

Human Revolution Means All of Us
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During the Timothy McVeigh trial, I heard something on the radio that made me reconsider my whole view of the death penalty. People who knew Timothy were testifying, and at one point, a neighbor said: “I knew him pretty well. I liked him.” And then, “I can’t believe he could have done a thing like this.” At that point, Timothy covered his mouth and began crying.

This interaction made me realize two things. First, I was reminded how important is our respect for one another. I asked myself, if Timothy had felt a little more love or respect from the people around him, would things have turned out differently?

People are not absolutely good or evil. As SGI President Ikeda says in his “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra”: “Good and evil are not substances. They are relative concepts. Therefore it cannot be said that a particular person is intrinsically good or intrinsically evil.” And as Nichiren Daishonin says, “Even a heartless villain loves his wife and children. He too has a portion of the bodhisattva world within him” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 53). Essentially we are all mixtures of the same things.

Second, and more important, I felt that as much as Timothy appeared to be oblivious to the proceedings, on some semi-conscious level, he deeply regretted what he had done. He might not have even been able to verbalize this regret, but I couldn’t help feeling that there was a tremendous energy in that regret, which, if handled correctly, could create incredible value.

In every defeat lie the seeds of victory. Buddhism embraces the concept that from the muddy swamp blooms the lotus flower. Our mistakes create the energy and insight for our greatest growth.

But in our society we tend to want to Whiteout every negative experience or event. And to start all over again in a clean, chlorinated pool. Such an attitude doesn’t allow either the criminal or society to grapple with the situation. It puts the problem outside ourselves. Kill this person and be done with it — we have a clean sheet of paper once again.

But as much as we’d like to believe this is possible, this person is a part of our society. President Ikeda explains that “the Buddhist principle of dependent origination describes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life, continuous over past, present and future. We are urged to understand that it is impossible to found lasting prosperity on the suffering of others.” By acknowledging our connectedness and helping another do his or her human revolution, we end up growing and developing ourselves. This is the Buddhist teaching that if we light a lamp for another, our own way will be lit.

On the other hand, I am not advocating leniency or tolerance. As Bryan Wilson says in a dialogue with President Ikeda on this subject: “There may be times when the question we face is not life versus death, but whose life and whose death. If that is an effective choice, then I should like to choose life for the innocent.” As long as the innocent are protected, I think we are wasting a tremendous opportunity for human revolution — both for the individual and society — when we institute the death penalty.

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