Special Series:

Message for the Age of Human Rights —What Does the Third Millennium Require? (1)

Daisaku Ikeda
Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

Here we present another in the Dialogue Among Civilizations *series, this time a dialogue between Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President Daisaku Ikeda and the Argentinean human rights activist and Nobel Peace laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, who met in Tokyo in December 1995. Contemplating the global outlook for the* Third Millennium*, in the process covering a broad range of topics including the universal nature of human rights over and above the sovereignty of national assemblies; building solidarity among ordinary people; and the great strength and potential of the world's women, they vowed to publish a collection of their dialogues. In the years following that initial meeting they have maintained a lively correspondence, and in this issue we hear about a man of indomitable spirit who has spent many years as a champion of human rights battling authoritarian evil, and the encounters that have helped shape his life.*
This will be the fifth article in the Dialogue Among Civilizations *series by President Ikeda, following* The Beauty of a Lion's Heart *(with Dr. Axinia D. Djourova of Bulgaria),* Dialogues on Eastern Wisdom *(with Dr. Ji Xianlin and Professor Jiang Zhongxin of China),* The Spirit of India—Buddhism and Hinduism *(with Dr. Ved P. Nanda, Honorary President of the World Jurist Association), and* The Humanist Principle—Compassion and Tolerance *(with Dr. Felix Unger, President of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts).*

The Dawn of a New Humanism

Ikeda: I greatly respect people who stand up for the dignity of humanity and strive to reform our epoch. You are such a person, and your work constitutes a treasure for the whole world.

Refusing to bow before repeated oppression from a military dictatorship, throughout your struggle you have remained true to your belief in justice. Under mortal threat, you have exerted the most strenuous efforts

for the sake of peace. Your example sends forth a ray of courage and hope for humanity. That is why I am extremely happy to engage in this dialogue with you.

Esquivel: It is my honor. As a reader of your books, I have looked forward to meeting you in person and feel I have already known you for a long time.

Ikeda: I feel the same. I wholeheartedly applauded your receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980, at the age of 49, for championing human rights under the banner of nonviolence and for giving light to people suffering in the darkness of oppression. Your struggle will always remain a shining example of a twentieth-century human triumph.

Esquivel: Thank you. Human beings are born with the right to equality. They have the capability to choose their own way of life, to exercise their freedom, and to select the path they want to follow. Unfortunately, however, these fundamental rights are often denied. History reveals the suffering faces of countless people condemned to starvation, war, slavery, poverty, and social exclusion. These people have no ways out of their situations. They are in need of friendly hands to support them. They hope for solidarity with other individuals and peoples. Thousands—millions—of people on earth clamor for a more just and brotherly way of life.

Ikeda: I agree. Human history has been too full of misery caused by war, violence, discrimination, and oppression. Tragically, inhumane acts are still being perpetrated today all over the globe. Now in the twenty-first century, learning from the past and always looking steadily forward, humanity must set the third millennium on the correct path. We cannot shirk the difficult mission of transforming human history by creating a society founded on respect for human dignity. We must eliminate authoritarian control and allow the people—including women—to assume the determining role in society. You and I are resolved to find a way to achieve these aims.

Esquivel: Sometimes humanity seems trapped in a repeating but unvarying cycle of Fortune, like Sisyphus of Greek mythology, who bears witness to the existential anguish of humanity. For disobedience, Zeus, the supreme Olympian god, condemns Sisyphus to carry a boulder on his shoulders to the pinnacle of a mountain. He keeps an eye on his

goal as he approaches step by step. When, exhausted, he is half way up, the stone falls from his back and rolls down to the foot of the mountain. It his anguishing mission to repeat this task eternally, knowing that all his efforts are futile and that he is condemned to struggle with himself throughout an endless time that is in a sense timeless.

Ikeda: In ancient India, the birthplace of Buddhism, various ideas about human fate were advanced. Some of them involve existential suffering like that of Sisyphus. In general they fall into three categories.

First is the fatalistic notion that present and future are determined irrevocably by the past. Even effort itself is propelled by destiny. Second is the idea of divine will as taught by the Brahmans. According to this doctrine, the will of the gods determines the caste and condition into which a person is born. From this teaching arose the infamous Indian caste system of fatalistic discrimination. Third is the doctrine of chance, which argued that human life is entirely fortuitous. By denying free-will, this approach contributed to moral and ethical breakdown.

Esquivel: Albert Camus called Sisyphus the absurd hero and saw in him a symbol of existential suffering in the face of impossibility, frustrated efforts, despair, and defeat. A cursory reading of human behavior throughout history, of our wild violence at all times, it would seem that nothing changes. It is as if the human condition were inextricably bound to violence and that all our efforts to overcome it were useless.

Ikeda: Undeniably the pessimistic idea that, because they are instinctive in human beings, war and violence are ineradicable is deep rooted. Fatalists disregard dreams of a war-free century as futile. Their attitude resembles deterministic Indian philosophies founded on belief in the impotence of free will to alter destiny.

Esquivel: To continue the earlier paradigm, the instant the stone fell from his shoulders, Sisyphus impotently and sorrowfully beheld his own eternal anguish. As he watched it roll down to the foot of the mountain he knew he was condemned to recommence the laborious task.

Like Sisyphus, many members of society live oppressed by existential anguish: men and women who strive in desperation and useless heroics and submit to the fatalistic future of their existence. They have their own intolerably heavy burdens.

Nonetheless, if we look more closely into their lives, we see that men, women, and children—with no pretense at heroics—optimistically look

daily for a bud to blossom and a miracle to happen. The flower can bloom in the daily struggle, in a child's smile, in the creation of hope, and in the illumination of our path showing us that our exertions are our liberation.

Ikeda: A splendid way to express it. To return to what I was saying earlier, Shakyamuni Buddha demolished ancient Indian fatalism and belief in divine determination. Several anecdotes illustrate how his attitude differed from those of his religious contemporaries. For instance, on one occasion, as he was sitting in meditation under a tree, a Brahman approached and, concluding that the meditating man must be of lowly status, asked Shakyamuni about his birth. Shakyamuni replied that it is deeds, not birth, that matters. Human beings are not defined by birth or circumstances. According to the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (Grouped Discourses), as a fire can spring from a tiny wood shaving, so the person who reflects on his own mind and deeds is noble no matter what his birth. Shakyamuni's highly independent view was that, because deeds are the determining factor, the power of free will can alter destiny.

The great thirteenth-century Japanese religious leader Nichiren, whom we of Soka Gakkai revere, wrote, "There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds."[1]

By a land impure in itself, Nichiren means the world of delusion and ignorance plagued by violence, war, poverty, and oppression. He contrasts this with a land pure in itself, in other words, the pure and tranquil land where the Buddha dwells. This land is filled with the joy of wisdom, nonviolence, peace, equality, justice, freedom, and compassion. Nichiren argued that it is the mind of the people—the single thought moment of a human being—that determines whether the world is pure or impure. Evil minds make the world impure. But, on the basis of a revolution converting the mind to wisdom, it is possible to convert impure society into a pure and tranquil land. This is the essence of our philosophy of reforming society through the Human Revolution. It is possible to struggle against war and discrimination. But the way to give the light of hope to the ordinary people and make social reforms long-lasting is to act through a solidarity of human wisdom.

Through your struggle for human rights you have given rise to one of the great reformations in human history. I am certain that the radiant hope you have inspired will illumine the future of humankind.

The Long Path of Opposition

Ikeda: To see how you came to embody hope for the future, I should like to review your human-rights struggle.

The Service of Peace and Justice Foundation (*Servicio de Paz y Justicia or SERPAJ*) was formed in 1974 as a result of nonviolent human-rights activities by Christian activists throughout Latin America. One of its founders, you also served as chairman of the group. With the slogan of "Struggle through Nonviolence," the organization became active in all parts of Latin America.

Esquivel: Yes. It spread throughout Latin America as social resistance and popular struggles took place all over the continent. The military coup perpetrated in Chile in 1973 by General Augusto Pinochet with the support of the Nixon administration in the United States had an immense impact. Its human cost was tremendous. It destroyed the productive capacity of our countries and imposed state terrorism with shootings, torture, imprisonment, and exiling. We received these exiles in Buenos Aires and helped them and their families travel to safety abroad.

Ikeda: Former president Patricio Aylwin Azocar told me much about the overthrow of civilian government by the Pinochet militarist regime. In the dialogue he and I published together, *Dawn of the Pacific*, (*La Alborado del Pacifico*), he called the Pinochet government a tyranny of extraordinary brutality. The first few years were especially horrible, with tens of thousands of arrests, relocations, and forced exiles. More than two thousand people were summarily executed and shot. More than a thousand were declared missing, which means they were killed and their bodies dumped into the sea or buried in places where no one could find them. Fear ruled the whole country and spread to all parts of Latin America.

Esquivel: Yes, it did. For years we worked in countries where horrors and serious human-rights violations affected the lives of the people. Such occurrences took place practically every day under the military dictatorships of Chile, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Guatemala. In Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay some Latin American bishops and I were condemned and expelled by ruling dictatorships. We complained to the Organization of American States, the United Nations, and the European Parliament and to national, international, and

religious organizations. Some doors opened to us, and we knew that saving lives depended on our efforts. We helped relocate political refugees mainly to Canada, Sweden, and European nations.

The Archives of Terror, discovered in Asuncion, Paraguay proved the existence of what was called Operation Condor. It revealed the roles and responsibilities of intervening Latin American countries in assassinating, abducting, and transferring prisoners from one country to another. We referred to Operation Condor as Terror International (*La Internacional del Terror*). Groups responsible for implementing the program were paramilitary or para-police. Their operations extended beyond Latin America to the United States and Europe.

Ikeda: Operation Condor revealed how the military in various Latin American countries was implicated in criminal acts. They exchanged information about people opposed to them and cooperated in arresting and taking them into custody. They abducted and transferred refugees who were then publicly said to have "disappeared."

Evil powers are quick to collude. The good, on the other hand, rarely unite. This is one of the factors accounting for much of the tragedy of the past. The unity of the good surely is the key to a brighter future and the only way to resist evil thoroughly.

Esquivel: Our efforts at first were very frail. But as we went along, we discovered that our weakness was actually a strength. We were able to rely on the will of God, the power of prayer and reflection, and the strength of resistance in each of us. We found out that we must not allow fear to dominate us. We learned of the risks and perils to which we exposed ourselves, our families, activists of and our own organization, SERPAJ.

Ikeda: Valuable and important knowledge. You have manifested the true strength of the human spirit in your courageous nonviolent activities. As a quintessential practitioner of nonviolence Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "Nonviolence is the law of our species (humankind) as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law—to the strength of the spirit."[2]

Nonviolence is the proof of our humanity. As violence is the explosion of brutishness, so nonviolence is the manifestation of the robust human spirit.

Serving the People

Ikeda: Your family is very artistic. You yourself are a sculptor, painter, and architect. Your wife Amanda is a pianist and composer. Your life was once a quiet one devoted to art. Yet, in a very praiseworthy manner, you chose to live for the sake of helping the unfortunate in the turbulent struggle for human rights.

In art or religion, nothing could be more comfortable than remaining within one's individual category, paying no attention to social realities. Such a life is free of criticism and pressure. But, to join the masses in the often tempestuous struggle for their good is far nobler. By taking up this higher cause, you became a sculptor of the ultimate personality, an architect of an immortal life, and a composer of eternal humanity.

Esquivel: Thank you very much for your understanding and recognition. Certainly our lives as artists and teachers have been good and successful. Amanda has appeared in piano concerts and composes in different forms: symphonies, chorals, cantatas, and quartets. I have held exhibitions, produced monuments, and taught on the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the *Universidad Nacional de la Plata*, in art schools, and at the *Instituto del Profesorado*. All the while our little children grew and smiled at life.

As the great teacher and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi said, "Fear paralyzes, and it is only a step from fear to cowardice."

I have often reflected on this sober thought. If we allow ourselves to be subdued by cowardice, we lose the fundamental condition of our humanity by being subjected to domineering power and the violence and fear it generates.

I consider myself a laborer, a patient artisan modeling forms that emerge from my hands and tools. Not all my materials are equal. Each has its own energy and emerging vitality, which I must liberate by living as fully as I can. It is necessary to discover and respect the essential character of each.

Ikeda: Every one of your words conveys stubborn resistance to evil and the passion that compels you to help the suffering. Your calling yourself a laborer reveals awareness of yourself as a human being free of affectation. It suggests the radiant conviction and pride you feel in walking side by side with the ordinary people. Mahatma Gandhi had a similar attitude.

By representing devotion to the fight for universal justice and for the

sake of other people, sparing no pains, you represent humanity in the sublime form of the bodhisattva as taught by Buddhism.

Esquivel: I am honored. In the first part of the 1970s, as I was busily organizing the Service of Peace and Justice Foundation in Latin America, I traveled to different countries, where I met with religious and ecclesiastical communities, agricultural and indigenous leaders, labor unions, and representatives of the very poorest sectors of the population.

In spite of their own poverty, many of the men and women I met were able to come together with the poor people and share their own bread with the needy. This really marvelous experience reconciled us to life and to the capacity of the poor to resist socially, culturally, and spiritually. It rewarded us greatly with strength and hope. Humanity has extraordinary capacities when working for shared objectives of liberty and peace. In all parts of Latin America, even in isolated and inhospitable places, we encounter men and women who join with the people in the search for ways and alternatives to solve the problems they face. Many of them have given their lives for their compatriots.

Ikeda: Your words move me to profound reverence. As you imply, people who devote themselves to a great cause can manifest immeasurable power. In an interview, you once explained your philosophical reasons for participating in the human-rights movement. First you mentioned your desire to remain true to your beliefs. Then you said you wanted to learn what the people need by observing the reality confronting them. Then, in a way that I find unforgettable, you said that, coming from a poor family yourself, you had physical experience of the poverty of the people. A sense of deep responsibility caused you to arise and lead the masses.

Born into a poor fishing family, in your youth, you sometimes had food one day then went without for three. Observing them firsthand, you saw that poor people often lack the spirit to demand their just human rights. I understand that you decided to join Christian groups and popular organizations to deal with the problem of human rights when you were twelve or thirteen.

My family too made its living from the sea. We produced edible seaweed products. When I was in the second year of primary school, father was bedridden with rheumatism. This made our situation much worse, but mother kept her spirits up and often joked that we were "champion-class poor people." Her good cheer in times of trouble encouraged us children greatly.

The masses are the indispensable hope of the future. That is why we must never lose sight of the great rule: no matter what the situation, stay in touch with the people, join in their struggle, and—if need be—die with them.

Esquivel: One of the most gratifying developments in our experiences was ecumenism among diverse Christian and non-Christian groups acting together for the people and transcending ideological and sectarian barriers. This barrier-less ecumenism arose from the needs of the people united in defense of life and human dignity.

Many agnostics too took part. Though without religious beliefs, they identified with social needs and on many occasions participated in prayer and meditation meetings, offering suggestions with one goal in mind: to save lives. This encouraged us to continue the struggle.

Ikeda: Your relating this important piece of history reminds me of something my own mentor, Josei Toda, second president of Soka Gakkai, frequently said about the ecumenical approach: "If giants like Nichiren Daishonin, Shakyamuni, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Marx, and others could come together for a conference they would talk in terms of compassion and love. They would discuss, make concessions, and respect each other. For the attainment of the eternal happiness of humanity, their great shared goal, they would abolish war, violence, and conflict and would agree perfectly on ways to bring real peace and true prosperity." To give relief to the suffering, troubled, and ill, the creative minds of these great leaders would overcome prejudiced radicalism and conflict.

Religion does not exist for its own sake. Its basic goal is making humanity happy. If they are true to this fundamental aim, religions can cooperate to overcome differences for the sake of peace and the general welfare.

Battling with Militaristic Regimes

Ikeda: While you and your associates were working together for human rights, the threat of militarism was spreading throughout Latin America. For instance, from the 1950s in your own homeland Argentina, political power changed hands time and time again between militaristic and democratic regimes. In 1973, Juan Domingo Perón became president for the third time. Upon his death in 1974, his wife Isabel became president, and the political situation worsened.

Esquivel: Yes. The general crisis broke out in 1975, many families—women and young and old alike—came to the offices of our Latin America branch of the Service of Peace and Justice Foundation for help in finding loved ones and friends who had gone missing. The state remained silent and negative. Most churches shut their doors on victims' families. Labor Unions and political parties had been neutralized. So relatives came to us with their grief. We joined in a solid effort to help them. Of course, simply listening passively was insufficient. It was necessary to take action. Our consciences, spirits, and human dignity would not permit us to remain indifferent to the suffering of our people.

Ikeda: In the *Republic*, Plato sharply rebukes cowards who think only of themselves and turn away from social realities. Such a person "lies low and does only what he's meant to do. It's as if he's taken shelter under a wall during a storm, with the wind whipping up the dust and rain pelting down; lawlessness infects everyone else he sees, so he is content if he can find a way to live his life here on earth without becoming tainted by immoral or unjust deeds, and to depart from life confidently, and without anger and bitterness."[3]

Such cowardice is not, however, the way to reform society. People who behave this way are ultimately swallowed up in evil themselves.

Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, first president of Soka Gakkai, wrote, "The results of refraining from doing good are the same as those from doing evil." Doing nothing allows evil to run rampant and is therefore tantamount to doing evil. You lit the flame of justice and at mortal risk battled evil for the sake of the people. The masses praise and vigorously support people like you.

Esquivel: As your quotation from the *Republic* indicates, human beings are compelled to make choices. The paths they choose define their lives. We can close our ears, eyes, and hearts to the people and go our own ways as if they were of no importance. This is to choose egoism. Or we can assume the capacity to share and travel with our own and other fraternal peoples.

Ikeda: From the late 1960s into the 1970s, Argentina experienced chronic inflation and enormous debts. Terrorism reigned, with about 20,000 incidents recorded for the decade starting in the late 1960s. In these circumstances, General Jorge Videla led a coup d'etat that removed Isabel Perón from office.

Esquivel: Yes, the coup took place on March 24, 1976. And from that moment, the armed forces assumed total power. During this period, the so-called doctrine of national security reached its apogee on the South American continent. People were kidnapped and "disappeared," and the state was intent on evading its responsibility toward them. Since judicial protection no longer functioned, vulnerability was total.

Under such conditions, we could not remain indifferent. We were compelled to muster our forces and try to denounce injustices. Our basic task was reclaiming the rights of individuals and of the people as a whole.

Ikeda: Many precious Argentine lives were lost because of kidnapping and torture at the hands of the militarist government in power from 1976 to 1983. During this period, you boldly rose up to do something about the situation. In June, 1994, to an assembly of spellbound Soka University students, you related experiences from this dark period too shocking to be describable by anyone who had not actually survived them. "The thirty thousand people did not all die at once. They disappeared one or two at a time. Although the numbers of victims increased from five to ten and to a hundred, society raised no clamor of protest. In this way, thirty thousand people lost their lives."

Little by little the military government "disappeared" people they considered undesirable and lied to conceal its own connections with the disappearances. Some uninformed people and the general mass media bought the authorities' attempts to smear the victims as villains. But your own written condemnation exposed the truth about their deliberate plan to remove a huge number of missing innocent people.

Esquivel: Unfortunately that is true.

Ikeda: Victor Hugo once wrote that lying is the very face of the Devil.[4] Indeed constant lying that deceives the people into believing falsehoods to be true and injustices to be just is the habitual practice of evil. Because cowardly lying is the companion of violence, the just must never remain silent about it. Justice is not real unless it speaks with the voice of truth. Many people prefer to remain on the sidelines. You, on the other hand, were unable to remain silent in the face of the authorities' immoral lack of conscience and bore the brunt of the battle to speak on behalf of the voiceless oppressed.

Esquivel: As Christians, we were responsible for our neighbors, our

people, and other peoples of the world. Common values identify us as members of the human family.

Ikeda: Buddhism proclaims the responsibility that bodhisattvas have for all sentient beings on Earth. These are formulated as the Four Universal Vows incumbent on all Mahayana bodhisattvas. The first is to save all sentient beings; that is, to aid suffering beings throughout their lives. The second is to eradicate countless earthly desires; that is, to challenge the delusions (evil intents) inherent in human life and to transform all of them into wisdom (good intents). Third is to master innumerable Buddhist teachings. By extension, the term *Buddhist teachings* can mean the philosophical teachings evolved by humanity everywhere and at all times. Thus this third vow means mastering the human spiritual heritage and using it to aid all beings on the basis of Buddhism.

The fourth vow—to attain supreme enlightenment—pertains to self-perfection as taught in Buddhism. It means establishing the realm of the Greater Self of unity with the fundamental and eternal aspects of the cosmos.

Striving for the self realization for both his or her own and the other, the bodhisattva feels responsible for the happiness of the masses. In short, the struggle for the salvation of the masses creates the highest values human beings can attain. The continuing challenge is to enhance human dignity by helping save the ordinary people. No matter how difficult the task, we must persevere in creating value, which in Japanese is the *soka* in the name of Soka Gakkai.

Esquivel: Value creation—*soka*—motivates the struggle for dignity, the values that make us human, and the societies we are trying to construct from faith and commitment to life. It is the quest for the ecumenical approach permitting us to discover views and ideas for analyzing and understanding the human condition in all its complexity, the life of the people, and the ways of power.

Ikeda: You have struggled against suppression of human rights in many parts of Latin America. Even before the military coup d'etat in Argentina, you said you could not ignore or remain silent about the many acts of terror and repression then taking place in your country. As is well known, you were in the forefront of the march of the Mothers of the May Plaza (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo*) demanding the return of vanished loved ones. For your efforts in this connection, I believe your own family was arrested.

Esquivel: Yes, in May, 1976, the police raided the offices of the Service of Peace and Justice Foundation and arrested all our associates—male and female—including my oldest son Leonardo. At the time, Amanda and I were in Vienna working with various organizations and denouncing serious human-rights violations in Argentina and other South American countries.

We immediately initiated an international campaign and succeeded in having our associates liberated in two days. For reasons of security, we therefore decided to get our children out of the country. The Austrian embassy in Argentina protected them and succeeded in getting them out.

After meeting up with our children in Geneva, we took refuge in Vienna. Then after traveling to Brussels, we decided to go to Paris.

We had many sympathetic friends in Europe and could have settled there. But my work and commitment were with my people and my fellow Latin-Americans. I could not leave companions exposed to the hazards represented by the military dictatorship. With great courage and sense of purpose, they resolved not to close the Service of Peace and Justice Foundation but to continue working at the risk of everything.

Ikeda: Unable to betray companions struggling for justice, your family chose the path of great human virtue. Thereafter, as you continued the battle in the name of the peoples of Latin America, the authorities stepped up their suppressive policies against you.

Esquivel: In Ecuador too repression awaited me. When finally I was free, the family decided to return to Argentina. We could not abandon our comrades and people. We had to testify and set an example in both struggle and resistance. We knew the possible consequences of our actions. Amanda's great firmness and courage were a mainstay. With her great resolution, she always demonstrates calm and equilibrium.

While taking part in a conference of Latin American bishops in Ecuador, I was arrested and imprisoned in Riobamba, at the Casa de la Santa Cruz. Arrested with me were 17 Latin American bishops and four lay and religious North Americans. After being released, I returned to Argentina, where, as I was trying to renew my passport, the Central Department of Federal Police detained me.

Ikeda: I believe that was in April 1977, a time when the situation grew darker and darker for dissidents, who never knew when they might be killed.

Falsely accused of crimes, without due process of law, you were tor-

tured with things like electrical shocks. You owed your life to the courageous acts of your wife. When she hurried to the prison upon learning of your fate, the authorities, insidiously intent on eradicating someone they considered a troublemaker, lied to her, saying that you had not been arrested and that you were not there. For a few days, newspapers reported your disappearance. But your wife refused to go away silently. Accompanied by lawyers, she went to the authorities and publicly proclaimed that you had been arrested while the two of you were renewing your passport. Actually she had not been on the scene but said this to dramatize the arrest. When, thanks to her courage and wisdom, the truth became public knowledge, they could no longer try to shut you up.

Esquivel: I knew they were looking for me. But I had nothing to hide. Our work was always within the law and perfectly legitimate. But the military had other ideas. After I was detained, Amanda courageously hurried to the police department, where she announced that she knew where I was and wanted to see me. First they denied that I was being held in the Federal Security Supervision Prison. But Amanda insisted that she knew different because she was there with me when I was detained. Finally, her firmness and resolution were so strong that the police had to admit they had lied about my detention. This was the beginning of our long struggle against the military government.

The Cruelty of Prison Life

Ikeda: Throughout your life of tumultuous struggle, your wife has remained a cheerful comrade by your side. I am deeply convinced that your victorious drama is hers too.

Esquivel: I am wholeheartedly grateful to her both as a wife and as a comrade. Like other women—who later formed the Mothers of May Plaza movement—she rapped on the doors of many ministries and churches. She visited bishops, ambassadors, and various organizations for both my liberation and the liberation of others kidnapped or missing. People who shirked responsibility shut their doors on her. Out of fear, some of our friends would not so much as telephone us.

At about that time, delegations and celebrities, international jurists, and representatives of churches and human-rights organizations began coming to Argentina. Unyielding in the face of government pressure and threats, they conferred and started resistance movements. When she was finally allowed to see me, Amanda told me of the things being done by

all over the world for the sake of my freedom.

Ikeda: Your fourteen months in prison must have been indescribably bitter. Only people who have experienced it know how fearsome imprisonment is. As I know from experience—albeit a brief one—the violence of authority emerges fully in prison. For this reason I sympathize with what you must have felt. I understand that your solitary cell was barely four paces to a side. Broken windows let in the cold that made sleeping hard. Your jailor woke you every two hours in the hope of breaking you physically and mentally. But you endured it all triumphantly.

Esquivel: For the first days of my imprisonment, I was shut up in a disgusting little cell called a "tube," where monotonous days and nights were varied only by the transfer of prisoners, occasional yells, and the racket of weapons and vehicles. Amanda came every day to bring me food and sometimes to spend a few minutes with me.

When the tube was opened, the bright light dazzled me until my eyes became accustomed to it. In the brief moments granted me, I was able to see many graffiti made by former male and female inmates. There were prayers and names of missing loved ones. I even remember some of them. "In the twilight of life, you will be interrogated if you have lived in love." "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "God save us and grant us Your peace." I remember also insults directed toward the police and the military and the names and emblems of favorite football clubs.

But the one that made the most profound mental and spiritual impression on me was a large stain on a cell wall. Little by little, it became apparent that the stain was blood, in which someone had written, "God does not slaughter." As an act of faith, an imprisoned man or woman who, in confinement and probably after repeated torturing, found the strength to invoke God with his or her own blood.

Ikeda: Those words represent an eternally unforgettable cry. How many times has justice been violated in this way! During World War II, the Japanese militarist government threw Tsunesaburo Makiguchi in prison, where he died. After the war, although he had no great understanding of Buddhism, Kunio Yanagita (1875–1962), the father of Japanese folklore studies, wrote this about Mr. Makiguchi: "Working with young people, he proclaimed doctrines of pacificism and opposition to the war. For this reason, the military frowned upon him and ultimately senselessly imprisoned him. He refused to make the concessions his captors

required and died either in prison or immediately after being released. In other words, he suffered the kind of martyrdom not uncommon in the history of religious founders."

In spite of the severe interrogation methods used by the special police, Mr. Makiguchi would not budge from his position. The prevailing Shinto doctrine was that, since Japan was the land of the gods, any war it perpetrated was sacred. Mr. Makiguchi flatly rejected the idea. As is revealed in the interrogation records of the time, he believed that the Sino-Japanese war and the so-called Great East Asia War had both arisen because Japan slandered the Buddhist Law. The militarists used the idea of a holy war to convince the people to countenance the invasion of China and other Asian nations under the banner of what was called the Greater East Asia Mutual Prosperity Sphere. In the very midst of this war, Mr. Makiguchi dealt a destructive blow to the spiritual foundations of war itself.

The Buddhist Law he accused Japan of slandering is the law of respect for the dignity of life as expounded in the Lotus Sutra. Japan violated this law by committing atrocities and violent invasions that trampled on the dignity of life. True to his religious convictions, until the day he died in prison, Mr. Makiguchi condemned this slander of the Law and the nation committing it.

Esquivel: I see. I am certain that, as an educator and a person of awakened conscience, you understand what I say. Imprisoned, tortured, and humiliated, many of my companions were destroyed physically and spiritually. They were dehumanized. They lost the power to resist and all sense of meaning in life. They were crushed.

Others of us learned how to keep from being crushed, how not to submit. It is not that we were better or stronger. In my own case, spiritual resistance supported me because I knew that liberty lives inside us and cannot be incarcerated in any prison. Freedom lives in commitment, in the decision to take the people's part, and in knowing that you are not alone. Many men, women, organizations, and religious groups were with us, joining us in prayer and struggle. This encouraged my prison companions and me. Resistance was our byword.

Ikeda: Only someone who has walked the line between life and death could utter golden words like yours. The steely strength of your spirit conveys your great earnestness. I am reminded of Jawaharlal Nehru, who was imprisoned nine times in the course of his struggle and who wrote that being imprisoned effects different people in different ways.

Whereas some become weak and frustrated, others grow braver and get a still firmer grip on their beliefs. The latter kind of person exerts a powerful influence on the masses of the people. You are one of them.

Esquivel: You praise me too highly.

Ikeda: In the summer of 1957, I was unjustly imprisoned in a tiny solitary cell with barred windows. As temperatures soared over forty degrees Celsius, day after day, I was cruelly interrogated. I slept leaning on the wall, which was slightly cooler than the rest of the room. Prosecutors threatened imprison Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda unless I admitted to the charges brought against me. It was not until four and a half years later that I was finally cleared in a court of law.

Nichiren too was unjustly exiled to the island of Sado but never lost courage. In 1274, upon returning to the city of Kamakura, the political center of the country at the time, he openly remonstrated with one of the most influential government officials named Hei no Saemon. He told him, "Even if it seems that, because I was born in the ruler's domain, I follow him in my actions, I will never follow him in my heart."

In this encapsulation of the spirit he demonstrated throughout life, Nichiren is saying that, though they can exile him or release him, the authorities can never constrain his freedom of mind. This same spirit is an essence of Buddhism and the main current of the SGI struggle for human rights.

Nichiren's words, like the roar of a lion, are included in the chapter "Limits of Power" in the universally and eternally important human-rights work Birthright of Man: Selected Texts, published in 1968 by UNESCO to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the enactment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The first two Soka Gakkai presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, inherited Nichiren's unyielding spirit. Even during the days of fanatic Japanese nationalism preceding World War II, they boldly spoke out for the true Buddhism and unceasingly struggled in the name of peace and the happiness of the people. For this, their freedom of speech was violated. They were subject to special criminal investigation and continuously harassed. Finally, to cap this inhuman treatment, they were arrested and imprisoned. In spite of the cruelty he experienced, Mr. Makiguchi resolutely declared that all his sufferings were insignificant compared with what Nichiren had undergone. Kept in solitary in a small, dark, cold cell, he constantly planned for the future of society and the happiness of the masses until at last he died. Josei Toda, who was

finally released, took a solemn vow to take vengeance on the powers responsible for his mentor's death by building a post-war society of peace and respect for human rights. I shall always remember hearing him echo his mentor's words by saying, in choked voice, that his own sufferings were insignificant in comparison with those of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi.

Esquivel: I am greatly impressed by hearing of the struggle of your predecessors in Soka Gakkai and by the words of Nichiren, who most accurately said that life is worth living only when liberty breathes in truth and in the shadow-dispelling light. I am certain that, far from being futile, your leaders' commitment and service to their people and to all humanity are still bearing fruit throughout the world today. The values they represent reconcile us to life.

The lotus rises from the mud to bloom in glory. Similarly, the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, while rooted in reality, shed light that transcends the visible world.

In prison, when night fell and the guards had gone, closing the cell gratings, I had about an hour for exercise and yoga. This was my only time for it, since we were forbidden exercise. If I had been caught at it, I would have been taken to the torture house.

Meditation was fundamental for me. I strove to attend to two things: what took place within me and what took place outside me. I wanted to attain interior equilibrium in which to hear the silence of God.

Ikeda: For you, it was a struggle to get through one prison day after another. As he was engaged in a similar battle, in 1944, Josei Toda read and reread the Lotus Sutra until finally he attained a great certitude. He became absolutely sure that Buddhahood is nothing other than life itself. In other words, he saw that it existed in his own life and throughout the cosmos and is in fact one with universal life. The Buddha as expounded in the Lotus Sutra is inherent deep in the lives of all beings. At the same time, however, it transcends individual manifestations to fill the universe.

Josei Toda became aware of the Buddha life deep within the world of actuality, with its associated evils of violence, war, conflict, discrimination, suppression, and environmental destruction. He then developed the idea of the Human Revolution and started a movement dedicated to the salvation of the suffering masses. This spiritual leap he made while still in prison became a major driving force in the later development of Soka Gakkai. Your own experiences in prison marked a dramatic turning

point too.

Esquivel: Yes, they did. At sunrise on May 5, 1977, I was taken from prison and, still fettered, was driven in a patrol car to the airport at Sant Justo. I was forced on a plane and chained to one of the seats in the rear. Thus began what I thought would be my death flight. For two hours or more we flew over the Rio de la Plata and the sea. Horrified at the idea that I was about to be thrown out into the sea, I nonetheless tried to calm my spirit and heart through prayer.

Ikeda: You were in a precarious situation on the verge of death. Was anyone else onboard with you?

Esquivel: Onboard were the murderous guards preparing to commit their crime. Their human victims are invisible to such slaves of violence. Meanwhile, as I watched them preparing to throw me into the Rio de la Plata or the sea, I wondered how many people they had thrown in alive. I asked myself how they stayed calm. And, after finishing the assassination, how did they get home to love their wives and children. I prayed for the butchers about to kill me. I prayed that in His infinite mercy, God would touch their hearts and pardon them.

I knew the fates of prisoners who, drugged and bound in wires or chains, were tossed into the sea, because at the International Jurists Association in Geneva, I had seen microfilms of cadavers washed ashore by currents on the Uruguay coast and of others eaten away at by fish. I felt defenseless and impotent before the mad state in which the human being is considered as no more than a disposable object.

I could only pray to God for my family, for the people of Argentina and the rest of Latin America, and for myself. I could only ask Him to forgive my faults and to help the people transcend their grave predicament.

Ikeda: You were resigned to death.

Esquivel: Yes. The day was cold; the sky was clear and cloudless. The immense serenity of creation enveloped the dawn. I saw the sun rising on the horizon as the sky went red, violet, yellow, and orange. I could not help admiring such beauty, even as hatred and fear filled the plane. I took a deep breath, perhaps my last. And I gave thanks to God for the chance to behold the great beauty of creation.

Just as preparations for dumping me overboard had been completed,

the pilot unexpectedly received orders to take me to the airbase at Moron. The guys on board looked at each other either confused by the instructions or disgruntled at being unable to complete their task.

The plane headed for the military base. There, after some hours of deliberation among the commanders, it was decided to send me to Unit 9 at La Plata, a maximum-security prison.

Ikeda: Why were the orders suddenly changed?

Esquivel: An official told me, "Set your mind at ease. We're taking you to U9. You're safe. You've stirred up a lot of reaction."

On the border between life and death, many things passed through my mind. I lost the capacity of thinking rationally. Prayer and faith in God were all that sustained me.

Ikeda: Though under different circumstances, Nichiren too experienced a chilling instant on the boundary between life and death. Time and time again he encountered potentially mortal dangers, one of the most perilous of which was the so-called Tatsunokuchi Persecution of 1271. Falsely accused of rebellion against the authorities of the Kamakura shogunal government, Nichiren was taken to an execution ground at a place called Tatsunokuchi to be beheaded. Late at night, treated as a criminal, he was set on a horse and surrounded by military guards. Some of his disciples heard of the danger he was in and hurried to the place. Resolved to share his martyrdom, they clung to his horse's muzzle. As they approached the appointed place, Nichiren said solemnly to his weeping disciples, "You don't understand. What greater joy could there be?" In saying this, he showed himself to embody the ultimate human victor.

But, just at the last moment, a blindingly bright object flashed across the night sky. (Dr. Hideo Hirose, professor emeritus and former director of the astronomical observatory of Tokyo University, suggested that the object may have been a large meteor caused by Encke's Comet located in the Aries-Tauras constellation.)[5] The amazed soldiers trembled with fear. As Nichiren himself recorded, the executioner fell stunned to the ground. Others slipped from their horses and groveled, while still others ran away. Following the Tatsunokuchi incident, Nichiren was exiled to the Island of Sado, from which it was thought nobody could escape alive.

His opponents constantly sought to kill him. Still, even ill fed and poorly clothed in the bitter cold of Sado, he wrote whole series of teach-

ings and letters of encouragement to disciples at home undergoing repeated persecution in his name.

The Grassroots Peace Prize

Ikeda: The desperate efforts on the part of your wife Amanda and many representatives of the ordinary people brought about a sudden reversal of the orders to kill you. Hearing your experiences renews my consciousness of the evil inherent in power and the harm and pain it has caused the innocent throughout history. As Plato points out in the *Gorgias* atrocious, inhumane people arise from among the powerful. The evil of power makes the powerful despise others as means to the satisfaction of their own desires and take pleasure in domineering. In Buddhist terms, this attitude is symbolized by the so-called Devil of the Sixth Heaven, who jealously hates, reviles, and oppresses devotees of righteous philosophy and faith.

Struggle for popular happiness, peace, and justice is a battle against the evil of power. We must always be wary of authority. This is part of the eternal struggle to reverse human misery. As Martin Luther King, Jr., who was himself imprisoned, enthusiastically insisted,"If history teaches anything, it is that evil is recalcitrant and determined, and never voluntarily relinquishes its hold short of an almost fanatical resistance. Evil must be attacked by a counteracting persistence, by the day-to-day assault of the battering rams of justice."[6]

For your own great achievements as a warrior for human rights and a victor over oppression, you received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980. I understand that you were still in prison when you were nominated.

Esquivel: That is true. One day my wife Amanda and our son Leonardo came to tell me that my nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize was being discussed on the international scene. I had been recommended by Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, Peace Prize laureates from Northern Ireland.

Some months before I was informed that the organization *Pax Christi Internacional* had awarded me the John XXIII Peace Memorial. But all of this seemed remote and strange to me. Prison is a completely distinct world. Life in a cell is monotonous; punishment is the only alteration in the routine. For prisoners, surviving is the main thing.

Ikeda: Then later, after you had been released and were active again, you received notification of having been given the Peace Prize.

Esquivel: I was away from home and when I telephoned my wife, at home, she told me that she had received a telephone call from the Norwegian Embassy and that they urgently wanted to get in touch with me. I headed there at once because I thought it had something to do with information I was providing on human-rights violations.

When I arrived and the ambassador informed me that I had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, I was more surprised than anybody. I could not believe it was real. There were many candidates who did extraordinary work in many countries—people famous all over the world!

Ikeda: At the time, your Nobel Prize became famous far and wide as the Grassroots Peace Prize. Not long thereafter, the military government issued a statement about patching things up.

Esquivel: My first reaction was not to accept the prize as due to me personally because the work in Argentina and Latin America is not mine alone. Thousands of men and women; indigenous people; and social, popular, and religions organizations share our struggles, hopes, and hardships. I accepted it in the name of those who work, live, and walk with some of the poorest and most marginalized people on the continent. During the more than twenty years that have passed since I received the prize, I have always tried keep my words and deeds consistent.

Ikeda: The truly great are truly modest as well. I believe that more than its enhancing you, your receipt of it enhances the Nobel Peace Prize.

Since receiving it, you have carried on your struggle in the name of a just society and respect for humanity. You are still taking part in the search for people arrested and lost without trace under the Argentine militarist regime. In cooperation with other Nobel laureates, you have worked to promote global human-rights movements and to organize a summit to deliberate the economies and development problems of industrializing nations while exerting your utmost to eradicate social evil from the world. Because you have never ceased your relentless struggle in the name of humanity and its future, you are a true lion of human rights and a champion of peace, announcing to all people the dawning of a century of humanism.

Champions of Nonviolence

Ikeda: Reflections on great people can have a strengthening effect on

life itself. I understand that familiarity with the writings of people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Lev Tolstoy from an early age cultivated in you respect for champions of peace. I have seen a photograph of you at home next to a statue of Gandhi taken the day after the announcement of your having received the Nobel Peace Prize (October 14, 1980). This is most appropriate because you belong in the great human spiritual lineage of champions of nonviolence.

Esquivel: Mahatma Gandhi has had a great influence on my life and continues to influence me today. He gave up everything in order to be a true human being and part of the evolution of truth and justice. His social and political actions in the service of his people were carried out for the sake of spiritual awakening, the protection of the value of human dignity, and reaffirmation of the truth that all human beings are equal and have the same rights.

His nonviolence movement challenged the British Empire. At first it seemed impossible. But, through experience and daily struggle, it showed that nonviolent reform can be achieved through opposition, noncooperation, and refusal to be complicit with injustice.

Ikeda: His inexpressibly great achievement was to experience himself and revive in modern times the Indian spirit of *ahimsa* or nonviolence or not taking life. As is well known, Albert Einstein said of Gandhi, "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth".

In my speeches and addresses I have frequently spoken of the significance of Gandhi's thought and actions. He always worked cooperatively among the ordinary people for the sake of their own good. This is the aspect of his approach with which I feel most sympathetic. Jawaharlal Nehru expressed high praise when he said that Gandhi evaluated every issue on the basis of its usefulness to the oppressed people of India.

I entirely sympathize with the limitless belief in the human spirit that pulsates in Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence.

Gandhi is said to have been fond of reading John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, the title of which is a reference to a passage in the New Testament. As Gandhi learned from this book, Ruskin believed that neither the individual nor society as a whole can find liberty and happiness until they became the lot of the very last person on Earth. It also taught him that the good existing in one person exits in all people. Gandhi's perceptive eye discerned something radiant and holy in everybody regardless of rank or wealth. He worried constantly about the suffering people, as is

indicated by his remark, "My religion is serving and working for the people." He lived among the people, sharing their joys and sorrows and boldly opposing social ills and all oppressive authorities.

Esquivel: I agree. The Mahatma was an educator. Together with community life and the inculcation of responsible liberty, education was his great objective. The ashram, the center of his resistance movement, was a place of training. He said that simply taking India back from the English would be insufficient. The real revolution would not be achieved until the untouchables had the same rights as the Brahmans. He found his duty to achieve this end expressed in the sacred Indian texts, the Gospels, and the example of the Buddha. In other words, he was open to the ecumenical spirit and could understand the truths of other religions. Devoted to prayer and the spiritual way, his whole life proved that mystics and contemplative people are active, not passive.

Ikeda: Faith is conviction. The deeds of the person who prays profoundly are permeated with justice and conviction. The point is to pray while acting and act while praying. Gandhi's life is a good example of this principle.

Gandhi's profound interest in Shakyamuni and Buddhism is well known. He wrote in one of his letters that coming to know the teachings of the Buddha opened his eyes to the limitless possibilities of nonviolence. His daily prayers included the mantra "Hail to the Sutra of the Lotus of the Mystic Law," or "Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo" which expresses the ultimate Law of the cosmos. His grandson Arun Gandhi told me that he remembered his grandfather's chanting it. Gandhi was indeed open to Buddhism and other religions. This openness enabled him to imbibe and sublimate spiritual nourishment transcending philosophy and religion.

Esquivel: Precisely so.

Ikeda: In February, 1979, I visited Raj Ghat, where the body of the assassinated Gandhi was cremated. After laying flowers at the memorial, in memory of the noble man who gave his life for the Indian people, I wrote in the visitors book:

> "Father of your country sleeps here.
> People of your country visit this shrine.
> I pray for the eternal and abundant happiness

of both the father and his children."

As I reflected on Gandhi's services to his people, I recalled how my own mentor Josei Toda had longed with all his soul to remove the very word *misery* from the world.

As I have said, during World War II, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, first president of Soka Gakkai, and Josei Toda, second president, opposed the foolish policies of the Japanese militarist government. For this they were thrown in prison. Mr. Makiguchi died there. Mr. Toda was released after the war. Beholding the misery inflicted on the ordinary people convinced him that, though it might seem circuitous, the only path to real peace was to create a movement capable of propelling the times forward and making the ordinary people independent, strong, and wise. He set to work bringing this about.

Soka Gakkai is an organization of the common people. At the outset, few people responded to Toda's call. But in the world, as his disciple, I embraced his philosophy and have striven to expand a popular movement dedicated to peace, culture, and education.

Especially Significant People

Esquivel: The histories of the presidents of Soka Gakkai and the course of Gandhi's life impress me with the importance of the mentor-disciple relationship. At various stages in life, we all look for references for self-examination. We seek spiritual guides or models in social, political, cultural, and other disciplines. These models may be from the world of sport, exemplary figures in science or art, or combat heroes. They serve as examples that, in one form or another, we want to emulate be it out of admiration, sympathy, or appreciation of their qualities. This relates to personal evolution in terms of awareness and view of life.

The first models we have are our parents or others who foster us and mold our lives. Often we seek great people who, for some reason, have had a strong impact on us. At other times, we discover in their human dimension, personal affections that show us the way and guide us along the paths of our lives. It is important to discover in such people values that help us grow and understand. When they are physically close at hand, we can engage in person-to-person exchanges that help us understand still better. Such people can be considered mentors or spiritual guides.

Ikeda: Encounters—with people or even great books—help give human

life shape. Good people have always experienced major enlightening encounters, which are a great source of joy. In my youth, making contacts with the wisdom of humanity through reading and discussions with wise people delighted me. In his *Hyperion*, one of the books I read when I was young, the German poet Friedrich Holderlin (1770–1843) comments on his good fortune in having met noble people from a very early age. In *The Divine Comedy*—another book always at my side in my young days—Dante expresses his joy at meeting his companion and guide Virgil in this unforgettable passage: "Now go; for both have one will: Thou guide, thou lord and master."

Having a mentor ennobles a life and makes it all the more precious. My own encounter with my mentor Josei Toda when I was nineteen has been the supreme joy of my life. Though he died years ago, to the present day, daily mental dialogue with Mr. Toda gives me the power to go forward.

Has there been someone of special meaning to your life?

Esquivel: Yes. I can answer your question by describing the following incident. Some years ago, I was in Washington DC to help celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Organization of American States (OAS). Among the many people invited to take part were special guests and members of the diplomatic corps, leading authorities, jurists, and representatives of various international organizations. The day proceeded calmly in accord with protocols established for such events. One of the scheduled activities was a dialogue among five Nobel Laureates from diverse fields. Audience interest and excitement grew stronger and stronger in the course of sober discussions of the problems of Latin-American peoples, human rights, the role of the OAS in conflicts, and international relations. The moderator guiding the debate used humorous wit to provide a few moments' diversion and relax the atmosphere whenever things showed signs of getting too tense. At one of those times, he asked each of us to name his or her most significant hero. Naturally, the question generated expectation and suspense.

One person cited George Washington and Winston Churchill for their roles as statesmen committed to the building of the United States of America and Great Britain. Another said Shakespeare the literary genius and great playwright. A third designated Marie Curie, who in spite of male exclusivism, courageously demonstrated dedication to science by persisting with her discoveries. A fourth introduced the name of General Simón Bolívar. All the people mentioned were extraordinary individuals who had done a great deal for their people and for humanity. In one way

or another, all the responses from the audience expressed recognition of individuals who dedicated their lives to carrying out injunctions from their consciences or from humanity.

Ikeda: All of them were great individuals whose names are inscribed in human history. Whom did you cite?

Esquivel: When the moderator asked who my hero was, I replied in a word, "Grandmother." The huge room exploded in guffaws. The full diplomatic corps had never laughed so hard. No one had expected me to cite my grandmother as a heroine and momentous figure in my life. I imagine they had expected a response more in accordance with social and cultural stereotypes. But how else could I let them know that there are people who live daily lives constructively and weigh all difficulties and who are models for everybody in society, in their little groups, in their villages and towns? I think I was right to suggest that, while attending big, external affairs, we often overlook the little things in daily life that are nonetheless important.

Ikeda: I should like to relate your wonderful response to many of the world's social leaders. Once when a certain celebrated person asked me what kind of person I considered noblest and greatest, I replied a mother of the simple people. As reliable as the sun, she works every day, whether it be rain, wind, or shine in the heat of the summer and the cold of the winter. She is burdened with the heavy labor of nurturing, protecting, and commiserating with life. Lives like hers lived in obscurity among the common people nonetheless radiate the light of sincerity, wisdom, and devotion.

I understand that your own mother died when you were only three. Your father, a fisherman, struggled with poverty. For a while, you lived with your grandmother, while your brothers went to there respective boarding schools. Like Mother Earth she supported you as you grew.

Esquivel: My grandmother Eugenia had a great influence on my juvenile attitudes and behavior. She was an Indio of the Guaraní tribe who never learned to speak Spanish correctly but preferred to express her feelings in the pleasing Guarani language. For a woman her age, she was strong and lively and had the sagacity of her people, of Mother Earth, or Pachamama as she is honorifically called. She talked with animals, plants and winds. She could tell when nature was thrilled or angered by harm done to her. Occasionally she would say to me, "Come

here, son. Sit and let Pachamama wrap you in her fragrance. She knows what's good for you. Try to learn to hear her. Don't strain. Just listen to what she says without words."

Ikeda: A brilliantly philosophical and beautiful story. Surely one of the causes of the modern forgetfulness of our humanity is the loss of attention to and converse with the world of nature. We must once again remember that we are part of that world. As Shakyamuni explains in the doctrine of dependent origination, nothing exists independently: all things are mutually interdependent. In his *The Treatise on the Middle Way*, the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE) illustrates this relationship with reference to firewood and fire. Firewood is only wood without fire. Without firewood, fire cannot burn. Each exists because of the other. They are, therefore, mutually interdependent. The existence of all other things too depends on cause.

The Chinese Tiantai Buddhist priest and scholar Miaole (711–82) taught the oneness of the life entity and its environment in a doctrine called in Japanese *Esho-funi*. Each depends on the other, and both are united on the profound level of cosmic life. Diverse forms of life come into being as a result of causal contacts with their environments. Buddhist dependent origination seems to relate to what you refer to as the Pachamama, to your dialogues with your grandmother, and to the Guarani people's way of living in oneness with the operations of nature.

Esquivel: Yes. My grandmother Eugenia was a countrywoman accustomed to the sun and to hard work. Long years of strenuous labor had made her hands strong. Deep wrinkles on her face were marks of time. Seated alone, she seemed to be waiting (no one knows for what) and listening in the silence. Her deep, weary, black eyes observed everything around her. She knew how to make sober deductions from human behavior. Years gave her the ability to understand without words and to know who was genuine and who assumed proud roles. She was rarely mistaken in evaluating people. She easily exposed people who, like actors, played a part and, confident in their ability to conceal their own identity behind a facade, hoped that others would notice only the performance.

In her limited Spanish vocabulary she would say things like, "That's a good person, he knows how to see you and hear you." When she disliked someone, she would say, "Watch out for him. He doesn't look at things straight on. He's ready to claw you at any moment." Or, "Never trust anybody who won't look you straight in the face or who beats

around the bush before saying something he doesn't want to say."

In our lives we all have unforgettable people who remain in our spirits permanently in spite of passing time and changing places and distances. People assign to certain individuals distinct roles and meanings. Some of them become publicly celebrated and serve as models for society on account of their courage and their commitment to their peoples and to all humanity.

Ikeda: I can tell how deeply you respected your grandmother. She surely had the keen wisdom needed to evaluate people accurately. If all the ordinary people were as wise as she, people with arrogant instincts and wicked intentions would be exposed; and the populace would no longer be duped and made to suffer by bad leaders. We must do all we can to enlighten the people and empower them to assume the lead in politics and society as a whole. For their part, leaders will be unable to redirect our violently changing society in the direction of prosperity and triumph unless they come into close contact with the ordinary people and learn their thoughts and actions from actual experience. The people are a goal in themselves; they must never be regarded as a mere means. They are the focal point. Putting them in the center of our thinking is the way to find hints for solutions to the modern complex of problems.

Esquivel: I agree wholeheartedly.

In addition to my grandmother, I might mention others who inspired me and set me an example. One was the Italian mystic, philosopher, author, and disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, Lanza del Vasto. He journeyed to India to participate in the liberation campaign. During the agrarian reformation program called Land Gift, he worked with Vinoba Bhave, one of Gandhi's chosen disciples. Through daily activities he discovered social and spiritual dimensions and came to see nonviolence as liberating power. His numerous written works include *Peregrinación a las Fuentes* (Return to the Source) and *Judas*. Upon returning to Europe, he founded the Community of the Ark, a religious, ecumenical, working order based on the Ghandian ashram.

I met him at a conference on nonviolence at the Faculty of Law of the University of Buenos Aires when I was still young. His lecture helped me discover new social dimensions and ideas. We became friends, and my wife and son and I decided to join the Community of the Ark. We took part in the first nonviolent demonstrations held in Argentina and thereafter in various Latin American countries.

Ikeda: Called Gandhi's spiritual heir, Vinoba Bhave, like other disciples gathered to study with the Mahatma before taking the independence struggle into other parts of the world. He was the leader of Gandhi's *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all) movement and instituted the Land-gift (*Bhudan Yajna*) program through which thousands of landowners were convinced to donate some of their holdings to the landless. When we discussed the reasons for the success of this difficult undertaking, Dr. Radhakrishnan, a former director of the Gandhi Memorial Center, described Bhave's method as first opening his minds to people then encouraging dialogue with a maximum number of representatives of various schools of thought. A noble personality, Bhave himself was a master at inspiring people through totally confident dialogue.

Esquivel: That is a trait characteristic of great champions of peace.

Others whom I must mention as having influenced my life and destiny are a married couple: the Austrian Hildegard Goss-Mayr and Jean Goss, a French railroad worker and a hero of World War II. Having witnessed atrocities committed during the war in Algeria by French soldiers acting on official policies, Jean decided to return all the war decorations conferred on him by the French government. Then, as nonviolent activists, the pair traveled to places like Africa and the Middle East promoting the training of militants dedicated to nonviolence as a liberating power.

They were the first to initiate nonviolent movements in Latin America in an organized fashion. In 1962, they traveled the continent visiting religious people, social organizations, labor unions, and other groups to inform and educate leaders capable of undertaking nonviolent actions. Their task was not an easy one at a time of violent movements like the Cuban revolution and guerrilla activities in Colombia.

They worked with equal enthusiasm in Brazil and Mexico too. The fruit of their labor was the emergence of bishops like Hélder Cámara and Dom Fragoso in Brazil. They also converted supporters to participate in nonviolent actions intended to bring about conflict resolution.

In its later years, the movement expanded to the point where, in February, 1974, member groups held an international conference in the Columbian city of Medellin. Acting on a decision of this assembly, I undertook the formation of an organization that was to become the Service of Peace and Justice Foundation in Latin America.

Ikeda: The historical background of your organization is very valuable.

Gandhi too expended tremendous effort proclaiming and propagating

the philosophy of nonviolence. He wrote, "Every good movement passes through five stages: indifference, ridicule, abuse, repression, and respect." For their pioneering work in South America, Hildergard Goss-Mayr and Jean Goss and their fellow workers have my greatest respect.

The nonviolent movement is at once a spiritual struggle and an educational undertaking setting out to reform human minds fundamentally. In this connection, I am reminded of the experiences of my respected friend Dr. B. N. Pande, whom I have met both in India and in Tokyo.

Joining Gandhi in 1921, Pande devoted himself completely to the nonviolent movement. Because of this work, he was imprisoned eight times for a total of ten years. He was a person of great calm under which could be perceived unbendable will forged though years of struggle.

When Pande was only fourteen, Gandhi asked him whether he was a Brahman; that is, a member of the highest Hindu caste. When he replied affirmatively, Gandhi said, "In that case, I have some work for you to do. That's all right, isn't it?" The work was cleaning toilets, a job that no Brahman would want to undertake. Nevertheless, Pande carried it out faithfully. In the morning he prepared night-soil fertilizer for the fields. In the afternoon, he spun thread with a spinning wheel or charkha.

Dr. Pande says that he only realized later how correct Gandhi had been in giving him this kind of work to do. If he was to be champion of nonviolence, he had to rid himself of the sense of superiority he felt as a Brahman. This could be done and he could become mentally united with everyone else by doing lowly work. As Gandhi often said, everyone is important to the achievement of the aim of building a nation of equality. Gandhi used everyday activities to teach human dignity and equality and to educate champions of nonviolence one by one.

Esquivel: A very illustrative story showing the important connection between real behavior and daily activity. All the people whom I have mentioned as significant in my life were always consistent in word and deed. Spirituality was the axis that gave meaning to their lives. They were never distracted by facile victory, vanity, or pride. Their goal was to share the life of the impoverished and to walk side by side with the poorest sectors of the population. They modestly assumed historical challenges of social, cultural, and political commitment.

Through popular organizations they sought paths to liberation for the ordinary people and ways that would allow the poorest to play the leading role. They were all great educators capable of awaking a critical spirit and creating new spaces of liberty. In some of your books, you explain the spirit of the Mahayana Buddhism that the higher practice of

the bodhisattva is to seek enlightenment, the lower to educate the masses. The people I have been discussing actually possessed this spirit.

Ikeda: No matter what its philosophy, no matter how skillfully it is interpreted, a religion is valueless unless believers actually put its teachings into practice. Mahayana Buddhism reveals the bodhisattva's wisdom by practical action for the salvation of sentient beings.

In his *Treatise on the Great Perfection Wisdom*, Nāgārjuna describes the nature of the bodhisattva in the following terms. A bodhisattva is so named because he works to his own advantage and the advantage of others, because he strives to help all sentient beings attain enlightenment, because he knows the true nature of all the Dharmas, because he follows the way leading to perfect enlightenment, and because he is praised by all the wise and holy sages. Elsewhere in the same work, he explains that the bodhisattva is one who, for the sake of all sentient beings, seeks the way to save them from the sufferings of birth, aging, illness, and death. Dialogue, a major nonviolent technique, is certainly an important method for fulfilling the bodhisattva mission of saving all humanity.

The Power of Spirituality

Esquivel: I share your ideas on the power of dialogue. The Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (about the fourth century BCE) pondered the question of dialogue in this way. "The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?"

Converse is the energy that transmits ideas. When the idea has been transmitted, the essence of the energy survives; but the words that served as a medium disappear. Written words, however, have the power of permanence in time. They can engrave part of the popular memory in the awareness and history of individuals and communities. Through arts and in various manifestations, words register the big and small events of humanity, its joys and tragedies. They record the products of spirituality, identity, and relevance.

Ikeda: In the famous passage you mention, Zhuangzi comments on the folly of attending only to superficial verbal and literary forms and overlooking the true meanings behind them. People often emphasize the

words, the mere tools, and neglect their underlying meanings. Zhuangzi expresses the desire to meet a person who has forgotten the tools and mastered the meanings.

By *meanings*, he refers to what you call energy and essence; that is, spirituality. Words play the important role of transmitting this spirituality to others over the ages. We must not, however, become so obsessed with them that we lose sight of the inner spirituality.

Buddhism explains the relation between verbal expressions and their inner meanings by means of three terms: words, meanings, and intents. The vast Buddhist canon, said to comprise about eighty thousand teachings, is written in words that convey teachings and truths (meanings) and purport (intent). Zhiyi, the founder of Tiantai Buddhism in China, and Nichiren in Japan regarded the Lotus Sutra as the scripture that fully reveals Shakyamuni's enlightenment. To understand that enlightenment, we must go beyond the words of the sutra and its teachings (meanings) and delve to the intention or truth deep within. Doing this requires us to read the text, study the teachings, and engage in the various practices that I mentioned earlier in connection with the Mahayana bodhisattva. The Human Revolution clarifies the words, meanings, and inner intents of the Sutra by freeing us from the smaller self and leading us to the greater self and a sense of sympathy with others. Action is everything.

Esquivel: Spirituality is born when we are able to open our minds and hearts to create inner space that lets light in. It comes into being when the spirit unites with the transcendence of the One in all things. We need an interior light that illuminates the way to peace. No one who lacks it can give it to another.

To paraphrase Zhuangzi, "Where can I find a man or woman who has forgotten the word *peace*? I should like to talk with such a man or woman."

Ikeda: Very true. No amount of talking about it will bring peace. The spirit and power of peace pulsate in efforts to respect humanity and human dignity and to create human solidarity. You expressed my own conviction born of many years of participation in the pacifist movement when you said that peace will not come to those who sit and wait: it must be won. You touched on this point in the speech you made in November, 1996, at the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, on the occasion of receiving the Global Citizen Award. In a perceptive indication of the problems facing modern society, you said that politicians have lost their ethics and social leaders their spirituality. As economic

values have been maximized, human values and the sense of identity have been minimized. The home where people ought to be able to live rich meaningful lives has become mere lodgings. You went on to say, "So far I have portrayed a very grave future. But we also have to focus on the signs of hope that exist. As peoples, we cannot be mere spectators. We have to become the protagonists of our history. As peoples, we have to learn to unite in the building of a culture of solidarity and hope." You added that instead of lamenting the absence of ideals, we must bring forth our own ideals. If we want freedom, we must struggle against the forces that repress freedom. Retreat and resignation are evil. You finally said, "Peace is something that must be won, and it will be won only through struggle." I agree entirely.

Esquivel: We constantly hear a great deal of talk about peace and human rights in majestic ceremonies and conventions where treaties and protocols are ratified. Audiences applaud each speech, promising to execute the things they sign and make others execute them too. But the majority of them do not believe it. This is the attitude of many governments, political leaders, scientists, and educators. They themselves have forgotten the power and energy of peace and the consistency that they ought to obtain between word and deed. They have forgotten that peace is the dynamic that gives sense and life to humanity. They have stripped it of content and proclaim, "If you want peace, prepare for war." They hold up fear of a nuclear holocaust as a guarantee of peace.

Ikeda: War treats life with contempt as if it were no more than a means or a tool. Peace cultivates the dignity of life—its ultimate goal—and safeguards human rights. It is for these purposes that all social undertakings—political and educational—exist. I am convinced that to value anything outside or more than life is to oppress humanity.

As you point out, humanity, which ought to be the major focus, is often sacrificed to the interests of politics and economy, which ought to exist for the sake of human happiness. We must correct these false priorities and the vicious circle they generate. Under prevailing circumstances, selfish people—and they are very numerous—prey on others for their own power or advantage. As I often say in my proposals and speeches at educational institutions throughout the world, the first step toward peace is knowing the principle that it is wrong to build one's own happiness on the unhappiness of others.

Esquivel: That is a moral principle that we should remember and apply

daily. Nonetheless, countries with serious problems like the silent bomb of famine spend billions of dollars on nuclear arms. This is true of Pakistan, and paradoxically of India, the homeland of Mahatma Gandhi, whose life was an example of struggle for his people by means of the courageous practice of nonviolence as a spiritual and social concept. He opposed the British Empire and showed his people the way to peace. Nor did he limit himself to political and social action but was a profound educator. His villages or ashrams instilled the values of peace in the mind and life attitudes of each person.

But to return to the theme of war, we live in a world convulsed by violence and conflicts of various origins in which economic interests predominate over the interests of humanity, competition over solidarity, a world in which attention is concentrated on the market place while the needs of the poorest people are forgotten.

We see people fighting among themselves, totally unable to resolve their conflicts. Their struggles are orchestrated by the individuals and national governments that have promised to preserve and strengthen the peace.

I repeat: unless our leaders have peace in their hearts, minds, and spirits, peace will never be established on Earth. The power of domination is like the spell a serpent casts to hypnotize its victim before striking with its venom. The majority of governments are incapable of resisting the spell of power.

Ikeda: Gandhi once advised a politician to beware of power because it corrupts. He told him never to become the slave of its pomp and circumstance and admonished him never to forget that politicians are the servants of the poor peasants of India. In our earlier discussions of the topic, I remarked that Buddhism identifies the evil of power with what is called the life force of the Devil King of the Sixth Heaven. The highest realm in the world of desire, the Sixth Heaven is a place where beings can freely dominate. In other words, the realm represents the egoism that is a fundamental part of life force. The life of a person greedy to have all his material and social desires gratified epitomizes this egoistic Sixth Heaven. Such people use money and power to dominate others, who become, not human beings, but simple means to desire gratification. Powerful people of this kind pathologically refuse to admit the existence of other human beings.

Esquivel: We should reflect on the conditions prevailing in our societies. We must realize that each of us, men and women, who inhabit this

small planet re-encounter spiritually in our communal house where today more than fifty wars and conflicts are taking place in different places. Lost in power and violence we are exhausted in a mad race to nowhere. We must return to the ways of the spirit that lead us to peace.

Ikeda: A very important point. We must seek ways to overcome the evil actualized by power. In this, the surveillance of a wise populace is essential. In addition, human power holders must return to a deeper religion and spirituality. Gandhi always said that politics apart from religion is dirty and always to be avoided. He also insisted that his struggle was not merely political but religious and therefore completely pure. Power holders need firm religiosity and spirituality if they are to triumph over evil, purify their life force, and correct their actions. This is the basic significance of Gandhi's belief in a pure struggle.

Notes

[1] On Attaining Buddhahood in this Lifetime, *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (Soka Gakkai, 1999), p. 4.

[2] *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India), Vol. 18 (July–November 1945), p. 133.

[3] *Philosopher Kings* (from Republic, translation by Robin Waterfield; Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 219.

[4] Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, translated by Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (New York: New American Library, 1987), p. 214.

[5] See also *Buddhism and the Cosmos* by Daisaku Ikeda (Macdonald, 1986).

[6] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 128.

Daisaku Ikeda
Born in 1928. Honorary President of Soka Gakkai. President of Soka Gakkai International (SGI). Founder of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy. Established educational institutions such as Soka University, Soka University of America and Soka Schools; cultural institutions such as the Min-On Concert Association and the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum; as well as academic and peace-research institutions such as Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research and the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century. Authored numerous literary works such as "*The Human Revolution*" (12 volumes), "*The New Human Revolution*" (in progress), and "*The Intimate Talks with Global Pioneers*," and "*Recollections of My Meetings with LeadingWorld Figures*." Furthermore, there are many collections of dialogues with intelligentsia from around the world, "*Choose Life*" (A. Toynbee), "*Moral Lessons of the Twentieth Century*" (M.S. Gorbachev), "*Choose Peace*" (Johan Galtung), etc. He has received 220 honorary doctorates and honorary professorships from universities and institutes around the world, such as Moscow State University, University of Glagow and Beijing University.

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel
Born 1931 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Graduate of the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes and the Universidad de La Plata. Highly acclaimed as an architect, sculptor and artist Esquivel worked in a number of sculptural medias. In 1974, he founded the El Servicio de Paz y Justicia (the Service of Peace and Justice Foundation) for the safeguarding of human rights by promoting an international campaign to condemn the atrocities committed by the military regime. He was arrested in 1977 in Buenos Aires by the Policía Federal, tortured and held without trial for 14 months. While incarcerated, he received the Pope John XXIII Peace Memorial. In 1980 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in defending human rights. He has received honorary doctorates and honorary professorships from universities around the world such as the University of Buenos Aires. His wife, Amanda, is a pianist and musical composer.