

Discovering Great Literature

This is the 18th installment of a series of discussions on youth among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division chiefs Hidenobu Kimura (young men's chief) and Kazue Igeta (young women's chief), representing the members of the high school division.

KIMURA: Today we have some questions regarding literature. In an earlier installment, we talked about the importance of reading (Nov. 14, 1997, *World Tribune*). Many members were inspired by that discussion and now read with a passion.

IGETA: We often make excuses for not reading, such as being too busy, but actually, once we make a firm resolve to read, we find that we do have time. One student said that our discussion on that subject gave her a new appreciation of how much fun reading can be.

IKEDA: Yes, literature is a very important subject, and it deserves to be talked about again in the hope that it may help high school division members to lead rich and satisfying lives, becoming personable young people who understand others' hearts.

In Japan today, great literature is far removed from most people's daily lives. It is viewed as something to be read only for school exams. What a sad waste. More effort needs to be made to show people how wonderful it is to explore literature. Life is a quest. We are always searching for the answers to the grand questions: What is it to be human? What is a good life? Literature is an excellent companion and guide on that quest.

KIMURA: There are many ways to have fun, I think. For example, computer games are definitely fun. But once the game is over, there's nothing to show for it. Many people have experienced this. But the feeling one has after reading a really good book lasts forever.

IKEDA: Yes. Playing something like a video game gives momentary pleasure, but reading has a far more enduring impact. Reading requires mental effort and perseverance — we have to use our imagination and make our way through a book word by word, line by line, page by page.

It may be difficult, but we cultivate our hearts and minds only to the extent that we challenge ourselves. Those who read great literature have more depth. If we make an effort to read, it will eventually become second nature and a source of enjoyment.

KIMURA: Whenever I read your *Youthful Diary*, President Ikeda, I am astonished by the incredible pace and scope of your reading. Even when Mr. Toda's business was going bankrupt and you were busy taking care of the company's affairs, your reading schedule never slowed down.

In your diary entry for Feb. 8, 1951, you write: "Fourteen young champions of religious reform gathered together proudly and joyfully under our mentor, Mr. Toda. Each participant expressed his thoughts and impressions on the book *The Eternal City*." The entry for Feb. 21 says: "Youth, arise! Youth, advance! Youth, take action! Forward, ever forward! Undaunted by towering precipices or raging waves! Like Rossi and Bruno. Like Napoleon and Alexander. Like Whitman and Dante!" The entry for Feb. 24 states: "Finished reading *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The grand plot skillfully portrays the subtleties of the human mind. It is a giant epic depicting the exploits of warriors and political leaders in a time of tremendous strife and chaos. It is packed with political intrigue, love, tears, ambition, power and moral lessons. The main character, Liu Pei, is a youth of revolution — a man of construction."

Although you were then going through the most tempestuous of times yourself, you continued to study, looking 10, 20 years ahead.

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Your diary is filled with references to your love of literature. One day you write: "I read *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It made me think about many things." Another day you report: "I read *Scaramouche*." In yet another entry: "Was up late reading Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. I'll read more tomorrow." And again: "In the evening I went to Kanda and bought three books at a used-book shop. There's a mountain of books I want, but I can't afford all of them."

IGETA: I have heard that from the time you were a young man, President Ikeda, you knew you wanted to become a great writer. How did you come to be so fond of literature?

IKEDA: I suffered from poor health when I was young, so I couldn't participate in sports very much. Since one can read in bed or while lying down, I naturally came to spend a lot of time reading. That was the first step.

KIMURA: One member said that he is a science major and has no interest in literature. He asked if he should make an effort to read anyway.

IKEDA: Well, that's certainly an honest question. Actually, contrary to what he may think, reading literature can greatly enhance his study of science. If science is all he focuses on, his mind will grow very mechanical. We are only fully human when we possess not only intelligence but also emotion and sensitivity. Literature is the oil that greases the wheels of the mind.

Because this has been forgotten, many tragedies have occurred. If national leaders know nothing but science, it may well be that they will think only of building weapons. A knowledge of great literature breathes life into our humanity. Literature derives from the human spirit.

IGETA: Speaking of science, wasn't Mr. Toda an expert mathematician?

IKEDA: Yes, mathematics was his specialty, but he also knew a great deal about literature. He declared that one could neither understand mathematics nor religion unless one read literature. And he always urged the youth division members to read a great deal. The last time that Mr. Toda asked me what I was reading, I responded, "Rousseau's *Emile*." I was reading this treatise on education because I was determined to found a school someday.

Literature is the study of humanity. It is the study of oneself and of the infinite realm of the human heart. Without an understanding of people's hearts, one cannot gain a profound understanding of any other sphere of learning or endeavor. Human culture is the product of the human heart and mind.

Actually, dividing things into the humanities and the sciences is itself odd. As long as so many of our political leaders and educators remain caught up in their specialties and unaware of the vital importance of literature, we will never create a better society. It will be very dangerous if our society is made up of people who, like robots, possess knowledge but have no heart or conscience.

IGETA: Every day, when I ride the train to work, I am disappointed by what I see middle-aged men reading. Almost all of them have their heads in sensationalist magazines or trashy tabloids. How spiritually impoverished Japan is, I always sadly think. Even people who at least sample the works of world literature during their student days stop reading them as soon as they graduate.

KIMURA: I hope today's high school students will grow into different kinds of adults — the kind who will continue to read literature and learn from it all of their lives.

IKEDA: Does merely growing older make one an adult? No. What makes one a mature person is one's growth as a human being, one's richness of character and experience, and those are things that literature can indeed help us develop.

Learning languages allows us to expand our boundaries to encompass other nations and cultures. Reading literature further widens our horizons, enabling us to become acquainted

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with people and places all over the world. Sometimes an encounter with a great work of literature can entirely change the course of our lives.

Literature is the very pulse of life. Those who have learned to appreciate great literature during their youth are always vital and vigorous, because the pulse of literature beats in them. Those who haven't learned such an appreciation lack that vitality; their lives are spiritually drab and empty.

Looking up at the blue sky, for example, might be a different experience for someone who has read *War and Peace* than someone who hasn't, for that person who has may quite likely be reminded of the peaceful blue sky that Prince Andrei gazed up at in the midst of a terrible, bloody battle — one of the novel's climactic scenes. That same sky stretches above all of our heads at this very moment.

Prince Andrei, who had carried the Russian flag in the attack against the French forces, lies wounded on the battlefield. He looks up at the blue sky: "Above him there was now only the sky — the lofty sky, not clear yet still immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds creeping softly across it. 'How quiet, how peaceful and solemn!... How was it I did not see that sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes, all is vanity, all is delusion except these infinite heavens. There is nothing, nothing but that. But even it does not exist, there is nothing but peace and stillness....'"

Take also the example of a flowing river. Those who have read Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* may share the joy Siddhartha felt when, after a long regime of painful austerities, he regained his strength at the river's edge. A river flows endlessly, never ceasing for a moment. It is in constant motion, yet it is always there. It never changes, yet it is always new. In the same way, the world itself is also whole and complete each moment, and we attain happiness here and now — not at some other place, in some other time.

Literature also helps us relate to people's characters and dispositions. In one person, we may detect something of Hamlet; in another, Don Quixote; in another, Moliere's hypocritical Tartuffe. We may know a person who resembles the proud Julien Sorel from Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, or a person who, like Sydney Carton from Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, goes to the guillotine for the sake of friendship and love.

Similarly, a visit to the sea may remind one of the sea of obsession in Melville's *Moby Dick*, or the drifting sea of Homer's *Odyssey*, or the sea of sadness in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*. There is also the tranquil sea described in the *Man'yoshu* (Anthology of a Thousand Leaves), a collection of ancient Japanese poetry.

Reading literature allows us to view the incredible kaleidoscope of human behavior and emotion. It also gives us an insight into the vast, deep ocean of life existing beneath the countless rolling waves.

KIMURA: I was asked by one student if there is something to be gained from reading books when we are young that we won't be able to gain when we get older.

IKEDA: I would say there is. It is more of a challenge to read when you get older. You have to battle with busy daily schedules and sometimes even increasingly poor eyesight! And you may find yourself starting to forget what you have read. This might be hard for you to believe right now, but it's true.

Everything has a time. What you read when you are young is etched into your memory. It becomes a part of you. What you learn as a result becomes a valuable experience and asset for forming your own ideas and philosophy, and acquiring different ways of looking at things.

Only human beings have the ability to read. I'm sure that some of our readers are

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probably thinking that they'll start reading later in life when they have more time. But chances are that if you neglect reading during your youth, you won't read later on either. For that reason, it's important to get into the habit of reading while you are young — this will establish the foundation on which to build the rest of your life. I cannot stress this enough.

Leading figures around the world frequently cite works of literature. Quite a few individuals even have a cursory knowledge of Japanese literature. If you read literature while you are young, you'll be more familiar with what those people are saying. I have talked about *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* [by Taketori Monogatari] with the Russian minister of education, and about the *Man'yoshu* with Dr. Arnold Toynbee. With others I have talked about *Urashima Taro* [a sort of Japanese Rip Van Winkle]. Unlike politics or business, discussions about literature are beautiful; they don't cause arguments, and rapport is struck quickly.

Mr. Toda once encouraged a young woman to discuss not only the Goshō when traveling overseas, but also Japan's many fine novels.

IGETA: There's something very likable and attractive about people who have lots of things to talk about.

IKEDA: I hope our youth division members will have sufficient knowledge of the famed stories and novels of their homelands to relate them with great expression and feeling. Every country has its folk tales and legends. The spiritual legacy of the people is woven into most of them. Stories that have been handed down through the generations have a value that has ensured their survival.

Time is the greatest critic. For that reason, I urge all of you to read literature that has stood the test of time.

KIMURA: One member, who is a huge fan of Japanese novelist Shūgoro Yamamoto, said that he just can't seem to find anything appealing about non-Japanese literature.

IKEDA: Non-Japanese literature can be difficult to read, usually because of the translation. From my experience, most such books are rather hard going for about the first quarter of the way through. But if you can stick with it and get past that point, you'll find yourself quickly drawn in and carried along. For example, Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* begins with a long description of the inn where the novel takes place and is a little slow in getting started. Yet no novel depicts a father's love for his daughter as wonderfully as this one does.

Though translated literature may be a challenge to get into at first, I hope you'll do your best to read such works. It's like hiking up a mountain — when you reach a certain height, the beautiful scenery begins to unfold all around you.

IGETA: Many students say that they want to read, but they don't have time. They are too busy with their studies, part-time jobs or extracurricular activities.

IKEDA: We often say that we don't have time, but all of us can spare at least five or 10 minutes now and then. Being a reader doesn't mean that you have to sit down for three or four hours and read straight through. In fact, I think that in many cases the things we read in brief spaces of time tend to stay with us longer. One method is to choose two or three types of books, like something easy and maybe a short story or an epic novel, and then read whichever one you want when you have a spare moment.

IGETA: Some say that they enjoy reading nonfiction but have no interest in fiction.

IKEDA: Works of fiction are sometimes farfetched and inaccurate. That's why it's important to firmly establish and maintain your own critical awareness so that you are not taken in by everything you read. Truly great literature, however, is filled with the richness of forests, rivers, stars, the four seasons and the whole tumultuous panorama of human history.

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Many of the novels that abound today tend to be limited in scope. Works that can be classed as great literature, on the other hand, take one on a journey of much greater depth and breadth. Those who have never savored that vast realm are most unfortunate. They are like people who have never seen the sea and think that the shallow stream nearby is all the water there is on earth.

KIMURA: Another student said that he hates reading. He struggles to read even one or two books a year, and as soon as he begins to turn the pages, he starts nodding off. He asked if there is any shortcut or secret method that he can use to become a better reader.

IKEDA: I'm afraid there's no shortcut. The only way to become a better reader is to make active efforts in that direction. As long as you are looking for an easy way out, you'll never progress.

The same is true with physical exercise. If you hate running and make no effort to run, you'll never be a fit runner.

So if you get sleepy when you read, then please get some sleep. But by the same token, please resume your reading when you wake up. Without effort, you can never hope to grow or improve, nor can you realize your true potential. You'll just grow old without experiencing the depth and wonder of life.

Having said that, I hope that those who haven't yet gotten into the habit of reading will take up the challenge. For starters, perhaps you can select a short, accessible book, and just dive in. That will be the first stone in the foundation of your reading capacity.

IGETA: It's a real shame never to experience the pure joy of reading.

IKEDA: Reading is fun. Shakespeare's plays, at the time they were written, were popular entertainment. They were like today's movies. When the 11th century Japanese novel *The Tale of Genji* was written, people used to vie to borrow a copy and read it, much like people pass around comic books today. It's a mistake to think of the classics as musty, difficult and boring. There's no need to be awed or intimidated by them, either. Once you have come to really appreciate them for what they are, you will find yourself a richer human being.

IGETA: One student said that she can see the important influence literature has on our lives, and wondered how that is different from what music and art teach us.

IKEDA: All appeal to our senses in different ways. Literature by its very nature expresses thoughts and ideas in the written form. Without ideas, it would be impossible to write. Ideas are vast in dimension; they are unlimited. Ideas move us and change the way we think.

The Bible, the Lotus Sutra and the ancient Japanese chronicle *Kojiki* can all be considered literature. Literature occupies a very important place in the history of human thought. Its influence reaches into the depths of human experience. Humankind will suffer a tremendous loss if all we do is restrict ourselves and our concerns to the spheres of politics, business and science, without reading and pondering great literature.

Literature is a stage upon which many different realms of human experience are presented, such as philosophies of life, the relationship of the individual to society, war and peace, struggle, and love and death. Music and art can illuminate one part of that experience, of course, and it is religion that illuminates it fully and completely.

Upon the foundation of literature unfold other aspects of culture such as drama, theater, film and music.

KIMURA: There is a film of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example, and a musical based on Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Some people come into contact with literature by first seeing such a film or musical, and then going on to investigate the original literary work.

IGETA: Reading gives us so much. Returning to your *Youthful Diary*, President Ikeda, I

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found this passage: “Gentle rain. Finished reading *The Count of Monte Cristo* at the office. Reading supplies one with wisdom, knowledge and leadership ability, and it helps in studying the Gosho as well. Someone once said: ‘Read throughout your life, even if only 30 minutes each day. In the course of a lifetime, this will add up to a tremendous amount of reading’” [Feb. 18, 1954].

IKEDA: Yes, I remember that time of my life fondly. Reading literature is an indispensable tool for understanding the Gosho. Both the Gosho and literature depict the human experience. We find in Nichiren Daishonin’s words the profoundly compassionate wish to save all of humanity, a fierce anger toward evil and a warmth that enters into the hidden corners of people’s hearts.

For example, to a follower who had first lost her husband and then her dearly loved son, the Daishonin had written, sharing in her grief, “It must be a dream, an illusion!” He goes on to say that if only her son had left word where she could meet him, “then, without wings, you would soar to the heavens, or without a boat, you would cross over to China. If you heard he was in the bowels of the earth, then how could you fail to dig through the earth?” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 262). The Daishonin voices the mother’s feelings for her son in his letter, empathizing with her pain.

IGETA: How comforted she must have been to receive that letter!

IKEDA: The Gosho contains innumerable descriptions of the human condition. The more experience you acquire in life, and the more great literature you read, the more you can appreciate the greatness of the Gosho. At the same time, by reading the Gosho you gain a deeper understanding of literature.

Literature portrays the complexities of the human heart. If you are determined to live your life as a true humanist, you must read literature. Cheap, carelessly written books or books that are solely for entertainment aren’t literature, because they do not explore the meaning of life. Technical, nonfiction books are important, of course, and have their purposes, but literature is an irreplaceable lifeline for all humanity.

IGETA: The question has been asked, “What good is literature to a starving child?” Some say that literature is just words; it can’t really change things or help those who are suffering.

IKEDA: The most important kind of help we can give another is spiritual help. Only when spiritual help is provided first can monetary and material help really be put to good use.

Reading literature makes us think of others’ situations and encourages us to address them with genuine concern and compassion. It is from such a sense of humanity that charity in its truest form emerges.

Great literature is a necessity both for the starving child and for those who are helping the child. Buddhism teaches, “The voice does the Buddha’s work” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 708). Our voices, our words, save people. Words that express a profound mind are in great need. The ability to express oneself well comes from an understanding of and a familiarity with literature. Because they lack this foundation, the words of most Japanese politicians are hollow and empty.

In his preface to *Les Misérables*, Hugo writes: “While ignorance and poverty persist on earth, books such as this cannot fail to be of value.” Literature, one might say, is what nurtures the will to save the starving child; then, from that will, action is taken and material and financial assistance is realized.

KIMURA: How would you describe “good writing”?

IKEDA: I think reading good writing is like eating good food: It is a pleasurable experience.

Mr. Toda told me to always read the preface and the afterword of every book I read. He said one should be able to judge the writer’s ability to some extent in those sections of the

book as well.

KIMURA: You have been designated a world poet laureate, President Ikeda. How do you write poetry?

IKEDA: I try to express my thoughts exactly as I think them, to put them into words exactly as they are.

When you read a lot of great literature, the words therein are naturally fused with your own. Then, when you see a beautiful scene, words come to you without effort. By reading a great deal, one's perception of nature changes. When animals see the beautiful green of the woods, for instance, they may not feel anything special. An artist, however, may be moved by its magnificence. And a gardener may see it as healthy and strong.

Imagine, for example, the moon shining on a beach. If you know the poem from the collection of Japanese poetry, *Senzai Wakashu* (Collection of a Thousand Years),

*Moon on this autumn night:
How you have transformed
The sands of the vast shore
Into a plain of jewels*

then, when you see a moonlit beach, its sands might immediately become a jeweled garden for you.

The Chilean poet Mistral, in "To the Clouds," has written:

*Ethereal clouds,
clouds like tulle,
transport my soul
through azure heaven.*

After reading that poem, you may find that now the clouds and the breeze arouse the keenest, deepest emotions in you.

Beautiful poetry isn't a bunch of fancy words and phrases. True beauty only comes from a beautiful spirit. I believe, too, that beautiful words come from a spirit that fights for humanity amid life's vicissitudes. Poetry is the product of trying to express in words the emotion we feel in everyday life. And so is literature.

All great literature, ancient and modern, is a bridge connecting one human being to another, one spirit to another. The quality of our lives is determined by how many of those bridges we can cross.

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