

**SPECIAL YOUTH  
PULLOUT SECTION**

# SEIZE the Day

## On 'Letter From Birmingham Jail'



**“Unless we fight evil and injustice, we cannot say we are working for good. The same applies to our struggle for kosen-rufu. Unless we defeat evil, we cannot realize kosen-rufu” (SGI President Ikeda, May 11 *World Tribune*, p. 4).**



**Willie Mack  
Los Angeles**

In the spring of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. went to Birmingham, Ala., to lead protests demanding that segregation come to an end in the city. At that time, Birmingham was considered the most racist and segregated city in the United States. For years, civil rights leaders in Birmingham had been trying to break the stronghold that racism and segregation held on the city. These protests would often become violent, as police in riot gear and armed with nightsticks beat and bloodied the peaceful protestors.

Many white segregationists believed that violence was the only way to stop these protests. Blacks were beaten into quiet submission and fear. Things began to change

when Dr. King—along with many other religious and community leaders—began practicing and teaching nonviolent civil disobedience along with direct action.

Through his work with the civil rights movement, Dr. King emphasized the importance of justice and denouncing injustice. He taught that justice allows people to reach their ultimate potential, while injustice does the opposite, it holds people back.

While in Birmingham, Dr. King was arrested and thrown in jail. He was criticized by many of his white religious colleagues, who, while sympathizing with the struggle for equal rights, felt that Dr. King was moving too fast. These moderate ministers believed that the only way for the Negro to get ahead was through negotiations and patience. They also blamed the nonviolent protestors for the violence that was perpetrated against them. Dr. King was up against a wall, but he held fast to his convictions and used this seemingly impossible situation to his advantage.

President Ikeda has spoken about the importance of fighting injustice, especially at the most perilous times: “What matters most is that we fight thoroughly against injustice with a lofty, dauntless spirit. While waging a determined struggle against evil that nearly cost him his life, Nichiren Daishonin cried out [to Shijo Kingo,

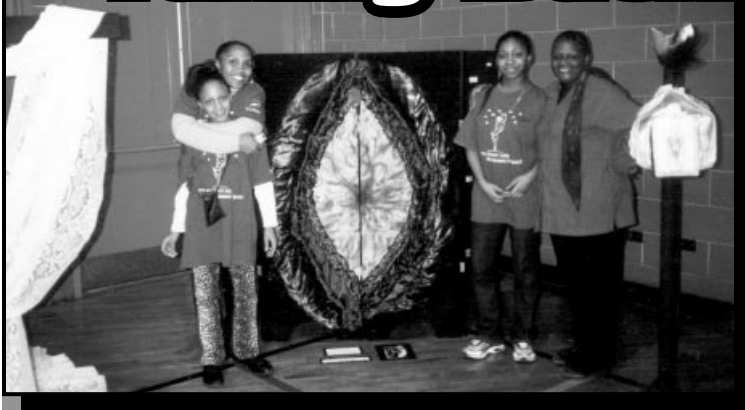
as they were being led to the executions grounds at Tatsunokuchi], ‘What greater joy could there be?’ (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 767). And he wholeheartedly anticipated that his disciples would form their ranks and follow him” (*Learning from the Gosho*, p. 243).

This can be compared with Dr. King and the perils he faced in Birmingham. He was in prison alone, and many of his colleagues had left him or spoken out against him. But instead of hiding or giving up, Dr. King took this opportunity to write a letter, which is known as the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” to answer any doubts as to why he and so many other black and white Americans believed so strongly in their cause and their course of action. He attacks the idea of moderation and patience over direct action and outlines why nonviolent civil disobedience is so effective. “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue” (*The History of Our Time*, ed. by William H. Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff, p. 184).

Dr. King also describes to America why segregation will without a doubt, come to an end and the true spirit of America, that all men are created equal, will prevail: “Injustice

*(“Letter” continued on Page C)*

# Taking Back the Night



Lisa Young (left, back) with Jaleesha Maury. Joi Ford with Valerie Ewing (right).

## “Take back the night!”

“Tonight is my night and I’m taking it back!”

These were just a few of the chants roaring through the early evening as a group of SGI-USA members in Chicago participated in a march to raise awareness about violence against women and children as a beginning to their summer activities.

It was the Southwest Women Working Together third annual Take Back the Night march, and SGI-USA youth were invited to participate because of friendships that Valerie Ewing, an SGI-USA women’s division member, developed within the community. Several groups, including the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, the Illinois Commission on Community Service and several elementary and high schools, joined in the planning and performances. Women and girls of all ages and different ethnic groups, belonging to different organizations within the community, marched in unity in one of Chicago’s most violent neighborhoods. As they carried signs with various

Victory Over Violence. People read dramatic poetry that illustrated the pain and suffering violence entails. There were skits and dances portraying the effects of violence on school-aged children. African drummers empowered the crowd with rhythms that gave a voice to protest against injustice. Various speakers shared their own experiences of dealing with violence, and in so doing, gave young women a voice to speak out about injustice and the tools they need to turn these voices into action. The messages were diverse and echoed of survival.

The SGI supported the event by setting up a

pledges against violence and sang out chants, people driving by in their cars honked their horns in support and some even joined the march.

Before taking to the streets that evening, there was a rally where hundreds of people celebrated

Victory Over Violence table and having people sign the Victory Over Violence pledge sheets. They also handed out book-marks so that people would remember what they pledged that evening. Jaleesha Maury, a recent Z-wave graduate, said: “The theme of stopping violence altogether is so powerful! It fits right in with what we’re doing in the SGI.” Valerie Ewing displayed a powerful artistic exhibit that depicted, through sight and sound, the damaging portrayal and perceptions of the female anatomy.

Joi Ford, a 13 year old young women’s division member, enjoyed participating in the event as well. She especially liked the

t-shirt exhibit, an exhibit intended for all of

the criminals that committed vicious crimes against women.

Friends of the victims wrote emotional messages to the

criminals on the t-shirts. After reading

all of the them, Joi stated: “I can really feel each person’s pain. The messages convey the anger and fear. We must stop the violence.” Many of the SGI participants left the rally and march with a renewed spirit to fight injustice in their own lives and encourage other members of the SGI to become involved in community events that promote Victory Over Violence. It was a great beginning to a peace-filled summer.

*As told to Lisa Young by Jaleesha Maury and Joi Ford, Chicago*

**“The theme of stopping violence altogether is so powerful! It fits right in with what we’re doing in the SGI.”**

## Reflections



Matthew, 14, with his sister, Isabella

Every second ticks by slowly  
yet months fly by in an instant.  
Days may seem long  
but soon enough  
they become the past.  
You go through life dreading things  
yet they still happen.  
Time keeps rolling on  
The Energizer Bunny may stop  
But time won't  
Not for you  
Nor for your uncle's friend's daughter's cousin.  
Do you ever wonder if you could relive a  
moment?  
Good  
or bad

Do you ever think  
That people may be dying while  
you are having a bubble bath?  
Do you ever think these things?  
Most likely not  
But what of it  
You live your complacent life  
Never dreaming of hardships  
people go through every day.  
Why care when you have your  
own worries?  
Whilst people go through hell.

By Matthew Levy  
Santa Monica, Calif.

("Letter" continued from Page A)

anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. ...Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds" (*The History of Our Time*, p. 183). Here, Dr. King makes it clear that as Americans, we all take responsibility for our fellow Americans.

And as human beings, we each share a common humanity. He believed in the power of the human spirit to look past the differences in skin color,

regional differences and ethnic differences. By overcoming these differences, he believed we could create a truly harmonious society.

"In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action" (*The History of Our Time*, p. 183).

Dr. King was determined to teach nonviolent civil disobedience as a means to achieving their goal. Many people who attacked his beliefs criticized him for breaking laws and encouraging others to do the same. They would ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" Dr. King's response was simple and direct: "The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all.'...To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust" (*The History of Our Time*, p. 187).

Dr. King clearly states any law that does not work for the betterment of society or individu-

als is unjust. President Ikeda states, "Justice is like the sun. A society that lacks justice is shrouded in darkness. No one can stop the sun from rising. No cloud can hide the rays of the sun indefinitely. 'Opening the eyes' means causing those hearts steeped in darkness to recognize the rising sun of justice" (*Learning from the Gosho*, p. 59). Dr. King took this to heart. Although he never spoke to President Ikeda, he

knew this was his purpose and that as long as he was working for the happiness of others, he was fighting for justice.

Today we do not face

the same problems that Dr. King and others faced during the civil rights movement. But each of us has the ability to decide in our hearts what we feel is just and unjust. Dr. King used his strong belief in the human spirit to fight for what he believed was justice. Through his passionate desire to change

the world and make it a better place for all, he was able to move

people in ways that no one else had been able to do in the past. Dr. King knew in his heart that all men were created equal and any laws that prevented people from working together or discriminated against any certain groups of people were wrong.

Dr. King dedicated his life to uplifting humanity from the discrimination and hate that was corroding away the human spirit. He knew that to do this he would have to make the ultimate sacrifice. He believed in his cause 100% and

never gave in to his own fears or persecution from others. When people criticized him, he calmly answered their attacks and stood by his belief in love and humanity. When he was threatened with violence, he knew that his life was a small price to pay for the rest of humanity. When he was accused of being too extreme he responded, "Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?" (*The History of Our Time*, p. 192).

Dr. King forced America to look at itself for the first time. He made people self-reflect on their actions toward other. He taught us that to live for others is the greatest life to live and to love others like brothers and sisters. Upholding Dr. King's spirit is a lifelong process. How do we bring that spirit to our everyday lives? How do we fight injustice? What is injustice? President Ikeda addressed these questions by saying: "The powerful may appear great, but in reality they are not. Greatest of all are ordinary people. If those in power lead lives of idle luxury it is because the people are silent. We have to speak out. With impassioned words, we need to resolutely attack abuses of power that cause people suffering. This is fighting for justice. It is wrong to remain silent

when confronted with injustice. Doing so is tantamount to supporting and condoning evil" (*Faith Into Action*, p. 226).

Dr. King never told us to live exactly as he has, he only taught us to love one another and respect each other as you would respect yourself. When we live a life striving for justice, we live a truly golden life.

Dr. King ends his letter by signing, "yours for the cause of peace and brotherhood" (*The History of Our Time*, p. 195). Each of us can make Dr. King's dream a reality in our everyday lives by making causes toward peace within our families, our workplaces and our friendships. ●

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### SEND IN YOUR STUFF

Our youth publication is only as strong as what you bring us. Poems, Articles, Pictures, Stories, Commentaries, ...whatever you got, get it to us.

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By Shan Serafin,  
SGI-USA Jr. High School Leader

### We the People...of Earth

Only recently am I coming to understand how difficult a concept global citizenship is. I used to hear the term and think, "Yeah, duh, global citizen, who wouldn't want that?" But, I'm starting to see the challenge we face in believing we're all on the same team.

One of the televised images of the Sept. 11 attack depicted people in the Middle East celebrating the destruction. Their joy seemed an unimaginable expression of evil, an instance of humanity needing obvious correction. I certainly agree; it does need to change. But I believe one crucial step in doing so, for us as Americans, is to realize that such wicked celebration of violence exists here too, here in

our homeland.

I was in college during the Persian Gulf War. I remember being with a bunch of friends in my dorm watching CNN broadcast the point-of-view of a missile as it whipped down an elevator shaft and blew up a building. My friends cheered and continued to cheer as they soon saw images of bombs bursting over Baghdad. Here were my college-going buddies, the social exemplars of American youth, applauding human massacre. I see much of the same sentiment now with Afghanistan — in large rallies, in media rhetoric, in intimate conversations.

Nationalism inevitably requires an "us vs. them" mentality. If you put your own nation first, your nation's welfare takes priority over the welfare of all others, at the expense of all others. When we become nationalistic in a time of violence, like during war, we're expecting one side to lose—their side—at a time when losing means many innocent people will die.

In being a superpower, we have the potential to inspire as well as set fire. It's like a playground where someone just threw a rock at the biggest kid in school. Bystanders expect the big kid to yell, "You don't mess with me!" and trounce the perpetrator. But what if this same big kid, who holds the powerful status to which other kids aspire, approached the rock thrower and talked

with him? The bystanders would then, through example, behold a new ideal—the power of dialogue. I feel there's a parallel: the countries in the current world theater are scrutinizing American actions. Many of them are entrenched in equally deadly situations, poised for bloodshed. It would be a powerful statement if we took a nonviolent course of action, doing it at a time when many

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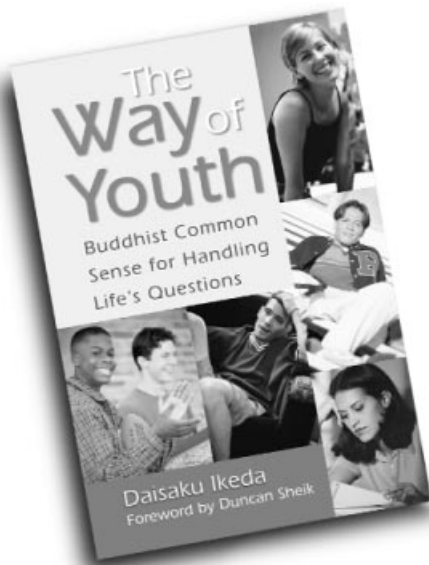
people of the world consider violent retaliation justifiable.

I asked SGI-USA Women's Leader Matilda Buck if she thought terrorism could really be affected by a grass-roots Victory Over Violence

campaign. She responded with a simple, profound thought—terrorism is itself a grass-roots movement; so, yes, it could be affected by a grass-roots campaign.

Skillfully talking with people about this subject has been hard for me. There are legitimate emotions involved, which require sensitivity and there is a wealth of history and insight I still don't have. But, there are great resources to help. I remind myself that studying just one of SGI President Ikeda's many peace proposals will well equip me to sit in a living room with a few friends and rationalize a Buddhist course of action. This way I can, in a small but definite way, advance our civilization toward being a world of global citizens. ●

# The Way of Youth



The following is an excerpt from the hit book *The Way of Youth*, a universally appealing collection of some of SGI President Ikeda's words to young people. His insight reaches beyond all barriers of race, creed, culture and gender and gets to the heart of youth issues. Each one of over 80 topics is covered in a question and answer format.

## Touching People's Lives, p. 146

**A person's nobility is manifested in compassion for others. Kindness and consideration for others resonate with both the Buddhist concept of compassion and the core Christian concept of love. When viewed from a larger perspective, we exist here thanks to the warmth, kindness and support not only of the people around us but of everything on this Earth and in the entire universe.**

*To read more or to find words of wisdom to other questions you may have asked yourself, The Way of Youth can be purchased from your favorite online or neighborhood bookstore.*