

## The Third Stage of Life No Room for Regret

*This is the eighth installment in this series. Participants are SGI President Ikeda, Seikyo Shimbun General Editorial Bureau Senior Director Osamu Matsuoka and Vice Director Katsusuke Sasaki.*

**IKEDA:** In the last installment, we talked about the secret to long life. We've since received many letters from readers on that subject, haven't we?

**MATSUOKA:** Yes. Let me read from a letter by Mr. Toshio Takahashi, a 77-year-old barber in Tochigi Prefecture:

Barbers work with their hands and have to concentrate. In our conversations with customers while we are working, we get glimpses into other lives, which are always stimulating. In the nearly 500 barbershops in our city, fewer than 10 elderly barbers have shown any symptoms of senility. I am grateful that I chose this profession, and every day during my morning and evening gongyo I thank my parents, who were also barbers.

**SASAKI:** Last year, Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. They are both still happily working, and they are also still active in the Soka Gakkai — Mr. Takahashi serves as a vice chapter leader.

**IKEDA:** What an encouraging example. I have heard that the barber's profession and the art of medicine are closely linked. Long ago, barbers actually served as surgeons. The twisting red-, white- and blue-striped barber pole is symbolic: Red is the arteries, blue is the veins and white is bandages. Both doctors and barbers wear white coats.

I'm sure that the concentration demanded from barbers has helped Mr. Takahashi stay healthy and active to such a wonderful age.

**MATSUOKA:** The need to stay alert and to concentrate does keep people young.

**IKEDA:** Dr. Shuhei Morita, the Soka Gakkai doctors division leader, once told me that when he was head of surgery at the Yokohama Red Cross Hospital, he never felt tired when he was performing surgery — even though he was sometimes on his feet in the operating room for 11 hours straight. But one hour on a crowded train doing nothing but hanging onto the hand strap, he said, exhausted him. I think this is a perfect example of the way that serious engagement in some kind of focused task can tap unlimited reserves of hidden potential.

**SASAKI:** The more we make use of our abilities, the more we can develop and hone them.

**IKEDA:** A noted American gerontologist, Dr. Belle Boone Beard, spent two decades studying centenarians. She concluded that when people continuously make use of their powers of memory and concentration, those abilities do not decline. In other words, "Memory shows no upper age limit" (Morton Puner, *To the Good Long Life*).

**MATSUOKA:** Speaking of memory, I am always astounded by yours. You remember things that happened 20 or 30 years ago with incredible clarity. People are always amazed at how

vividly you manage to recall things — things that they had long forgotten or, on occasion, hoped you wouldn't remember!

**SASAKI:** You have written tens of thousands of poems to encourage and inspire members. Of course, I am astonished that you can produce such moving, beautiful poetry on the spur of the moment. But I am even more surprised by how you often suddenly want to edit a poem you wrote a week earlier — but which you recall perfectly, without any notes or memos.

**MATSUOKA:** SGI members are at all hours at work somewhere in the world, and as SGI president, you never have a moment's rest. Yet even in the midst of your busy schedule, you somehow find the time and the mental energy to be thinking about a poem you have sent to a friend. It's staggering.

**IKEDA:** It's one thing to know, on an intellectual level, that each moment may be your last. But it's much harder to actually live and act, on a practical level, based on that.

I have lived these last 50 years with an absolute determination to triumph. Whenever I meet one of our members, I try to extend myself to the utmost — for that may be our last encounter. I never leave room for regret.

That is why each encounter I have remains vivid and fresh in my mind forever, transcending the passing of the years. I concentrate my entire being, an eternity of thought and feeling, in each moment of each encounter.

**SASAKI:** I am impressed by the seriousness with which you regard even the briefest encounter. The challenge we face is to take the limited span of years that we have and, instilled with hope and optimism, do our very best.

**IKEDA:** Dr. Norman Cousins, with whom I conducted a dialogue, declared that hope was his secret weapon. "Death is not the greatest tragedy that befalls us in life," he told me. "What is far more tragic is for an important part of oneself to die, while one is still alive. There is no more terrifying tragedy than this. What is important is to accomplish something in life."

**MATSUOKA:** No matter how old we are, we must never lose the spirit to rise to a challenge.

**IKEDA:** When Dr. Anatoli Logunov, the Russian nuclear physicist and director of the Institute of High-Energy Physics, was Moscow State University rector, we spoke about the way his family had evolved over the years. According to Dr. Logunov, his family changed as his children grew older. When his son and daughter became adults, Mr. Logunov and his wife enjoyed what he called a second youth. Then, after reaching age 50, they experienced a third youth.

He wanted to make the point that our lives are never static. We are always changing. And we must always pursue self-development and self-improvement.

**SASAKI:** When you began your dialogue with Dr. Logunov in the dignified atmosphere of the rector's office, Moscow State University was enveloped in the beautiful green cloak of spring. It was May 1981.

**IKEDA:** A large tapestry that had been presented by Beijing University to commemorate

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Moscow State University's bicentennial adorned one wall. Depicting Moscow State University in its entirety, the tapestry remained in place even during the height of political tension between the Soviet Union and China. This was a wonderful sight, I thought, a fine example of how the world of learning transcends political conflict.

**MATSUOKA:** It's interesting that Dr. Logunov used the expression *third youth*.

**IKEDA:** Yes. I hope that everyone can experience a third stage of life that's like a third youth. Youth is not something that fades with age. Our attitude toward life is what makes us young.

As long as we have a forward-looking, positive attitude, a spirit to take on challenges, we will gain depth as people. Our lives will shine with a brilliance that is ours alone.

Dr. Logunov quoted these lines of the Russian poet Aleksandr A. Blok: "Life is a continual struggle / rest comes only in our dreams." To this Dr. Logunov added that "life is good to those who are dynamic, sensitive to the pulse of the times, and who make an effort to align their lives with its rhythms." Life itself is the greatest ally of those who make their later years a third youth.

**SASAKI:** The day before that meeting with Dr. Logunov, you visited Lyudmila Gvishiani, the late Soviet Premier Aleksey N. Kosygin's daughter and director of the National Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow. I remember that very well.

**IKEDA:** Ms. Gvishiani waited for me at the entrance of the National Library. I was immediately reminded of her late father. She had the same wise, clear blue eyes. She was a fine woman with a distinct air of intelligence and refinement.

**SASAKI:** She recalled for you how, returning home from work one day, her father had exclaimed to his family: "Today, I met an extraordinary, extremely interesting Japanese. Though we touched upon very complex issues, I was happy that our discussion was most satisfying." He was speaking of his first encounter with you. That was on your first visit to the Soviet Union in September 1974.

**MATSUOKA:** Ms. Gvishiani said that these words made an impression on her, because her father rarely spoke to his family about his work.

**SASAKI:** Yes. Ms. Gvishiani said she appreciated your expression of condolences upon her father's death, your visit and your conversation with her. She said her family had decided to present you with some mementos of her father.

**IKEDA:** She presented me with a cherished crystal vase, engraved with her father's portrait. It had been bestowed on him at age 60, upon receiving the high Soviet honor, Hero of Socialist Labor. She also gave me two leather-bound books, his last works, which lay in his private library up to the moment of death.

"The warmth of my father's hands still clings to them. I offer them to you in his stead," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

**SASAKI:** Yes. It was a moving moment. The interpreter, too, was overcome with emotion. With her eyes cast down, Ms. Gvishiani went on to say that she regarded her father as a true friend. Every day as the sun set, she felt a strong sense of loss. You comforted her,

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saying that her father lived on in her heart. She nodded silently in agreement.

**MATSUOKA:** In one corner of the National Library of Foreign Literature was a large Soka Gakkai Corner, filled with your books. Ms. Gvishiani was deeply attached to her father, and I know that she found her meeting with you, who had engaged in such fulfilling, warmly communication with him, unforgettable.

**IKEDA:** The bonds of parent and child are strong. A parent's way of life is deeply engraved on the child's life.

I think that we can say that one of the most important aims of our third stage of life is to be true to ourselves to the very last. To become an inspiration to those around us. The memories a person leaves behind, the example he or she sets, can be a great source of encouragement and strength to those who survive.

**MATSUOKA:** A 49-year-old men's division member sent us a letter [see "A Letter From a Reader," this page] about his father and mother, who live in Nagano and have dedicated their lives to the Soka Gakkai movement. He said he eventually became aware of the nobility of his parent's lives and is grateful for the example they have provided. His father is a vice chapter leader and his mother is a district women's leader. The son is also involved in the forefront of Soka Gakkai activities.

It's a wonderful letter that brings up many stimulating points, and I want to share it with our readers.

**IKEDA:** It is fathers and mothers such as they who have built the Soka Gakkai. I am always praying for their happiness and well-being.

What can we contribute? What can we leave as a legacy for others in our third stage of life?

After all is stripped away — our wealth, fame, social status — the one thing that remains after death is the example we set of a life lived with purpose, dedication and dignity.

**WT**

### **A Letter From a Reader**

Reading this series on the third stage of life, I decided to look back over the lives of my parents. My father is 80, and my mother is 79. Since finding faith in the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin in 1959, they have completely dedicated their lives to it. My father doesn't drink or gamble. The only things I can remember my father doing are reading the *Seikyo Shimbun* or the Daishonin's writings, going out to spread the Daishonin's teachings and sitting before the Gohonzon and chanting. He has always been completely devoted to his faith and never indulged in personal pleasures or hobbies. When I was young, I used to think his life was dull.

But later, I came to realize just how wrong I was.

At one time in my life, I took a wrong turn. I am sure that both my father and mother were deeply troubled as they watched me. I'm sure that I made them weep in their hearts. But my father only said one thing to me: "You have given me the opportunity to chant daimoku...." I felt inexpressible shock at his words. And I couldn't understand why he thought as he did.

Today I walk forward, looking fondly at the example of my parents ahead of me on the road of life. Neither of them seem old to me at all. They have the strength of people who have always fought for their cherished beliefs. Having dedicated their lives to kosen-rufu within the Soka Gakkai, they are not spending their last years helpless and dependent on others. They are still fighting and living their third stage of life to the fullest.

— Ichiro Tomatsu, 49

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