

## Speak Out

*SGI President Ikeda gave the following speech at a leaders conference in Japan, Sept. 5.*

At this time of year in Japan, in the early evening hours when members, glowing with high spirits, set out on their way to activities, we can see a star shining in the southwestern sky. This star is the Earth's nearest neighbor, Mars. In a quest to discover whether life exists on that planet, NASA launched a probe and successfully landed an exploratory rover, fully equipped with hazard-avoidance capabilities, on Mars' surface.

NASA asked boys and girls around the world to come up with a name for the vehicle. The name that was finally selected — Sojourner — was not that of a renowned scientist or statesman but of a person who boasted no particular title or status.

Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was born 200 years ago in the state of New York. She rose from slavery to campaign for the equal rights of African Americans and for women.

At the time, a child born to slaves automatically became the property of the master who owned them. During her teens, Sojourner was sold from one household to another. Her children were also heartlessly sold to different households. But instead of giving in to despair, Sojourner spoke out forcefully against such social injustice.

*Sojourner* means traveler. She was a traveler seeking truth. Fulfilling the mission embodied in this name, she journeyed from city to city fighting to abolish slavery and demanding equal rights for women. Though illiterate, Sojourner's weapon was her dauntless and powerful voice.

"I cannot read a book, but I can read the people," she asserted (*Narrative of Sojourner Truth*). She had no formal education. Always down to earth, she possessed a burning and relentless indignation toward discrimination. And no matter how she was criticized or attacked, she stood firm with uncompromising conviction that what is right is right and what is wrong is wrong. Her strong faith and her anger at injustice were the wellspring from which her courage and wisdom flowed.

Sojourner Truth could not be silent. She had to speak out. Her earnest and wholehearted conviction is what won people's hearts and moved them.

I am reminded of the women's division members in the pioneering days of our organization. Never vain or pretentious, they devoted themselves completely to their activities. They were sincere. I remember how happy second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda was when he heard of a women's division member who, though lacking formal education herself, had introduced a college professor to the Daishonin's Buddhism.

Sojourner Truth carried herself with great dignity and confidence, wherever she went and with whomever she met. On a number of occasions, she was invited to the White House, where she spoke frankly and unreservedly with the nation's leaders, including President Abraham Lincoln. Whatever needed saying, she said. And she boldly refuted the arguments of arrogant church ministers who looked down upon women and opposed equal rights. She was afraid of nothing.

In those days, African Americans were barred from riding in public conveyances such as horse-drawn carriages. Here, too, Sojourner Truth took an active role in combating such discrimination. She wished to create a truly egalitarian society — the kind in which, among other things, anyone could ride in a carriage freely without indignity.

The name of this courageous champion of human rights, whom many people dared to mock, ridicule and malign during her lifetime, now adorns the rover that is journeying

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across the surface of the distant planet Mars. For her pioneering efforts, Sojourner Truth is now renowned and admired throughout the world.

## **We Will Be Remembered**

Those who have let power or popularity go to their heads lead empty, vacuous lives. Fancy titles and accolades are ephemeral. But the names of those who strive earnestly for the people's happiness and welfare, undeterred by criticism and personal attacks, shine more brightly as the years go by. This is all the more true of the SGI members who are working wholeheartedly to spread the timeless Mystic Law. Our names will be remembered eternally.

Upon receiving the sincere offerings of Shijo Kingo, Nichiren Daishonin writes:

I have received one *kan* [an ancient monetary unit] of coins and respectfully reported in the presence of the Lotus Sutra [the Gohonzon] that this is an offering from Yorimoto [Shijo Kingo]. I believe that from afar, Lord Shakyamuni, Taho [Many Treasures] Buddha and the Buddhas of the ten directions, and close at hand, the gods of the sun and moon in their heavenly palaces, will certainly watch over you. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 3, p. 285)

The gods of the sun and moon, Shakyamuni and all of the Buddhas throughout the ten directions are watching over us. Our names as proud champions of kosen-rufu will shine forth with a brilliance visible from all Buddha lands throughout the universe.

In today's sterile urban society, it is all too easy for the individual to be swallowed up in the crowd and lose sight of his or her identity. But in the realm of the SGI, each and every person is valued and seen as someone who has a precious and unique mission to fulfill.

I will do everything in my power to ensure that the names of those SGI members who are distinguishing themselves on the front lines of our movement are widely recognized and known for all time. This is my sincere wish and solemn determination.

Those who have betrayed their fellow members' trust or have turned against our organization, however, will not leave their names behind in the harmonious realm of Buddhism. In a sense, they are individuals whose names have been struck out by the original Buddha.

## **A Selfless Strength**

Nichiren Daishonin proclaims that he is the son of a low-caste *chandala* family [*chandala*: a class of people in ancient India despised as untouchable because their work involved the death of living creatures; the Daishonin was the son of a fisherman]. He declares without hesitation that he is an ordinary person with no wealth or possessions other than himself. This fact is extremely important.

On being exiled to Sado Island, Nichiren Daishonin writes:

I, Nichiren, am the son of a *chandala* family who lived near the seashore in Tojo in Awa Province, in the remote countryside of the eastern part of Japan. To discard my body, which would otherwise decay in vain, for the sake of the Lotus Sutra will be like exchanging rocks for gold. (MW-5, 124-)

The Daishonin says that being a rather lowly creature in the first place, he does not begrudge his life. He adds that should he be called upon to give his life for the Mystic Law, he will attain Buddhahood. Surely, he asserts, there is no more wonderful way to die than that.

If you are not arrogant, do not put on airs, and are not obsessed with status, fame or wealth, you can bring forth a strength that is selfless; you will not begrudge giving of yourself to others. On the other hand, if you hunger even a little for such fleeting vanities,

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your faith will slide downhill.

Some people are filled with conceit and think snobbishly: “I’m a university graduate.” “I come from a good family.” “I’m famous.” “I have status.” Attached to such superficial, illusory values, they seek to protect themselves and their positions at all costs. Their hearts are vain and shallow.

It is especially deplorable if individuals who have been appointed to leadership positions in the SGI or who have gained power and influence in society thanks to the support of the SGI members become filled with self-importance and think that what they have achieved has been through their own efforts.

### **Limitless Advancement**

A true leader feels deep emotion and humble appreciation at being given the opportunity to fulfill a leadership responsibility so that he or she can help support and encourage many others. Such a spirit, I believe, accords with that of the Daishonin, who declares, “I am the son of a *chandala* family.”

I myself will never forget that I am a son of a poor seaweed farmer. I am proud of my humble beginnings.

A person of genuine humanity is forged only among the people; it is only from among the people that such a person can emerge. This is because that person knows that standing on the side of the people is right and good.

Those who live with a commitment to faith, to *kosen-rufu* and to their self-realization are true champions in life. This is precisely what I have striven to show through my life these past 50 years.

Nichiren Daishonin writes: “Life is limited, and we must not begrudge it. What we should aspire to, after all, is the Buddha land” (MW-5, 132). The motto of the Soka Gakkai and the SGI is “Limitless advancement.”

I am praying for each of you to advance boundlessly and to achieve great success and happiness in your life.

**WT**