

## MY STORY—MYOICHI BY FAY HOVEY, MAUI, HAWAII

The following story is a fictionalized first-person account of Myoichi and what it might have been like for her to live in thirteenth-century Japan as a follower of Nichiren Daishonin. Myoichi, who lived in Kamakura, was related to Nissho, one of the Daishonin's six senior priests. She was an educated woman who had lost her husband and was struggling with the difficulties of raising her children alone. Her husband was a strong believer who maintained his faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism even after his estate was confiscated by the government. Many of the Daishonin's disciples faltered in their beliefs under persecution. Her husband died worrying about the Daishonin who was then in exile, and about his wife, whose constitution was frail, and who would have to support their two children. In his letter titled "Winter Always Turns to Spring" the Daishonin assures Myoichi, "Those who believe in the Lotus Sutra are as if in winter, but winter always turns to spring. Never, from ancient times on, has anyone heard or seen of winter turning back to autumn. Nor have we ever heard of a believer in the Lotus Sutra who turned into an ordinary person. The sutra reads, 'If there are those who hear the Law, then not a one will fail to attain Buddhahood'" (WND, 536).

Warriors returning to Kamakura would tell extraordinary tales of whole forests emptying of their creatures at the onset of battle. Nichigen-nyo, the wife of Shijo Kingo, said that her husband had once seen hundreds of deer stumbling over one another to leave the region of a battlefield. It was as if the whole of Japan had wished to flee for over five years as we teetered on the edge of conflict with the Mongols who attempted invasion, fell back, and repeated their attempt with larger numbers of men. Each day brought more bad news as men were called away to help build ramparts at Kyushu and the heads of Mongolian emissaries were rolling.

Of all the disasters that could befall us, and believe me, we had our share of them, the most feared by all is foreign invasion. As is always the case, it is the women, the children, the old and the sick who suffer the most in war. It was with great relief that in 1281, another storm had repelled the warriors of Kublai Khan. Yet, it seemed like the calm before another storm.

To be ill a good part of the time is a harsh thing. For long periods I wasn't able to rise from my bed and often I wondered what the point of my life was. One sees the healthy going about their days in normal ways and I felt like giving up. The real challenge of sickness is that one cannot help feeling a rage deep within, an anger at one's fate at being alive when preferring to die. So living can become a kind of shadow—alive, but not truly living. And what of my two children?

It was my practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism that gave me hope and spurred me on. Other people climb actual mountains, testing themselves against the wind and rain. I challenged the mountain of my illness from my bed, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and reading the Daishonin's letters, using his guidance in my life. As my life-condition strengthened, I found myself reaching out to others, and all of my sufferings allowed me to understand their pain and sorrow.

Do you know what a few words of encouragement can mean to someone who is ill? The Daishonin's letters were beacons of hope during a dark time. They were delivered by his

traveling disciple, moving between his secluded hut at Mount Minobu and the military capital of Kamakura. Without fanfare, he arrived: soft-footed, discreet of voice and manner, a few words of inquiry. He would patiently wait while I wrote a short note in return. Whatever we could find to send the Daishonin—a basket of dried persimmons, a container of rice wine or clothing to keep him warm—we would send.

When my husband was alive, he insisted that we would provide anything we could to the Daishonin, so important he was to us. We knew that he was entirely dependent upon his followers for necessities and we gave without reservation, risking all. Indeed, three poor peasants at Atsuhara had paid the ultimate price for their faith when they were beheaded by Hei no Saemon, who bore Nichiren Daishonin a deep abiding hatred that knew no bounds. For our part, our land holdings were confiscated—yet our faith held fast. Once the Daishonin wrote me, “Winter always turns to spring.” I believe I forged on because of that letter, so powerful was the conviction and reassurance of his words. He also said that if something happened to me, he would take care of my children—it was as if he was extending his entire life force.

It is not surprising that the Daishonin had so many women followers. I can think of no other religious figure of our time that cared as much about the fate of women and children. In war, we were unfortunately dispensable. In fact, there was a prevailing belief that women were almost not “as human” as men and therefore didn’t have the same feelings and certainly not the same capacity for enlightenment. Women committed suicide rather than live without their husbands. We looked around at all of the madness and terror and were as trapped as rabbits in a snare.

The Daishonin had told us that we too could become enlightened in this lifetime and it was astonishing news! That he could see into our hearts and name our sufferings allowed us to see the hopeful horizon of life, and his recognition of our true selves and our prayers made us courageous. For years, we lived under the constant fear that we could all be savagely killed or enslaved by Mongol invaders, yet because of the Daishonin’s letters, even I could stand strong against that fear.

What is the meaning of faith? It is an absolute trust that we are protected; an unswerving belief that no matter what, we will prevail. That life has meaning and we have a meaningful part to play in it, no matter our circumstances in life. I may be old. I may be sick, but I am as much as warrior as those who ride to battlefields dressed in bright armor on fine horses. I am Myoichi. A woman of Kamakura. Follower of Nichiren Daishonin. I have no doubt. I have nothing to fear. □