

PERSPECTIVE
THE HUMAN BEING MUST ALWAYS COME FIRST
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February 1990 was a special time. U.S. President Bush and Soviet President Gorbachev had just declared the cold war over. Communism was losing its grip in Europe. Perestroika and glasnost were in full swing, and we were beginning to see the Soviet Union as something other than the Evil Empire. The Berlin Wall had symbolically fallen and the actual dismantling would take place in a matter of months. On Feb. 11, Nelson Mandela stepped out of a South African prison after a 27-year incarceration. I, like so many others, felt great relief and renewed hope.

Closer to home, on Feb. 12, SGI President Ikeda began his unprecedented 17-day stay in Los Angeles, during which he fundamentally corrected the SGI-USA's path of faith and ushered in a new era for our organization. I, like so many others, felt great relief and renewed hope.

As a youth division leader at that time, I had the opportunity to attend several of these meetings, where President Ikeda set the record straight on so many basic issues of faith and the organization. I've cherished my copy of the March 1990 *Seikyo Times* that contains all this guidance. Ten years later, it's interesting to turn the pages and see which parts I highlighted back then. The various blue and yellow markings record my own changes and needs, as first one and then another passage of guidance struck a chord in my heart.

I attended these meetings with people who had over the previous several years become true comrades-in-arms. In those years, we had directed our youthful energies into culture festival after culture festival, general meeting after general meeting, propagation campaign after propagation campaign—all glorious memories and impressive accomplishments I do not regret a bit. Through the tough times and victories, we had created bonds of shared memories so strong that others may find it hard to understand; not unlike, I can only suppose, those shared by battle-weary soldiers. In fact, over the years many of us have shared our “war stories” with great pride and humor (“When I was in the youth division...” the story always goes.)

These memories all came flooding back last week when more than 200 of these comrades reunited at Soka University of America in Calabasas, site of many of the 1990 events. A few more pounds, whiskers or gray hairs (what's left of them) graced the former young men's division members who attended. The former young women's division members all looked the same, even though many were carrying or running after their little contributions to the future division. My wife, Lynn, and I brought our own three little ones, Breana, 5, Colin, 3, and Andrew, 1. We saw a video from the 1990 meetings, recapped some of the guidance given at the time, hugged one another and caught up with those we hadn't seen in years.

In recalling the past, I thought the comment by General Director Danny Nagashima (who 10 years ago was the SGI-USA youth division leader) summed up many of our feelings well. He talked about the sense of relief he felt in 1990 and how he thought things would go smoothly from then on in the development of the organization. Little did he or the rest of us know how hard it would be, how many struggles—both personal and organizational—the ensuing decade would bring. But it is just these struggles that have given us all greater wisdom and deeper faith with which we can contribute to kosen-rufu

all the better now.

And that, ultimately, was what this reunion was all about for me: the future. What can I do from now?

When I hugged one old comrade at the reunion—a fellow leader with whom I had campaigned for years—I felt deeply how much I loved the guy, even though our paths hadn't crossed in years. Ten years ago, too often I didn't appreciate him and other fellow leaders as the human beings they were but only as cogs in our greater kosen-rufu movement. Thanks to President Ikeda's continued guidance, though, I've come to learn that it is the human being that always must come first. This man and I might not be the best of friends, but the appreciation I feel for him is genuine. I can't take back the past, but seeing him again made me resolve to somehow be better, to extend myself more—not only to him but to the many others who attended (or did not attend) that day, to whom I directly and indirectly owe so much. How? I'm not sure, but I'm starting by channeling my appreciation by adding him to my everyday prayers.

In Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism that stresses the idea of “from this moment on,” looking backwards takes on its true value only when we can use those memories as fuel for today. It's fun to reminisce, and important, because to do so helps strengthen the friendship. But more than just a time to share stories of the past, this reunion was a time to recall now 10-year-old determinations, hopes and dreams and start fresh.

In 1990, we felt that it was the time we could advance, as individuals and as a precious organization. It was a watershed 17 days for us youth dedicated to our cause, a time every bit as momentous—though perhaps on a different level—as the end of communism in the Soviet Union or the rise of equal rights in South Africa. With our newfound “freedom,” we've struggled forward for the past 10 years, each in our own way. It's been anything but easy. But now, in 2000, it is again time to advance, tapping ever more of our wisdom that has matured over the years.

In one sense, this reunion was just another catalyst to renew my resolve, one of countless catalysts I've experienced over the years. But it was also special, because the people I shared it with are special to me, whether they know it or not. I want to say thank you to them and say how much I look forward to the next 10 struggling, vigorous, hope-filled years.