

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES  
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA  
BRAZILIAN POET AMADEU THIAGO DE MELLO—GUARDIAN OF THE AMAZON**

*In his travels for peace, SGI President Ikeda meets with world leaders from all walks of life. In this series, he introduces the lives and character of those memorable figures.*

Those who battle oppression can be trusted. I respect those who carry out their vows to the people in the face of persecution and even imprisonment.

Such a person came to see me one day, and he brought with him the green breezes of the Amazon. “Don’t think of me as a great literary figure, please,” he said. “I am a child of the forest. I am a child of the river, of the wind.” Even his speech flowed with the cadence of the mighty river. “The children of the Amazon can hear what the wind has to say. They know the meaning of the rustling of the wind through the treetops. They know what the birds are saying.”

Amadeu Thiago de Mello, “guardian of the Amazon,” is a poet. To be a poet is to have the heart of an innocent child untouched by the world’s impurities. It is another name for a person who has for years battled against the pollution of the spirit that we call modern civilization.

“I remember when I was a boy. I grew up in a poor town near the middle reaches of the Amazon,” he reminisced. “At night the sky was an uninterrupted blanket of stars. The night sky was reflected perfectly in the gleaming jet-black waters of the Amazon, as if in a mirror. Stars in the sky and stars in the river. Then, one night, fireflies danced in the air linking river and sky. Fireflies, fireflies — millions of fireflies. It took my breath away.” The young boy was intoxicated with this magic spectacle of light spanning heaven and earth.

Today, at seventy-two, he continues struggling in his hometown of Barreirinha in Brazil, to defend “the home of life,” the mighty Amazon. His weapons are his pen and his voice. He continues to educate the young and work for the people using his knowledge of medicine.

Mr. Thiago de Mello explains, “The indigenous peoples of the Amazon may not be able to spell the word Utopia, but it is among them that we can discover a society of beauty, impartiality and brotherly love. They live in seamless harmony with nature. They are friends of the sun and follow the conversations of the stars.”

The tragedy of the noble indigenous people in the Central and South Americas came with the arrival of Europeans five hundred years ago. The persecutions perpetrated on them can fairly be described as another holocaust. The European invaders treated these “uncivilized” peoples mercilessly, butchering, plundering, exploiting and driving them to extinction. They destroyed or tortured into compliance any that dared to oppose their reign of terror. With lie after lie, the foreign invaders usurped their lands, stole their gold, and tricked them into debt and forced labor. In the name of their god, they demanded subservience to their authority; outlawing and destroying indigenous cultures, invading even the people’s souls and leaving indelible scars.

This is not simply a tale of a half-millennium ago. Such despicable behavior by professed “civilized” peoples has been seen frequently in modern times as well. Unscrupulous developers seeking to exploit the rubber trees of the Amazon rain forest gave the indigenous people clothing infected with diseases to which they had no resistance, and annihilated them. In some regions, the native people were forced to labor so hard that it is

estimated that seven people died for each ton of rubber harvested.

Which people are civilized? Which are uncivilized? The greed of “civilized savages” continues unabated to plunder and destroy our natural world.

The poet asks, “Have these ‘conquerors’ really won anything? Are these ones, who have stolen all the people had, the victors? And even if they were to ‘win’ their blind struggle to conquer nature itself, is that a victory? Haven’t they in fact called down on themselves the most hideous of all defeats?”

Yes, we are children of nature. The destruction of nature is the destruction of the very root of human existence. It also eats away and destroys the verdant richness, the humanity, of the destroyers themselves.

Mr. Thiago de Mello’s entire life has been devoted to resisting this devastation. When he was a young boy, he used to lead his blind grandfather around. He asked him, “Why are those people always so poor, yet they work so hard?” Then there were the wealthy landowners, who amassed tremendous riches, though all they did was arrogantly order others about. “How can they treat others so badly?” he would ask. His grandfather told him about the injustices of human society, and the young poet was unable to suppress his indignation.

He studied medicine, and through his contact with the poor and destitute among his patients he learned more about the cruel reality of their lives. He could not remain silent. The poet was too loving to remain unmoved. “One who believes in love must decide which path they will take. Will it be the path of goodness, or the path of silence—of being an accomplice to injustice?” He wrote fiery poems denouncing social injustice. He led strikes for which he was jailed. Each time he refused to give up. He was determined that he would fight, and fight with all his might.

His mother always said to him, “Do whatever you must, so long as you are helping others.”

A tempest of military rule was sweeping Latin America. In the spring of Mr. Thiago de Mello’s thirty-eighth year (1964), Brazil underwent a military coup. The barbaric men in power imprisoned the poet of human rights. They banned his books.

But on the wall of his military prison cell, the poet found written the verse: “Night is coming, but I sing, because, without fail, morning will come.” It was a line from one of his poems. Someone had scratched it into the wall. Someone had been roused to courage in the darkness of this cell by his words. All the schemes of the authorities could not erase them. What greater honor could there be for a poet?

Mr. Thiago de Mello’s words were not empty literary exercises—they were the voice of surging waves of love for humanity, the voice of roaring winds of passionate prayers by a man who was one with nature. I believe that if the Amazon could speak, it would be with a voice like Mr. Thiago de Mello’s. If the millions of native peoples who were massacred could take up a pen, they would write as he writes.

The Brazilian poet lived in exile for many years, including in Chile. His friend, who had welcomed him, Chilean President Salvador Allende, was himself murdered in a military coup. Afterward, Mr. Thiago de Mello came within an inch of being shot by a Chilean rebel soldier. With the gun barrel pointed at him, he was filled not only with fear but also with rage. “Is justice to be extinguished by the forces of evil? Is all hope gone?” At that moment, his life force rose within him to reply: “No! You must live! This is no time to die! Survive! Take action, and bring hope to the people once more!”

After periods of exile in Germany, France, and Portugal, he returned to his homeland in

the Amazon. He returned to the vast reaches of rain forest, to the town of fireflies. He returned to the days of his youth.

Decades had passed since he was last there. The mighty Amazon River spoke to him, telling him of the terrible destruction that had taken place in the months and years gone by.

The Amazon region is very important as a climate stabilizer of the entire planet. Destroying the Amazon is like destroying one's own home.

Humanity! Is there no end to your greed? How long will you arrogantly go on repaying the beneficence of the great forest of life with exploitation and destruction?

I raise my voice with the poet: "Listen, listen to the Earth's angry voice! Have respect—respect for the pure spirit of the people!" Respect is the first step toward learning. People talk about protecting the environment, protecting indigenous peoples, but what is really necessary is the profound humility to learn from the laws of nature. To study the wisdom of peoples who have lived in harmony with their environment for centuries.

When Mr. Thiago de Mello spoke at the Kansai Soka Junior and Senior High Schools in Japan, he said to the students:

Today, some 800 million children and adults are threatened by starvation. Hundreds of millions cannot read. I want each of you to be aware of just how fortunate you are.

To possess good fortune means to have a responsibility to others. The purpose of your studies is not simply to receive a diploma, find a good job, and live a comfortable life. You mustn't be so selfish. I have a request for all of you: please grow into upstanding adults and be active as exemplary world citizens. Make sure that in the twenty-first century not a single child has to lie awake at night unable to sleep because of hunger. Make sure that not a single adult is prevented from grasping the light of wisdom because he or she cannot read. I want all of you to make an effort to serve humanity.

And I am sure that if you do so, no one will be happier than President Ikeda, the founder of your school system. That is the very reason that he has withstood all the challenges and difficulties that he has faced so far.

Here is a man who understands my thoughts, and here and now I would like to express my great appreciation for his profound understanding.

The poet said to me: "What future awaits the world? I believe that the crucial thing is for each individual to carry out his or her mission in life. That is the key to saving the world." He almost seemed to be speaking to himself as he said these words, and it was the voice of a man determined to see the dawning of a century of respect for the dignity of all life. □