

**Recollections
By Daisaku Ikeda
Think Critically and Spot Injustice**

**Adolfo Pérez Esquivel —
Nobel Prize-Winning Argentine Human Rights Activist**

Under Argentina's military dictatorship [1976–83], 30,000 people were murdered. They were abducted and tortured to death."

The Soka University students in Tokyo listened transfixed to this gripping testimony of Dr. Pérez Esquivel [June 1994]. Could such a terrible thing have taken place in this day and age? Even for those aware of this tragedy, the words of one who had experienced it were shocking.

"Of course, all 30,000 were not killed at once," Dr. Pérez Esquivel went on. "They disappeared one or two at a time. Though the number of victims rose to five, 10, 100, there was no cry of protest from society. And that is why 30,000 people died."

A husband, a wife and a child would one day simply disappear. The military authorities were cunning in making people seem to vanish without a trace. Today, when no country can easily afford to ignore international opinion, it is not acceptable to oppress people too conspicuously. But if it can make "troublemakers" simply "disappear" quietly — inconspicuously, a little at a time — the government can easily deny involvement. The secret is to rob the protesters of their power to resist or to inflict irreparable damage on them and their cause, however ruthless the means.

Dr. Pérez Esquivel has written: "The authorities believed that they held the power of life and death in their hands.... Mothers, grandmothers and relatives knocked repeatedly on the doors of the churches, labor union offices, local and central government [looking for help finding their missing loved ones]. But the response was always the same: 'We have no idea where they are. They must have had a reason to disappear. No doubt they did something wrong.'"

Those missing, the victims in this scenario, were simply dismissed as criminals. And those who did not know them personally were willing to believe this.

Indeed, they were made to believe it. The government manipulated the mass media to drive its message home at every opportunity. Dr. Pérez Esquivel calls this the "shutting down of the conscience." The people, robbed of the spirit to think critically, convinced themselves that the government line was the truth. Since everyone said those missing were criminals, it had to be true; there must be a reason for their disappearance. Instead of speaking out with principle and conscience, they decided to remain silent, to not get involved.

But Dr. Pérez Esquivel could not remain silent. He contacted the families of those who had disappeared, and he marched at the front of demonstrations of mothers demanding their loved ones' return. Dr. Pérez Esquivel had already been campaigning against human rights abuses across Latin America. As a Christian, his beliefs also led him to the conclusion that action was the only path available.

In 1977, Dr. Pérez Esquivel was suddenly arrested without a warrant or a hearing. He was thrown in prison, cast into a world of violent words and violent deeds. There, the false face that the government showed its people was stripped away, and its true brutality was revealed in its rawest form. His cell was tiny, hardly large enough in which to take even four paces. It was freezing cold. He tried to keep the wind and rain out by covering the

missing window panes with old newspaper and slapped himself to keep warm. Sleep was almost impossible. What's more, his jailers woke him every two hours.

Their only aim was to destroy the resisters, physically and mentally. One jailer said: "Here you are only a convict. Not even God can help you." Some prisoners had cigarette burns all over their bodies. Others were left with permanent marks across their face from the blindfolds they were forced to wear over long periods. Many suffered lasting psychological damage. Dr. Pérez Esquivel was even subjected to electric-shock torture. During all this, he constantly told himself not to be defeated, resolving to endure and be strong.

When we met [December 1995], Dr. Pérez Esquivel said to me: "In prison, I gained the strength to survive under extreme conditions, the strength to resist. That strength is mental and spiritual. In prison, one is denied physical freedom. But the mind is free. The mind cannot be imprisoned."

Sustained by prayer, Dr. Pérez Esquivel endured prison life. The hardest thing to bear was the sound of others being beaten — the continual cries of pain and anguish. The authorities had no ears for human suffering; they looked on their prisoners as faceless numbers.

How dangerous is a society that has lost all sense of right and wrong.

Recently in Japan, a young boy committed suicide; he was unable to endure the pain of being a victim of schoolyard bullying any longer. Without any sense of inappropriateness, one of his classmates, expressing his sadness, said, "Now I have one less rival to worry about." It is easy to decry such callousness, but who has the right to condemn this youth alone when the leaders of our society shamelessly, with no moral or ethical standards, pursue nothing but their own gain?

At every opportunity, Dr. Pérez Esquivel calls out to youth not to be bystanders. He urges them to participate, to become the main actors in the human drama unfolding around them. He challenges them to become the shapers of history, to have the critical discernment to spot injustices when they happen, to take action and forge support and unity among people.

To wait for someone else to do something is irresponsible and represents spiritual self-defeat.

Social consciousness is important, says Dr. Pérez Esquivel. We must rebel against injustice, he urges. How true! When stones are cast at good people, when the rights of honest, hardworking people are trampled, we should be angry! When anyone anywhere in the world discriminates against another, we should burn with indignation! All good people must rage against injustice! Raise your voices! Drown out the loudspeaker lies of the oppressors with a resounding no! Nothing suits the authorities better than the people's apathy, than their feeling of powerlessness and their acceptance of human rights violations.

Through his sufferings in prison, Dr. Pérez Esquivel acquired a keen personal understanding of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: It's not the repression by the bad people that hurts — it's the silence of the good. When moral apathy spreads throughout society, when people don't want to get involved, bad people are free to do as they please. As a result, the good who remain silent and apathetic become accessories to their crimes.

When first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi was imprisoned for his beliefs during World War II, he asked his fellow prisoners: "Is doing evil the same as not doing good? Or are they different?" They are the same. Mr. Makiguchi knew that there was no middle ground between good and evil.

After 14 months, Dr. Pérez Esquivel was released from prison, but the authorities continued to keep him under strict surveillance.

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One person who champions the cause of justice, who stands up for what is right, is more powerful than the apathetic masses.

Dr. Pérez Esquivel is a highly acclaimed sculptor and painter. He has always believed that an artist feels the joy, the sadness and the suffering of the people and gives them voice and form.

I said to him and his wife, the musician Amanda Guerreño: “If the two of you had simply remained artists, your lives might have been quiet and peaceful. But you dared to cast your lot with the struggle for human rights. You stood up to save those who are suffering. When you stand up for a cause, you expose yourself to criticism and attack. Knowing this, you still chose to walk the thorny path. What a magnificent life you have led! A life dedicated to fighting oppression shines with golden brilliance.”

In 1980, Dr. Pérez Esquivel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It gave an enormous positive boost to the struggle for human rights around the world.

I asked him, “Weren’t the military authorities who persecuted you the most displeased by your award?”

“Most assuredly yes,” he replied. “They opposed and protested the award more than anyone.”

He said that the Argentine mass media remained silent on the true merit of his activities and the international recognition he received. If they did write about him, it was to distort the facts.

The day he left Japan, Dr. Pérez Esquivel sent me a message: “When someone I have great faith in is attacked, insulted and persecuted, I will say nothing to him. But when that person ceases to be criticized, then I will express dissatisfaction — because that means he has given up the fight. There is a passage from Cervantes’ classic novel *Don Quixote*, where it is observed that the yapping of dogs is proof that we are proceeding on horseback.”

These are inspiring words indeed, words from a committed crusader for justice.

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