

AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA OPENING THE WAY TO A CENTURY WITHOUT WAR

‘We must open the way to a century without war, a century of peace,’ SGI President Ikeda writes, remembering World War II. ‘This, I believe, is our destiny and our mission.’

Recently, for the first time in a long while, I wrote a letter to a friend from my elementary school days.

When we were in elementary school together, the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–45 had already started, and year after year the fires of war were spreading. Everyone was poor.

Childhood is usually a time of imagination and excitement, but the war had driven Japan into such a state of misery and desperation that our hearts were unable to soar free and find refuge. We sensed that some black, dire event was approaching like a storm.

It was an age of unending sorrow and pain. Even if we dreamed, on the wings of imagination, of an enjoyable, fairy tale world, at dawn the shrill blast of a military bugle would sound. Fathers and sons were torn from their families and sent to distant battlefields.



From the spring of 1942 — shortly after the start of the Pacific War and after finishing my studies at the national people’s school — I was forced, at age 14, to spend the days of my youth working at the Niigata Steelworks in my hometown of Kamata, Tokyo.

It was not long before the war quickly took a turn for the worse.

My good friend from elementary school used to regularly express his discontent and sorrow to me. “Aren’t our souls allowed to be free?” he asked. “It is just so oppressive always being forced to control our thoughts and feelings. I get so sick of it. Blue sky stretches above us and flowers are blooming in the field, but we are like prisoners. We have nothing to be proud or excited about, nothing to hope for. We are drowning in despair.”

The faces in the street told the same story; hardly anyone smiled.

One day, we ran into a group of factory workers making a loud ruckus. They were venting their pent-up frustrations at the world by shouting and cursing and generally behaving badly. “Let’s get out of here,” said my friend, having no time for such displays. He was the kind of young man who would say, “I just have a stitch in my side,” rather than whine, “I’m hungry.”

We walked along the beach at nearby Morigasaki. As he chewed on a blade of grass, my friend talked to me seriously for a long time. “I hate our country,” he said. “Japan is truly frightening. Someday I want to go to Europe. I am prepared to swim, to ride the sea wind, to get out of here and go to another country.”



The streets were dark at night because of the threat of air raids. There was no food, no clothing. People’s homes had been destroyed, and they had nowhere to live. They spoke in hushed, subdued voices. And the sight of people sadly evacuating the city was heartrending.

“I want to be saved by something,” said my friend. “If I go on like this, I will die. There

are no bright possibilities to look forward to. There is no future. We are supposed to be entering the best days of our youth, but the road ahead is shrouded in darkness, and I cannot see a thing. I want to beat a drum and shout something. But day after day is dark and gloomy, and I feel like I am falling into a world of emptiness and meaninglessness. When I think of my country, which is all in a frenzy over this war, I feel nothing. I wonder if it is just that I am a weak person.”

He went on: “If people want to abuse me, they can go ahead. If they say I am frivolous or do not show proper commitment to the cause, let them. But I want to create something solid and enduring, forge an unshakable spirit and inner strength, so that dear friends like you will understand my heart even after I am gone.

“My life is my greatest treasure. How can I live my life so that it will one day shine with glorious triumph? How can I challenge and conquer the humiliations, cruelties and temptations I meet along the way while always keeping a spirit of indignation toward such things blazing in my heart?

“Right now, I see nothing of jewel-like brilliance before me. To my side, I see a sodden, muddy path that has none of the warmth of a nice, thick rug underfoot.

“How will these insane times toy with my life? I am exhausted by all the monstrous social upheavals we have gone through, yet I feel sure that the eternal, true reality that I long and thirst for from the depths of my being lies beyond these dark storm clouds.

“I have begun to deeply ponder the unfathomable mystery of the human spirit and the treasure that is the life of the universe. There must exist the power to survive even the most calamitous flood. I want to experience for myself the reality of that shining power.

“No matter how foul a road we must traverse, no matter how painful and even bloody the path, I want to keep pressing onward toward the green fields abloom with flowers that lie beyond the present darkness and confusion.”

Hot tears fell from my friend’s eyes.



A wind was blowing, tapping at the windows of the houses. Our conversation continued. We noted that many people had gotten into the habit of spiritual laziness. They did not have the means to open the window of their minds and see clearly.

It was blatant that the hearts of Japan’s leaders were putrid with rot and decay. And the great hopes that the people had so long lost sight of were reemerging as a powerful cry and beginning to take shape as a broad popular alliance.

Hope would come. And, not to be outdone, so would despair. We agreed that the strength to transform even despair into hope had to exist. We acknowledged the need to forge resolute inner strength so that we could live true to ourselves, undefeated by disappointment. And we pondered where we could find a philosophy and a mentor to teach us how to do just that.



Recalling that conversation of more than 55 years ago, I wrote to my old friend.

Many of our classmates died in the war. I also lost contact with many in the long, chaotic years during and after the war. But I remember many of them, just as they were when we were young. They are precious friends from my hometown, their images engraved deep in my heart.

Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who is around the same age as I, once told me that our generation could be described as the “children of war.” It is true that as

children we were forced to endure the pain and misery of wars started by our elders. That is precisely why we must never allow future generations of children to experience that cruel tragedy.

We must open the way to a century without war, a century of peace. This, I believe, is our destiny and our mission.

I had the good fortune to encounter my mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda. I have lived my life striving with all my might as his disciple. The work of education that he entrusted to me and to which I have devoted my life has now progressed to the stage where Soka University of America is under construction.

I am looking forward to someday continuing the conversation that my childhood friend and I held on Morigasaki Beach those many years ago but this time at the new SUA Orange County campus, bathed in fresh sea breezes from the Pacific Ocean.