

FREEING OUR IMAGINATION
BY JOMO THORNE, SGI-USA HIGH SCHOOL DIVISION LEADER

My mentor called to us: Do not become blank-eyed spiritual sleepwalkers! Do not become people whose minds are closed and rigid, who are unable to dream! — SGI President Daisaku Ikeda

(Dec. 1, 2000, *World Tribune*, p. 6)

Recently I teamed up with Hamilton, one of the high school students in my chapter, to do a presentation at a Nov. 18 district general meeting. We wanted to discuss the founding of the Soka Gakkai and the many important lessons the first and second Soka Gakkai presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, taught us about living life through their examples. Hamilton and I shaped our presentation in the form of a dialogue. Our goal was to inspire everyone attending to personally embody the spirit behind the founding of the Soka Gakkai.

In preparing for our presentation, Hamilton and I discussed the social, economic and political factors at play in Japan during the first half of the 20th century. The Japanese government of the time, in a desperate attempt to catch up with the Western powers, threw the nation into a building and development frenzy. Government officials saw the need to mobilize millions of regular people to work relentlessly for the sake of the state. Among other strategies used toward this end, the government fashioned a national education system and curriculum that emphasized blind submission to the state and discouraged free thought and inventiveness. As Hamilton and I deepened our understanding of President Makiguchi's struggle against authoritarianism, it struck me how education could be such a powerful tool for control over people.

In fact, the more I thought about it, the clearer the link between education and human liberation became to me.

During the American civil rights movement, for example, education played a key role in advancing freedom for black Americans. In the famous *Brown vs. The Board of Education* case, the United States Supreme Court found that the system of segregating schoolchildren by skin color created inequalities that affected both the lives of all children *and* society as a whole.

All this made me think about something that happened when I was in Japan earlier this year. I had the opportunity to witness a dialogue between President Ikeda, Dr. Lawrence E. Carter, dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College in Atlanta, and George Miller, professor and director of the Scholars Academy of Lewis University in Illinois. The three met for about two hours after a ceremony in which President Ikeda was inducted into the chapel's Hall of Scholars.

President Ikeda began the exchange by asking Dr. Carter if he could interview him about his life and his experiences with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (who was one of Dr. Carter's early mentors). Dr. Carter shared wonderful stories about Dr. King's life. Through their exchanges, President Ikeda and his guests impressed me with their deep insights into human nature. I did my best to absorb everything. In witnessing this meeting among leading world educators and a veteran of the

American civil rights movement, I thought: “Wow! What an incredible manifestation of the concept of Soka!”

Soka crystallizes President Makiguchi’s belief that all people are naturally creative and resourceful. Makiguchi believed that through education a person’s creativity could be unleashed and used for the benefit of society. Education is what liberates people — it is what frees their minds. In a way, we can say that President Makiguchi’s “retirement home” was a small jail cell. But from that jail cell he imagined that the principles of Soka education and world peace would spread widely. His incredible conviction in the face of persecution, was the initial cause for the present development of our movement for peace, culture and education. A person whose mind is free, who can access his or her imagination, can change the world.

I believe that as we move into the 21st century, the crucial battles for human liberation will be waged in our nation’s classrooms and lecture halls. The new Aliso Viejo campus of Soka University of America being dedicated on May 3 of this year, will be a training ground for men and women who will lead a dramatic struggle to liberate people in the new millennium.

I hope that all the high school members and their supporters in the SGI-USA will determine to support SUA. I hope that they will determine to take responsibility for educating themselves and their communities. Let’s move beyond a superficial understanding of our missions and possibilities. Let’s free our imaginations in 2001!

If you’d like to get in touch with Jomo, please feel free to email him at jathorne@hotmail.com.