

Cultivating the Friendships We Create

LAST month I had the opportunity to travel to Guam, the largest of the Mariana Islands, in the West Pacific. There, in the offices of Lieutenant Governor Madeline Z. Bordallo, I witnessed, along with other SGI-USA representatives, the signing of a proclamation designating May 3, 1998, as SGI Peace Day. At a reception that followed, on behalf of SGI President Ikeda, I received an award designating the SGI leader as Honorary Ambassador at Large.

It struck me how important it is to foster relationships—to plant seeds, so to speak, then to cultivate them. The seeds for the recognition of the SGI that I witnessed in Guam were planted some twenty-three years ago when Lieutenant Governor Bordallo met SGI President Ikeda for the first time during the festivities surrounding the SGI's founding there. At that time she was the wife of Guam's governor, the late Gov. Ricardo J. Bordallo, but she never forgot the warm friendship extended by Mr. Ikeda during that visit and his vision of peace. Now as the island's lieutenant governor, she was able to honor that memory with the festivities I attended.

AS I reflected on my own life over these past twenty-five years since I came to the United States, I wondered how many "seeds" of friendship I have planted. More than three decades ago, fresh out of college, I had just joined the Soka Gakkai staff to conduct public relations activities with what was then known as the Asian People's Association. As a student I had been keenly interested in Asian matters—now it was my job to foster relationships among the representatives from various Asian countries and Japan. Once a month we invited our Asian guests to cultural events that the Association sponsored and we also published a monthly magazine on Asian culture.

At the time I had not much interest in American or European culture. My worldview focused upon Asia. That all changed dramatically three years later when I was transferred to the *Seikyo Shimbun* as a reporter. My primary task was to cover the stories of American members who came to Japan to participate in exchanges of faith and culture. The turning point occurred when I was assigned to cover their convention held in Seattle in 1971. It was my first trip overseas.

AFTER the convention, I attended a summer English course at UCLA with other Japanese students. During this period I traveled to San Diego, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Denver, St. Louis, Chicago, Boston, New York and Washington, D.C. It was my first encounter with America and her culture. My indifference about America quickly changed. I became enchanted by the openness of the people in this country and about the diversity of ideas being expressed. As I was young and idealistic, I was very interested in the social issues of the time: the protest over the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and the hippie movement.

When I returned to Japan, I coauthored a book about my experiences in the

United States that was published by the Seikyo Press. A couple of years later, President Ikeda decided to dispatch reporters to major cities around the world. He asked us to write down the name of whatever locale overseas we each wanted to visit. Sometime later he assigned five reporters to overseas posts: one to Paris, one to Hong Kong, one to New York, one to Germany and one, me, to Los Angeles. I later learned that I was the only person to have written “Los Angeles” on my paper.

I enjoyed traveling throughout the United States and learned so much about the fabric of American society. I had the tremendous opportunity to interview many young people both inside and outside the organization, including Native American youth and Bobby Seal, the leader of the Black Panthers, as well as scholars at various universities.

What I have gained through all these unforgettable experiences is that American soil is fertile for the blossoming of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism that teaches human equality and respect for all life. And that our mission, yours and mine, is to see that this Buddhism has good, firm roots. I have a great deal of pride and confidence in what we are doing. If we continue to cultivate carefully the seeds we plant—that is, the friendships we create as we share the Daishonin’s teachings in our respective communities—I have no doubt that they will grow into giant oaks of peace, solidarity and harmony.

Last month I mentioned President Ikeda’s challenge he made in a March 16th address to all members to succeed him as the next president of the SGI. In that speech he states:

All of you are president of the Soka Gakkai. Please advance with this awareness....Ultimately our future development hinges on every member having the commitment required of a Soka Gakkai president. With this spirit, this sense of responsibility, this leadership in your activities, may you always work for kosen-rufu and the victory of the people. (April 17, 1998, *World Tribune*, p. 10)

While I was in Guam, a quote from the speech President Ikeda made to those assembled on the island on the occasion of SGI’s founding (January 26, 1975) came to mind: “I hope you do not seek praise as blossoms yourselves, but instead dedicate your whole lives to spreading the seeds of true Buddhism throughout the world.” I realized that one way to do that—just like he has been doing all these years—is to never backslide in our efforts to plant and carefully nurture the seeds of human relationships.

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