Goro's funeral ourselves. Tokimitsu led us all in gongyo. We offered incense. Our friends and neighbors gave their condolences and we spoke of Goro and how much he made us all laugh, how glad we were to be around his spirited personality. We read one of the Daishonin's letters. And still in my heart, deep within me was the question: "Why, why this child? Why now? What had I done to bring such suffering to us all?" I blamed myself. "Was it because I had wanted to deny living when my husband died? Had I not chanted enough to protect my family? Did I lack sufficient appreciation? What could I have done to avert this tragedy?" My thoughts were like birds, darting in and out of my mind. I refused all food and took to my bed, wishing I had died instead. I would have willingly given up my life for his. Still, it seemed each day a letter would come from the Daishonin and I would prop myself up, read it with shaking hands and streaming eyes and I would feel I could go on just one more day because there was someone who really understood what I was feeling. Even though he was at Minobu, I could feel his weeping with me, could feel his compassion and concern for me. I don't believe I would be telling you this story now, if he hadn't written to me. I hung on to those letters like a floating log in a stormy sea. And, no matter how I felt, I joined the family for morning and evening prayers. In the afternoons, I would go to sit by Goro's grave and chant. Needless to say, my family was worried about me and watched over me closely.

You see, there is a bond between a mother and a child like no other. When a child dies, something inside the mother dies. We can survive, but we will always have a part of us that is dead. No pain can match it. The only comfort I had was the letters from the Daishonin, telling me that surely Goro was reunited with his father at Eagle Peak. He told me that I could be with them by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Please understand me. Life requires us to be ferocious sometimes. It beats us down, time and time again, and we can still get up. We must get up. Because of the Daishonin's letters and the loving patience of my family, I began to eat the food my daughter-in-law would

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discreetly leave in my room. I saw through the eyes of direct experience just how precious life is, how important it is to continue to chant no matter what pain you are in. The pain, now sharp, will become duller as time passes. This is the way life is.

One day I woke from a nap and found my little grandson had been tucked beside me while I slept. He was now 4 months old and beginning to drool and wiggle, waving his arms and grinning with merry little eyes. "Ah, little Hiwaka ... you've grown up so much!" I breathed and he laughed, reminding me of Goro when he was a baby. As I picked him up and held him, I realized I hadn't looked at him since the day Goro had died. He had been growing all along while I had been in the depths of sorrow, waiting for me to wake up one day and notice him. "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo," I softly told him. "Hello, I'm your grandmother, what do you think of that?" And he kicked his wrappings off and showed me his chubby little legs.

You know, life handed me a lot. Perhaps I have not always acted with wisdom, and perhaps my karma was such that I had to experience such suffering. The fresh hope and happiness I began to feel as I held my grandson grew with my appreciation for my mentor and the Buddhism he taught us. I knew that as long as I had the Gohonzon and could chant, I could continue and life could be sweet again. And it was. □

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