

**TOKI JONIN: “MY STORY”
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*This is a fictionalized first-person account of the thoughts of Toki Jonin,
recipient of “Letter to Lord Toki,” our study material for May and June.*

THE scented wisps of cedar incense rose aloft, captured by the sunlight, as we all knelt chanting. I saw clouds billowing up against the mountains. Another day, yes, but a day I would never forget. It was the day of Nichiren Daishonin’s funeral service. As I sat before each follower holding the tray with small flakes of cedar for their offering, my heart contracted inside my chest. He was gone. What would happen to us all? Did we have the strength and unity to carry on without him?

After the completion of the ceremony, I once again faced the Gohonzon, his great gift to humankind. I asked myself if I had really grasped everything he tried to teach us. So much of my life had been filled by his words, taken by this whirlwind of a man, bound to this sage who spoke such unmistakable truth.

There are people who are like great lamps, great bonfires that draw us near, where things seem more real and, yes, even dangerous. There on the knife-edge of life and death, it is their certainty, their profound confidence that holds us, and when they are gone, it lies with each of us to keep the lamp burning.

Even though we knew that death would come for him as he grew weaker, the reality of his passing was finally upon us. No more would we journey to Minobu to see him. Truly, I would have given anything just to sit with him once again as in the old days. It is hard to describe in words the impact he had on my life. I felt the deep sorrow and solemn determination in the room. We had been a part of history, and I was certain that in the distant future, people would look back on our times and say that Nichiren was not only a major force in Buddhist thinking, he was one of history’s most remarkable people.

I knew this with a certainty and felt that it was my important duty to protect the writings he had sent me over the years. I had taken great care with their storage, seeing that they were aired regularly and maintained with respect. Oh, what avid interest and urgency they had ignited in me when they arrived—letters written hastily from Teradomori before he left for Sado or long treatises from his freezing hut on that remote island, many times with instructions to read them with his other followers.

Even when he was separated from us, we felt his life force reaching out to us, every part of him striving to communicate the truth that was in him. He gave us everything he had, and the period after his death was like the silence that falls after a magnificent storm. For all my worldly success I felt uncharacteristically unsure.

I looked at my old friend Shijo Kingo, whose face was stern but eyes rimmed in red. I saw the backs of priests straight in prayer as they recited the Lotus Sutra. Two of them family members—my stepson and my son. What a journey we had made together. I remember when Nichiren stayed with us for a time after he narrowly escaped being taken or killed at Matsubagayatsu. It was then that we all became so close.

It was my great pleasure to walk with him around my estate, to pause together in some quiet spot and talk. It was good to know he was safe when he was there with us. I had a small temple built where he could preach. Those were good days, and all of us felt we would really change our world. The problem was that the more he was proven right, the

more followers he attracted, and the more dangerous it became for him. I could not always protect him to my satisfaction.

I reflect often about how difficult it must have been for him to explain everything to us. How much easier it could have been for him to enjoy the fruits of his enlightenment, installed in some comfortable temple in silken robes with an unlimited supply of writing materials and scribes to assist him. Instead he chose a hard road, fraught with real threats to his life, attacks by sword and the enmity of Hei no Saemon. He hid nothing from us. Even when he was eating snow at Minobu and pretending he was eating rice. Even when he was so sick he could barely hold a brush.

When Ota Jomyo, Shijo Kingo and myself were called before the High Court, accused of conspiring to create social unrest by following him, I thought I might lose my position, or worse be exiled myself. Yet, this was nothing compared to the privations of Sado and Minobu, to the ice that thickly layered his hut in winter.

That night, after the funeral, I sat late and the silence grew still yet more profound. Lighting fresh candles, I drew forth the letters he had written to me over the years, most of them on the humblest of papers. There were many letters to read, several large documents. Many nights, we had gathered in this very room. Quietly, followers would arrive so as not to draw attention. And we would sit together, reading his words, discussing them together. Following his directions, one of us would read it aloud, and somehow we found the courage to continue to chant, to face a ferocity of obstacles and live life afresh with a feeling we truly had something to live for.

Yet this night I chose to read one of the smaller, more personal letters he wrote me. I smiled down at his calligraphy, so strong and direct. It was a letter of appreciation he had written upon receiving an unlined kimono I had sent him. My mother had toiled long hours over it with her failing sight. Hundreds of small stitches, the fabric of the finest quality. For me, that robe was a symbol of all the attention she had devoted to raising and guiding her children. It was very precious to me, and it seemed proper to present it to the Daishonin. He would see it and know how much we cared for him. I felt him to be a part of my family.

Although he was gone, I felt his presence strongly, as if he were in the room with me still. Yes, there were many letters to read. And I would see to it that the ones in my possession would survive and be passed down for others to gather and read together.

I pondered into the night, imagining the followers to come in the future. Would they think of us and our rough and tumultuous age? Would they understand what it took for us to follow Nichiren and embrace his teachings? A man who could take on the entire military government of the nation with the courage of a lion. A man who would take up a brush and write with such tender consideration, seeing beyond the gift into the very heart of the giver.

Illustration by Ed Lee