

EXPERIENCE—SEAN IZUMI, ARLINGTON, VA. TRUE LOVE STARTS FROM WITHIN

Instead of filling the void of loneliness with another superficial relationship, Sean Izumi's newly found self-reliance leads him to true love.

I moved with my girlfriend to the South Arlington area in Northern Virginia about four-and-a-half years ago to attend Georgetown University for a doctoral degree in applied linguistics.

Coming to Georgetown for my doctorate was a big challenge for me; at first I was thinking of going back to Japan after obtaining my master's degree from Southern Illinois University. I had been thinking that I am not an academic, but more of a teacher type, so doing research and writing papers did not seem so exciting. In fact, it sounded beyond me. However, professors and colleagues encouraged me and Georgetown accepted me with a generous fellowship.

Academic life was not easy, especially during the first year, since I had to take a full load of demanding courses at the same time as working as a teaching and research assistant. It added even more pressure to have to work with a professor who was one of the nation's top young scholars in the field of second-language acquisition.

During my second year, as I was getting used to academic life and started enjoying my research in second-language instruction, the unexpected happened. One evening, my girlfriend suddenly told me she had somebody else she wanted to be with, and wanted to end our relationship. The news was so out of the blue, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My initial reaction was that this kind of thing only happens in a soap opera. I must be dreaming. After all, I was chanting and doing SGI activities all along. "Why me?" I thought? Regardless of my panic, however, she was quite determined with her decision, so there was nothing I could do to change her mind. I was devastated.

So, my struggle with self-doubt, a loser spirit and loneliness began. My coursework and my teaching duties at Georgetown still continued, but I could barely do the minimum work required. I lost interest in and enthusiasm for my academic studies and was afraid to leave my apartment for fear of showing my depressed, miserable face to other people. When I did go out, I was so envious of all those couples I saw on the street, at the shopping mall, on campus, almost anywhere I went. I felt so lonely.

Initially, I was hoping that I would get out of this miserable state in a few months, but in fact my depressive life state lasted for about a year-and-a-half.

During this time, I tried my best to chant as much as possible, sometimes with a very weak, almost whispering voice and sometimes crying my heart out in front of the Gohonzon. I kept asking myself, "Why do I have to suffer so much over a failed relationship? What's wrong with me?" At the same time, I was also telling myself, "I don't want to give up. I am not a loser. I will rise above it. I will become happy!" Together with chanting, I sought SGI President Ikeda's guidance on love and relationships.

In *Discussions on Youth*, volume 1, President Ikeda focused on this very topic. He says: "The question is: Does that person [you are in love with] inspire you to work harder at your studies or distract you from them? ... Does he or she inspire you to realize your future goals and work to achieve them? ... If you are neglecting the things you should be doing,

forgetting your purpose in life because of the relationship you are in [or in my case, a relationship that I desperately wished to be in], then you are on the wrong path. A healthy relationship is one in which two people encourage each other to reach their respective goals while sharing each other's hopes and dreams. A relationship should be a source of inspiration, invigoration and hope" (p. 116).

In another part, he says: "Real love is not two people clinging to each other; it can only be fostered between two strong people secure in their individuality. A shallow person will have only shallow relationships. If you want to experience real love, it is important to first sincerely develop a strong self-identity" (p. 128).

As I continued chanting and reading President Ikeda's guidance, I began to see why I had to break up with my girlfriend and especially the way it happened. I was clearly not developing the kind of relationship described by President Ikeda. Instead, I was simply clinging to a relationship that was working at a superficial level, just so I would not have to be alone. This I did all in the name and guise of what I considered to be love. Because I did not have the courage to break away from this chain of suffering, it seems my girlfriend took the initiative in breaking that chain on my behalf!

After the break-up, in the midst of my suffering, I went to Ecuador to spend eight summer weeks in an intensive Spanish language program in order to meet the second foreign language requirement for my doctoral degree. Before returning to the States, I took the opportunity to visit the Galapagos Islands, immersing myself in nature to refresh my spirit. It was a great experience to be surrounded by all those iguanas, sea turtles, etc.

One quiet night on a boat, as I was looking up at the sky admiring the Southern Cross, hearing the sound of waves, and feeling the breeze from the South Pacific Ocean, I suddenly caught myself still thinking: "Why am I so lonely? Will I be like this for the rest of my life?" Then I remembered President Ikeda's guidance: "If you try to use love as an escape, the euphoria is unlikely to last for long. If anything, you may only find yourself with even more problems. ... However much you may try, you can never run away from yourself. If you remain weak, suffering will follow you wherever you go. You will never find happiness if you don't change yourself from within" (p. 124).

President Ikeda is absolutely right. There I was in the Galapagos Islands, a paradise so far from Northern Virginia, and still carrying around this weak sentiment of loneliness and withdrawal from challenges that my life poses. That was a turning point in my life. I made up my mind there and then that I would polish myself and develop my character and capacity as a human being first, before I turn to someone else for what I lack due to my low self-esteem. After all, as President Ikeda says, "The relationships you form are a reflection of your own state of life" (p. 125).

I returned to the United States with this renewed spirit. On the very day I came back, I met a charming Japanese woman who, on the recommendation of a mutual friend, had been taking care of my apartment while I was away. Her name was Yukiko, and she was just starting her master's program in applied linguistics at Georgetown University. We enjoyed each other's company very much, talking about various things from linguistics to love and relationships. Nothing more than a friendship developed until a year later, when we both realized our deep feelings for each other and started dating. In retrospect, it seems that the one-year waiting period was necessary for me to consolidate my new self-reliant attitude to be a happy person no matter what.

During this period of intense hardship, a young men's leader in my Arlington Chapter

visited me many times to chant and encourage me to attend many SGI activities. He really helped to keep my faith alive by involving me in Gajokai activities, inviting me to do home visits and offering me opportunities to be master of ceremonies at world peace prayer meetings. I am so grateful to him for the trust he placed in me, and all the support he has given me to this day.

I don't intend to brag about how much I love Yukiko or how great our relationship is. But I'll say that it is the kind of constructive relationship described in the story *The Little Prince*: "Love is not two people gazing at each other, but two people looking ahead together in the same direction."

With all that has happened, I'm able to share even more happy news. After chanting with me for a little more than a year now, Yukiko has become an SGI member. Also, I took the final oral defense of my doctoral dissertation recently and passed it with distinction. And, I recently got a faculty position at one of the most prestigious universities in Japan in my field of specialty, English language education; I expect to start my teaching and researching career there next year. But, before that, Yukiko and I are getting married next February before we return to Japan together.

These are big changes in our lives, but we are both determined to create a happy life together and contribute to kosen-rufu. Although we still have many problems to overcome, together we will foster the kind of love described by President Ikeda: "If you genuinely love someone, then through your relationship with him or her, you can develop into a person whose love extends to all humanity. Such a relationship serves to strengthen, elevate and enrich the inner realm of your life" (p. 125).