

## **Nichigen-nyo: "My Story"** **By Fay Hovey, Maui, Hawaii**

*The articles on pages 12-13 introduce Nichigen-nyo, one of Nichiren Daishonin's most famous disciples. The first article on page 12 gives a brief account of her life. In the second article, Faye Hovey presents a fictionalized, first-person account of Nichigen-nyo's thoughts.*

WHAT is it that makes a woman put herself into the hands of a man and say, "Yes"? So many marriages were arranged in those times, and, if fortunate enough, a woman would come to love her husband as years passed. When my husband asked me to marry him, I said "Yes" because I saw a strength in the set of his chin and something else, something important to me in his eyes. I could tell that he was capable of deep devotion, a singular passion for life. And yes, there was his impetus and outspoken demeanor. I knew I would never lack for good company and the unexpected as long as he lived.

I was, of course, schooled in all of the womanly and wifely arts from childhood. A woman was to know her place, to follow, to make a man's home his sanctuary. I was no longer a girl when we married and I felt he was a man I could respect enough to follow rather than having to follow just because he was a man. I had other prospects, it was true enough. However, whenever he came to visit, sitting formally with my father and discussing governmental affairs and the weather's effect on the rice crop, I would listen on the other side of the screen before bringing them both tea, and I liked his voice. I liked how he questioned the way of things: his earnest belief that things could be better by making them so.

We had a good time together. Even though we had our social responsibilities to fulfill and the maintenance of our manor and lands to contend with, we were happy in all of the ways a man and woman can be happy with one another. And I felt protected from that other world that began outside our gate. Can there be a greater happiness than having the door closed against the world at night, one's family in good health, the sounds and smells of a meal cooking fragrant in the kitchen? To sleep at night, everything strong and good?

THERE were many times when we thought we couldn't go on. When crops failed, children sickened, earthquakes leveled the landscape. Death came, and my husband fought it like he once fought with his sword. He was a physician and there was hardly a time when our hall wasn't pungent with cooking herbs and his ointments and potions. A quiet knocking on the gate at night and he would be off to tend to someone. I grew accustomed to not being startled when I awoke alone, his side of the bed grown cold.

I had to become used to the fact that he could be called away by Lord Ema on some mission. Our lives went on without him when he was away, however, I kept one ear waiting to hear his horse neigh, his voice joking with the someone in

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the courtyard, his calling for some hot sake as he scooped his running children up in his arms and shouldered into the house.

One day he took me with him to see the priest Nichiren outside Kamakura. He had been sharing his impressions of this man and in my husband, I saw a renewed fire, a hope rising up in him that the anguish of persistent disease and government corruption had almost extinguished. I wanted to meet the man that could make my husband so excited.

NICHIREN Daishonin was unlike any priest that I'd ever met. For one thing, he didn't treat women like they were something to be barely tolerated and of lower caste. In us, he saw the same Buddha nature that existed in men. He seemed to know my heart, my concerns and asked me about our children and their health. I felt as if I could ask him any question, however private. We visited as often as we could, drawing close to this man who was like a great beacon of truth in a world grown intoxicated with tragedy, superstitious with grief and fear. We put ourselves and our lands and our family in grave danger in doing so during times when people were being jailed for simply walking by his door.

My husband and I began to see that together we had an even more important role to play. That there was a sacred and very real meaning to our being together beyond the family and his life as a retainer to Lord Ema. Because of our practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we had become sources of encouragement to people. And there can be no better way to attract attention to oneself than to be completely happy and truly concerned for others in such a deluded and cynical age. In a time when no one believed anything the government said, when suffering abounded and it seemed like human beings debased themselves with every sort of vice and lowness, a truly happy person was considered a revolutionary or, at best, a fool. Such a person should be prepared for anything.

One night, a commotion at the gate woke us all up. We knew it wasn't someone sick with fever needing my husband's care. I heard the urgent, decisive talk of men and drawing on an outer robe, I saw one of our servants hastily pulling Yorimoto's horse from the stable and he mounted, calling for the gates to be opened. He looked at me sharply from across the expanse between us saying: "They're taking him tonight to Tatsunokuchi. I leave you in charge of everything," and he dug his bare feet into the sides of the horse and was gone. It had only been a few minutes since we'd been sound asleep. He hadn't stopped to put on his boots.

I STOOD there on the steps for a long time, shaking and listening as quiet settled on the courtyard, the sound of the crickets in the hedges. Tatsuno-kuchi was the remote beach where criminals were executed. Never before had I felt such a strong desire to be a man, to be the one who goes forth, sword in hand to meet life. I stood there and felt how all women feel when they have to wait, to know they may never see their husbands again. I hurried back into the hall and lighting the candles and incense, I chanted for his protection, determined to hold back the seemingly random and

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dispassionate forces of destruction from descending on all those she loves.

My husband, the impetuous and outspoken man that he was, rode barefoot in his night robe to intercept the army that was accompanying the Daishonin to his death. He slipped from his horse and taking the reins of the Daishonin's horse, he insisted on leading him down the stony path to the dark beach, fully preparing himself to die with him. It was said that he openly wept as he led the horse. Later, when I heard this story, I knew that was the moment when my husband had become more than a man and I more than a wife and mother. To discover that there is something worth dying for is a great and humble realization.

As the Daishonin stretched forth his neck, exulting in the opportunity to die for the Lotus Sutra, a great light shot through the night sky, a fireball whose center and trail lit up the beach as if it were day. The soldiers dropped their swords and fell back, reluctant to kill such a man. And the executioner slowly lowered his sword. There would be no death that night, the taste for it no longer in anyone's mouth. When the Daishonin stood up, he stood up more than man. He had become a lion of courage, afraid of nothing.

SO it was that Yorimoto re-turned to me and our family alive—full of awe telling his story repeatedly to anyone who would listen. That night, curved against him as he soundly slept, my eyes were open in wonder to the night sky. "Nichigen-nyo" was the name the Daishonin had given me. "Sun-Eyes Woman." I knew from this night, I would always see things differently. I had prayed with the force of my entire being and the greatness of my own life unfolded before me. I held my husband's hand, happily listening to his breathing. I felt the sun rise in my heart as the world began to move from darkness tonight. □

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