

DISCUSSIONS ON YOUTH COURAGE IS WHAT MAKES JUSTICE POSSIBLE

In part two of this discussion, President Ikeda says that ‘if we are to do good, not only for ourselves but for humanity and the world, we need courage. This is the power that makes such actions possible...’

MICHIKO KANAZAWA: I want to share a student’s story. In the winter of her first year in senior high school, the group she used to hang out with suddenly began to ignore her. She tried to talk to them about it, but they brushed her off. Even other classmates, who at first sympathized with her, began to turn on her. Malicious notes were passed to her in class. Friendless and alone, she was distraught, unable to fathom why no one liked or trusted her anymore.

She sought advice from one of her seniors in the high school division, who encouraged her: “Don’t worry. This is a chance for you to grow. You have to beat this problem. Let’s chant together and do our best!”

The student decided to grit her teeth and keep going to school, but it was really hard for her to be there. And she finally told her parents that she wanted to quit school. Her mother said that she could stay home from school for one day but only on the condition that she chant for 10 hours.

SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA: I’m sure her mother was probably even more pained by and concerned about this terrible predicament than the daughter.

KANAZAWA: Yes, I think so, too. When the student started chanting, she was feeling sorry for herself, thinking, “What did I do to deserve such suffering?” But as she kept chanting, a new feeling rose inside her — the confidence that she had the power to make wonderful friends.

The next day she went back to school and put into action the challenge she had set for herself: greeting her classmates. She was extremely nervous when she opened the door to her classroom and said “Good morning,” but she had faith that the day would come when they would respond. She persisted in her efforts.

IKEDA: Persevering on one’s chosen path constitutes courage.

KANAZAWA: At first, no one returned her greeting. But she kept it up. By the beginning of her second year in high school, some of her classmates were responding, and today, everyone in her class does.

In fact, she’s now become a sort of adviser to both her classmates and student division members who are having human relations problems, and she’s doing very well. She says that she’s glad that she didn’t give up and let her problem defeat her, and she’s determined to become a bright source of courage and hope to others, just as her senior was to her when she was suffering.

IKEDA: That’s her declaration of victory. She really is to be congratulated. How happy her mother must be, too!

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This student kept greeting her classmates. At first she was ignored, but she persevered. That's so admirable.

Sometimes people laugh at brave acts in the beginning. They may see an act of courage as strange or peculiar. But later, they recognize it for what it was.

The famous German philosopher and poet Schiller said, "Those who are strong when they stand alone possess true courage." I have treasured those words since I was young.

It is wrong to blindly follow the crowd. Going along with something — without any real thought, just because everyone is doing it — and being quite content with not having to make any decisions yourself, leads to mental laziness and apathy. And that's dangerous.

This tendency is one of the greatest faults of the Japanese. If everyone says that war is good, everyone rushes to war, without dissent or opposition. Even if they know it's madness. No one has the courage to stand up and speak out, to rise up and say, "War is wrong!" We Japanese tend to just drift along with the flow, to hop on the bandwagon of superficially grand causes or fashionable trends.

But we mustn't be led astray. We must never give up our commitment to peace, our desire to learn and our love for humanity. Putting those ideals into practice and spreading them among others is an act of courage.

It lies inside us. We have to summon courage forth from the depths of our lives.

Taking refuge in strength of numbers is not courage but cowardice. It's fascism, not democracy. In a democracy, all individuals have to recognize that they are society's protagonists, and as such they have a responsibility to fulfill. There's too much self-interest and selfishness in Japan. There's too much blind following, too much willingness to go along with the crowd.

Only when people have the courage to stand up for justice — even if they are alone — can they lead the world in the direction of peace and good. When such courageous individuals join forces and unite in strong solidarity, they can change society.

But it all starts with you. You have to be courageous. The rest follows from that.

Courage is identical to what is right.

YASUYUKI ITAKURA: Talking about being brave enough to stand up for your beliefs reminds me of Rosa Parks.

IKEDA: Mrs. Parks is a cherished friend and the mother of the civil rights movement in the United States. She is a courageous person and, at the same time, very gentle. She is mild-mannered but possesses a will of iron.

ITAKURA: I believe that Mrs. Parks visited the SGI-USA Headquarters in Los Angeles in May 1998. She even sat for a photograph with junior high and high school division members.

IKEDA: I heard about that. Mrs. Parks has a great love for young people.

KANAZAWA: A translation of her book *Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue with Today's Youth* has recently come out in Japan.

ITAKURA: She said to the American members of the junior high and high school divisions:

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“I am very happy to be here today, surrounded by people of such beautiful spirit and such wonderful affection. I hope to continue to do everything I can for young people. They are our future. I know that if Dr. Ikeda were here with us, he would be just as pleased at this gathering of young people as I am, because he believes in freedom and love for all people.”

IKEDA: That was very kind of her to say. I, too, will do everything in my power for our young people, the leaders of the 21st century. Mrs. Parks has spent her life fighting against the discrimination and persecution of African Americans. She is indeed brave.

Racial discrimination was terrible in the 1950s. In those days, Mrs. Parks lived in Montgomery, Ala. [where such discrimination was entrenched]. “Colored” people were not allowed to sit with “white” people on the city buses. Even if they were seated in the colored section, the law required that they stand up and give their seats to white people when all the seats in the white section were filled.

ITAKURA: How horrible! Persecution and discrimination are absolutely wrong.

IKEDA: Then, one fated day — Dec. 1, 1955 — Mrs. Parks got on a bus to ride home from work. She sat down in the colored section, and the driver told her to give up her seat to a white person. It was only expected that she’d comply, since she was an African American, and those were the rules. Everyone had up to then, including Mrs. Parks.

But that day was different. She was fed up with being persecuted. “No,” she said. She refused to give up her seat. That one word went on to have a tremendous effect on the civil rights movement and the dismantling of institutionalized discrimination.

KANAZAWA: What courage she had! I wonder where she found it?

IKEDA: In the book you just mentioned, Mrs. Park says: “I had no idea that history was being made. I was just tired of giving in. Somehow, I felt that what I did was right by standing up to that bus driver. I did not think about the consequences. I knew that I could have been lynched, manhandled, or beaten when the police came. I chose not to move, because I was right” (p. 42).

ITAKURA: That’s the crucial part: “Because I was right.”

IKEDA: Mrs. Parks found the courage to speak out because she believed that she was right. She wasn’t trying to go down in history or trying to show off or worrying what others thought. She did what she did because she believed it was the right thing.

That’s courage. Courage is always identical to what is right, to justice. It comes from the wish to do what’s right, the wish to build a just society, to be a good human being.

If we are to do good, not only for ourselves but for humanity and the world, we need courage. This is the power that makes such actions possible — actions that may not call attention to themselves but really shine with the brilliance of good.

Putting an end to school-yard bullying is also an act of courage. So is enduring hardships and surviving tough circumstances. And so is trying to live an honest, decent life, day after day.

By contrast, people who are lazy and apathetic or who have fallen into bad ways are

products of not having the courage to challenge daily life. In our families and among our friends, we should clearly state our opinions so that things will move in a positive direction. Our willingness to proceed in that direction and help others do so is a very admirable form of courage.

No matter what anyone may say, you should always do what you believe is right. If you have the courage to do that, it's like having a magical weapon of unlimited powers. In Buddhism, we call such a person a bodhisattva or a Buddha.

**Bravado may seem like courage,
but it has no moral grounding.**

KANAZAWA: Usually we think of courage as taking part in some wild adventure, performing some daredevil feat that no one else can. But we're talking about something different here, aren't we?

ITAKURA: There's also the idea that being a good fighter is the same as courage. On television and in comics and video games, the hero is almost always someone who knocks out his opponents. But that's just physical courage, brute courage.

IKEDA: That's very different from the courage that we're talking about. Such reckless bravado is always smug and self-centered. It gives no thought to others. It is high-handed, arrogant.

ITAKURA: Many politicians are like that.

IKEDA: That kind of bravado may seem like courage, but it has no moral grounding. It's a wild, barbaric way to behave.

It lacks the intelligence, the consideration for others, the spirit of cooperation that are essential to all human beings. It is completely alien to what human beings should strive for.

ITAKURA: Just leaping into the fray without thinking is another kind of foolhardy bravado. Of course, it's also a mistake to worry so much about the consequences of your actions that you become a coward.

IKEDA: We can find courage in many different areas of human endeavor. There is the courage to take part in an adventure and the courage that is needed to excel in sports, but this is only one aspect of courage.

A more important kind of courage is that required to live a good life on a daily basis. For example, the courage to study hard, or the courage to form and sustain good, solid friendships.

This kind of courage we might even call perseverance, a virtue that directs our lives in a positive direction. This type of courage may not be flashy, but it is really the most important.

KANAZAWA: Courage isn't flashy — I'm going to remember that.

Part two of a discussion on courage among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division leaders Yasuyuki Itakura (Kansai young men's leader) and Michiko Kanazawa (young women's secretariat). Part one appeared in the April 16 issue. The conclusion will appear in an upcoming issue.

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