

## The Power of the Word: Understanding it Wisely, Using it Truly

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### Encouragement and Appreciation

I have been thinking and thinking about “the power of the word”—what that power is. What a word is. What it can do. And what it can’t. Language is always around us, but all too often we are not aware of the words we hear or say. Yet words are, or can be, essential. Elemental. Heart-making or heartbreaking, life taking or life giving. Integrally part of encouragement and appreciation—two qualities of mind that are crucial at all times and absolutely vital in times of great crisis. In the face and in the aftermath of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, the people of Tohoku know this deeply. They know. . . *you* know. . . how elemental encouragement is to an individual’s and to a community’s strength and how essential is a deep appreciation for what has happened and is happening. Only with such understanding can one address the grave challenges we face.

The people of Tohoku (Tohoku is the area damaged by the Earthquake) are our teachers, and I am here today to share some of what I have learned. In the past few days, my heart has been filled to overflowing. As I have listened to the many beautiful, sorrowful, hopeful, heart-building stories from those with whom I have had the cherished honor to meet, I have experienced the true power of encouragement. Each of your stories flourishes within me; each of your loved ones who did not make it through the tsunami lives now in my heart and life. I treasure their stories and yours and will care for them and share them wherever I go. They sow the seeds of hope for our planet’s future.

As American poet Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980) once said, the essence of poetry is sharing. You are living the poetic spirit Ikeda sensei (President of Soka Gakkai International) so beautifully describes. You have lived through the unutterable and the unbearable. You have found

strength to carry forward into life and to find the language to express what must have seemed unthinkable on March 10, 2011. Where does that strength come from? Where does such language live? You have taught me so much.

### **Your Words Create your Self-Portrait**

Before turning to those questions, I want first to think with you about what words are. When I was a little girl, even before I could read, I was absolutely fascinated by how words looked. I loved looking through my father's dictionary and copying the letters even though I did not know what they meant. It was an illustrated dictionary, and I was drawn to the pictures as well as intrigued by the shapes words made. The dictionary's illustrations were just the right size for a child, miniature with precise detail that invited a second, third and fourth look. No wonder that I brought words and pictures together as one. When I entered school and was learning to read, my teacher made a great game for us out of writing each word. After we wrote each letter side by side until it formed the word, we were invited to outline the word and see what its shape looked like to us: maybe it was a building or if you put wheels underneath it, a train or a truck. I loved seeing the shape of the words themselves . . . how the word itself became three-dimensional and was not just something flat on the page.

I tell you this small story from my childhood to celebrate the liveliness and friendliness words may hold for us. They speak to our growing imagination (and our imagination should always be growing!) , and they companion us throughout life. I pause now to ask you each to think of a word or a phrase that has been important to you in your life. Write it down; think about the memories that come to mind. Then turn to the person sitting next to you and listen to their story and share your own about words that have been important in your lives.

I think about the joy children show when they are first using their voices, devising a language all their own, and then slowly merging that language into a shared language with others. I well remember overhearing a little boy, probably no more than four years old, skipping hand-in-hand with his mother down the sidewalk of one of the streets in Ithaca, New York, the town where I went to graduate school. To him, words were a wonderful toy you could take with you everywhere. He sang to himself and to his mother all the rhyming words he could think of. That was more than 25 years ago, and I can still hear the delight in his voice as he heard how words seemed to greet each other so cheerfully in the

very way they sounded.

It comes as little surprise that in English we refer to our first encounter with language, the language that comes most readily and comfortably to us as our “mother tongue.” For many of us, our first memories of language may well have been through time we shared with our mothers. It is also no surprise that identity and language are so closely connected. Think how we recognize each other by the very sound of our voices. Just as we have a unique fingerprint, so we have a unique voiceprint. Something similar happens in the way we use words. We share much in common, but we also have our own turns of phrase that create a verbal self-portrait. In his essay “The Poet,” Emerson wrote, “The man is only half himself; the other half is his expression.”<sup>1</sup> He wanted his listeners and readers to explore that other half of themselves, precisely because expression mattered so deeply in terms of the potential within us and our contributions beyond us.

The power of the word is something that is often on my mind, although it often occurs in another form: what words can’t do. How often, in English, we say of an experience: “it can’t be put into words” or “there are no words for this.” Meeting with marvelous women at the Soka Gakkai Tohoku Culture Center the other day—a place that sheltered so many and was filled with so many encouraging words at a time of great chaos—those wise women also acknowledged when words are inadequate. At times the most powerful expression of all is simply and fully being with a person, a hand on their shoulder, sitting lovingly with them in their grief. At times we cannot put what we feel into words. At other times, we may shortchange language, failing to live up to the words that could do so much if only we stood behind them. The difference between what is said and what is done runs rampant throughout humanity. How do we right those words, so they don’t become empty husks of meaning or dangerous means of exploitation?

### **“Words are Things or Nothings”**

Again, I use a play on words from English. In English, the word “just” can mean “true” or “right.” It gives us the word “justice.” But that same word can also be used very differently. It can mean “only” or “merely.” Someone can say, “it’s just words” and mean that the words are empty and meaningless. Here you see a deeper distrust of language that has crept into English—that words themselves are ineffective or impotent. However, the possibility remains that the colloquial phrase “just words” can be turned back into “just” words—words that bring justice and

guarantee that individuals will be treated with dignity, in short, that each will be treated with true appreciation. On my first visit to Japan in 2006, I remember a conversation where we talked about how appreciation was the true foundation for justice. I have thought about that connection ever since.

Language is multi-dimensional. Words come in all shapes and sizes. They are not simply marks on a page or particular sounds in the air. They can take many forms, involving no writing at all. Many of us know that “music” is referred to as “the universal language” because it readily connects people who don’t speak each other’s mother tongue. As you know, I love the histories in words themselves, and in English, our word “word,” comes from a much older time when it also meant a promise, and you still see that meaning in phrases that tell us that “a man is as good as his word.”

Words—true words—deliver. If it is only a verbal promise and no action follows, there would be no true word. As Emerson said to his audience in 1831, “words are things or nothings.”<sup>2</sup> While his play on words may not translate very well into Japanese, its meaning surely does. If what we say or what we write contains no further force within it, then it is meaningless. To hold meaning, words must outlast a casual comment or glance. They must participate in some real form of connection. If isolated, they shrivel and die.

Let me describe some of these three-dimensional words. They will not be hard to imagine, for I know that you know them already. Each bag sewn and filled by women’s division members for their sisters who had lost everything was a word of encouragement. Every bit of sludge and debris removed by youth members was another such word. Again and again in these past few days, with every person I have spoken, I have heard how in the midst of their own heart-wrenching loss they reached out to others and cared for them. When I had the wonderful opportunity to meet with Mr. Hasegawa last week, he spoke so feelingly about the joy that arises through our exertions for others. Truly, you embody those words.

I also know that you can provide other examples from your own experiences. When Mrs. Nakano and her daughter returned to their home in Futabamachi on July 16, 2011 for a scant two hours, they faced the immobilizing weight of many, many emotions and the seeming impossibility of the task: how could one decide what to take from a home to which one could not again return? Mrs. Nakano’s daughter’s action and accompanying words turned the impossible not only into the possible but then to the actual. Packing a fan and kimono, she said,

“Mom aren’t these your necessary things.” I pause to think what made those words possible. The daughter beautifully knew her mother, knew what was important to her, and knew her mother’s creativity and compassion and how she expressed both. The dance troupe to which Mrs. Nakano belonged and which performed for the elderly at nursing homes and for different towns’ events had been elemental to her work of encouragement for the past 20 years. Imagine the stories that Mrs. Nakano and her daughter shared through those years. Imagine also the stories they probably never directly knew about how much people were heartened by the dances.

Such encouragement could all too easily become a thing of the past, part of the life “before” March 11. But instead, through her daughter’s words and their power to speak to who she was and who she would continue to become, Mrs. Nakano felt strength rebounding within her. As she tells it, “I’ll dance again! I’ll send hope through my dancing, sow seeds of hope everywhere!” And indeed she has, dancing at many different events with thirty others who were also displaced from Futabamachi. A dance is a word with power, speaking to the audience about life’s vitality, telling stories to be remembered and reinterpreted in one’s own life. And when the dancers themselves represent the most difficult demands we as humans will ever face, we in the audience know that we too would—no, must—be able to dance in spirit with them.

### **Words of Sharing and Mutual Support**

When we expand our understanding of what a word is, we see its power in many places. What could be more important than sustenance? In New Mexico my home land, there are numerous feast days at the pueblos. The women prepare food, lots and lots of good food. The practice began long ago to make certain that no one in the community would ever be hungry. Whoever had a little more would prepare more. If you had less that time, you needn’t worry. Everyone would share, and there would again be a time down the road, when you would have more and bring that to everyone. The food was a blessing, there to help keep everyone in the community strong, and prepared so that strength would flow out into the world. Women working together prepare food so that all might be fed. Conversations, laughter, sorrows shared and soothed: all go into that cooking, and those precious qualities in turn feed others, a larger sustenance than physical nutrition alone can provide.

In this light, I think of Mrs. Takahashi and the other women in Ōarai rebuilding Mama’s Eatery. They too know well the heart of a

community. They know what sustains a community and what rebuilds it. In a town supported by the fishing industry, everyone is involved. And even though women themselves were not allowed to become members of the Fisheries Cooperative, Mrs. Takahashi persevered, creating the Women's Fisheries Cooperative so that women could not only have their work acknowledged but a place in which their work together would be much stronger. From her work with the Women's Cooperative grew the idea of creating a place in the community where people both from the town and beyond could enjoy eating the fish that was so important to the life of the community itself. And when the tsunami devastated Mama's Eatery and wreaked havoc on the fishing industry, Mrs. Takahashi and the women of Ōarai worked relentlessly to rebuild what had been destroyed. As I read Mrs. Takahashi's account of the rebuilding of her community, I was struck by the importance of women within this work. As she says, "The women of Ōarai are united in solidarity. We cooperate to help each other along, and because we all stake our lives on our work in the same fishing industry, a spirit of mutual support is naturally borne amongst us. The fishing industry itself cannot be run without teamwork, so I believe that this spirit of mutual support is what enabled the quick restoration of our eatery."

"A spirit of mutual support"—the phrase describes so powerfully the very lifeblood of encouragement. Here again we see that larger understanding of words—communication created through cooperation, working together for a larger cause.

### **“Poetry is the Heart that Binds Humans, Society and the Universe”**

When Mrs. Takahashi speaks of “women united in solidarity” and of the encouragement they provide, my thoughts go immediately to the Soka Gakkai Women's Division members I have met and conversed with both here in Japan and in the United States through the Ikeda Center and now with the women I have met at the Tohoku Culture Center and in Ishinomaki. That sense of “mutual support” is so palpably present, and the determination and redetermination for the work at hand is vital and strong.

I take you back to 2006 when I spoke with Women's Division Members. This was my first trip to Japan. I was used to giving papers for academic conferences where audiences were generally interested and mostly fair-minded but more critical than openly inquiring. I had rarely been in a situation where the listeners actively supported the

speaker, literally creating conditions in which it was much easier to express thought. At Soka Women's College, the students brought a wonderful combination of heart into the room, a receptiveness and openness to the speaker that I was literally put at my ease and felt as though I was talking among friends. I was reminded how Emerson described the best circumstances for expressing the most difficult ideas not in a logic-determined essay but as if writing to one's friends. In his essay "Friendship," he wrote, "The scholar sits down to write, and all his years of meditation do not furnish him with one good thought or happy expression; but it is necessary to write a letter to a friend,—and forthwith, troops of gentle thoughts invest themselves, on every hand, with chosen words."<sup>3</sup> He also comments in the same paragraph, "our intellectual and active powers increase with our affection." Certainly the affection the students showed me that day and since through their whole-hearted welcome, their eager interest in sharing and inquiring into my thoughts and in turn sharing their own has meant a wonderful increase of what I have been able to think and say. And when a few days later, I met and spoke with women in Yokohama, the life-courage of those 500 women created a sense of deep connection that abides with me to this day. I want to read you a passage from my journal at that time,

‘While Angella translates I watch faces and I enjoy this time where it is as if we are listening together, experiencing the words together. . . . women catch my eyes, smile, nod, and in some cases cry. . . .500 of us women listening with our hearts to the thoughts of being peacemakers in a world that needs our good work. . . .that day will live with me always. I will always carry that moment with me and within me.

When I returned to Japan in 2009 and had the opportunity to meet with the Soka Gakkai Women's Peace Committee, I again experienced such heartening strength. Here women gathered in the spirit of mutual support. Sitting with those women, learning about the work they have done for peace, I felt the strength that comes from shared work. They have been the careful collectors and guardians of the stories of women who lived through World War II, enabling women to tell their stories on their own terms and to share those stories around the world. They have created powerful exhibits for peace that have travelled across continents, and right at home the young women's peace committee studied how youth see the world today and envision their part in the peacemaking process.

Hearing about this work I thought about the poets these women are and the poetry from which their work is created and into which their work is crafted. Here I use President Ikeda's beautiful definition of poetry and the poetic heart. If we want to understand what makes words "true" and how words maintain and sustain a creative power, we need go no further than that beautiful understanding.

In a poem that forms part of his 1988 essay, 'An Inquiry into the Restitution of the Poetic Heart,' Ikeda sensei describes poetry in the following way. Poetry, he tells us, "is the heart that binds together human beings, society and the universe." This poetry arises from a "rich fountain of the spirit . . . the poetic heart." That heart is the "source

Of all human creativity  
and power of imagination.  
It fashions the dreams  
and daring and hopes of this earth  
creates harmony and concord.  
It possesses a force no person whosoever can defy.  
It transforms the wasteland within us into a fertile plain."<sup>4</sup>

### **"Be strong, Be Strong, Be Strong"**

Let us spend time with these words and the power they hold for each and every one of us. Not only do we see, as one of my favorite American poets, Audre Lorde (1934–1992), tells us that "poetry is not a luxury,"<sup>5</sup> but we also see that poetry is integral to each person. Not just restricted to a certain few, it connects us all. In its absence we fall apart—within ourselves and from each other. But in all honesty, poetry is never absent, even if we may miss it for awhile. It is the ever-present source, inexhaustible and irrepressible. That source of creativity and that power of the imagination work at every moment. We see it in Daiki Oikawa who heard his grandfather's encouragement, "Don't stop! Keep going!" in the unstopped watch that spoke of time being present, inviting us to the future.

We see it in the sign, now world-renowned "Ganbaro! (Don't give up!) Ishinomaki" created out of salvaged wood by Mr. Kurosawa who himself survived only by clinging to a tree in freezing temperatures, a young man who lost his work and home and yet still encouraged his fellow townsmen not to be defeated. Just yesterday during my stay in Ishinomaki, a wonderful serendipity brought us together. I had hoped to see the words I'd seen only in photographs and on the internet. We



stopped, and Mr. Kurosawa himself was there, tending the place where these words stand so strongly. Together we reaffirmed the importance of each person doing the very thing that they imagine they can do. We must never underestimate the power of one strong and pure-hearted individual nor forget the mutual support of those who gladly contribute their energy so that a good action may come to fruition.

As Emerson says, every word was once a poem, and in these situations, you see how words become poems, speaking with vital encouragement. They draw courage from what a person knows and has known. They honor that person's past, even as their present changes in ways they never would have imagined. And they give courage to those who don't know where their courage has gone to.

Over these past few days, I have heard beautiful stories of how you have done this for each other. I have also seen this eloquently in action. I have been deeply moved by the loving support you give to one another. What you might not say about yourself and your own compassionate actions, others share joyfully, speaking so thoughtfully and carefully about how you, who have lost the most, have turned your own loss into the greatest compassion toward others. I have heard the deep appreciation you feel for the way Ikeda sensei's words live in your hearts and have come into action at the very time you have needed them most. I have been touched by your notebooks and scrapbooks where you treasure words that can then speak again and again. You carry that profound trust in words' deep potential, copying sensei's words even when you cannot recognize your own handwriting, so great is your loss. How deeply I relate to that, for words ceased to hold meaning for me after my mother died. I would look at them, read them, but the meaning would simply fall away. Music spoke to me then, as I know it does for the Kato family, and for Ms. Tashiro and for Ms. Noda. In time words began to hold meaning again, and as I took in the beauty of President Ikeda's photographs in one of the volumes of the *Poet's Star*, I found those words that speak to us all: "Be strong, Be Strong, Be Strong."

In working for others our own hearts are sustained. Even when our own mission seems to have been washed away, beneath it all, in the rubble and debris, another mission awakens. Mrs. Kunimoto taught me that when we shared precious time together the other day. I learned that from Mrs. Nakano and her daughter whose story, Ms. Kimura of the Women's Peace Committee shared with me. I learned that from Ms. Kamiyama and the way she has responded to the change the tsunami wrought in her life. When her doctoral research in marine biology was destroyed, what remained? What direction could her life's work now

take in the aftermath of the devastation and with the extremes of life's loss in Onagawa? Before meeting with Ms. Kamiyama at the Ishinomaki Culture Center yesterday, I had the chance to visit Onagawa. My heart filled beyond words when I saw what was no longer there. This beautiful place with the mountains leading down to the water. The trees with their great and dignified presence. The ocean with its bounty of fish. How would the health of human life be restored in this aching place? And so, when Ms. Kamiyama shared with me her decision to return to Onagawa, not as a researcher, but as a person dedicated to the reconstruction of the heart of the people of Onagawa, I again saw the power of the lived word in vibrant action. She spoke about how the values of Soka education came to life in this moment: how an individual's education exists for the joy of working for and supporting others. True education never closes in on itself, and now a grand mission unfolds before her in which I know many other true researchers will join, restoring our human trust in nature, fostering a true and compassionate relation with the natural world, and opening the individual to their true humanity. She has listened to the voice of her heart; she will become a Rachel Carson for the 21st century. When we listen, as she has, with such clarity and integrity, life again flourishes.

In these brief but timeless days I have shared with you, I have heard again and again about the words that remain in our hearts when all else has been washed away. Everywhere I have gone, people have told me how Ikeda sensei's words have spoken whether treasured from times past or bursting forth in what he now writes. They have steadied you and enabled you once again to stand. I think of the pole at the steadfast place of encouragement Mr. Kurosawa created to show how high the water came. Ikeda sensei's words have stood taller than the height of any tsunami wave. And even if those words simply rest quietly in one's heart, they are present, awaiting the time when your own voice will again speak what they have meant to you.

### **“Nothing can Destroy the Treasures of the Heart”**

Our English word “encouragement” literally means to give courage to someone—to give a kind of strength both for enduring and for acting. When we encourage, we acknowledge what that person has gone through or is going through. As Adrienne Rich (1929–2012) writes in a poem titled “For a Friend in Travail,” “*What are you going through? . . . is the great question.*”<sup>6</sup> Indeed in this acknowledgement and willingness to listen we meet a primary sense of the word appreciate. We value

deeply what that person's experience is, in all its dimensions and in all its demands. At the same time, we call to the very heart of that individual. Our word "courage" comes from an older word meaning "heart" or the very essence of our being. Perhaps it could be equated to life force. This work of encouragement is precious, crucial because it reaches to the very heart, continuing life in a good way.

This poetic heart and the encouragement it brings speak directly to the places where we most need to feel that strength of continuance. When I think about the utter devastation caused by the tsunami, of course my mind goes first to what actually can never be the same. The beloved home and land that will never look the same. As Mrs. Nakano says so well, "my hometown of blue sea, green fields, fireflies in summer and crimson-colored mountains in autumn." And the loved ones taken so suddenly and so unaccountably from our daily conversations. These changes are massive. But no less massive are the internal earthquakes and tsunamis that follow. With such seemingly absolute change, the heart may certainly become disheartened and the spirit disoriented. To us, our inner landscape might then look like a wasteland. We might feel that within us all is as ruined as the devastation around us. Whatever stood within us now seems flattened and lifeless. We may wonder what possibly can emerge from the shards and fragments within these broken spaces within us. What survives destruction? What perseveres through time? And how can we again come to feel that possibility within us?

Words that President Ikeda wrote shortly after the earthquake and tsunami come to mind. Inviting us to remember Nichiren Daishonin's words, that no disaster or calamity can destroy the heart, he says, "Nothing can destroy the treasures of the heart." And what is that heart but the poetic heart, the source of all human creativity. Quoting again from his words for the Tenth World Congress of Poets,

It possesses a force no person whosoever can defy.

It transforms the wasteland within us into a fertile plain.

### **"Silence" can be "Healing Words"**

What allows us to feel that power of the poetic heart? Perhaps that is the hardest question of all, because the power is there, but we may not be able to feel it. We've gone numb, unable to feel the beating of the heart whose lifeblood streams through us. I want to share a story that Jenny MacGregor, one of my students, recently shared with me. We had been talking about devastating losses and the power of the word at such

times, and she reminded me that silence is often the most important “word” of all. Recalling a story her mother had shared with her, she told me about the sudden and unexpected death of her mother’s best friend’s mother. Her mother and her friend were only 11 years old at the time. It is never easy to face the death of one’s mother, and at 11 as your childhood is changing into adolescence, there may well be no more difficult time. Jenny’s mom told her how her friend stopped talking. Jenny commented that “silence was a healing mechanism.” Words were just too painful. Jenny’s mom knew her friend so well that she understood how necessary such silence was. In fact, Jenny told me that all of this young girl’s classmates “unified in support”—Jenny’s words—and took on the role of protecting their friend, making certain that no one teased her or demanded that she speak.

Here I see such a deep intertwining of appreciation and encouragement. In this case, these 11 year olds truly took stock of their friend’s situation. They did not impose their own sense of “should”: how they thought she “should” be grieving or recovering from such a horrible loss. They valued her own feelings within this oh-so-difficult experience, and allowed her to heal in the way that felt best. They honored her. They appreciated her, and they gave her the encouragement that was vital to her recovery: creating the safe and supportive space that allowed her to experience the transformation within herself of a wasteland back into a fertile plain. Jenny’s mom told her that when her friend did return to words, she was “so thankful of the actions of my mom and her classmates for being there for her and protecting her even without words.”

Certainly these young people were putting into practice Pres. Ikeda’s definition of poetry: the heart that binds together human beings. They embodied that poetic heart in their concern and action for their fellow classmate and tapped into the “rich fountain of the spirit.”

### **Poetry is the Process of Sharing our Experience**

Thinking about the centrality of the poetic heart, I am reminded of American poet Muriel Rukeyser. She writes, that poetry resides in “our wish to share something of our experience.” She calls it a process fundamentally rooted in relationships characterized by a strong sense of sharing.

Around the same time, in her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde described how poetry is a “vital necessity of our existence,” and particularly of a women’s existence. She writes, “[Poetry]forms the

quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”<sup>8</sup>

Twenty years later, Adrienne Rich speaking at a conference entitled “Poetry and the Public Sphere” on a panel titled “Poetry, Feminism(s) and the Difficult Wor(l)d” said, “Poetry—if it is poetry—is liberatory at its core.”<sup>9</sup>

From each passage, you can see how vital poetry is. It liberates. Its goal and role are freedom. It provides the particular light in which we take our hope, we take our dreams and we bring those into action. Today, I’ll only be able to talk about one of the three poets, Muriel Rukeyser, whose words spanned much of the 20th century. In her rendering, poetry is completely freed from exclusivity. Available to all, it no longer is an enterprise for the elite. It is returned to where the source of poetry has always been: the people. You can see why I thought of her work in the context of this paper. Her poetry of and for the people seems akin to Pres. Ikeda’s poetry and vision of the poetic heart.

For Rukeyser, poetry centers in human interaction. When we wish to share something with someone, when we work to make that sharing occur, poetry is made. It cannot be limited to a certain kind of word. It is so much larger than that, more an interweaving of relationships than a verbal artifact. As she says, poetry, and indeed all of the arts, are “an exchange of energy.” She was far more concerned with how that energy flowed, making certain that exchange was possible. You see this emphasis in her life. When her father went bankrupt during the depression and she had to leave college, she became a journalist. Not only was this a way to support herself, but it meant a responsible, societal role. She covered events that cried for justice. When eleven young black men were falsely accused of raping two white women, she was there. At mining disasters in West Virginia, she reported on the hearings. She advocated for peace during the Viet Nam War, visiting Viet Nam when no Americans except those sanctioned by the military were supposed to be there. Her work was with and for the working people, guaranteeing civil rights for all Americans, not just those who could “afford” them.

She understood poetry to be essentially part of that work. In her 1949 volume *The Life of Poetry*, she drew attention to the reader’s role. She writes,

At this point, I should like to use another word: ‘audience’ or ‘reader’ or ‘listener’ seems inadequate. I suggest the old word ‘witness,’ which

includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence. The overtone of responsibility in this word is not present in the others."<sup>10</sup>

Reminding us that it takes more than one person to make a poem, or at least to bring it to life and keep it alive, she gives us a clear role, one that is challenging but also heartening. We are, and in fact must be, present in the poem. What we have seen, what we have come to know through our own experience matters. At the same time, it does not stop with a solitary reading. We are called on to give evidence. What we have seen in the poem we must say. We must continue in that exchange of energy. As she says elsewhere in "The Life of Poetry," "poetry is a process."

In Rukeyser's understanding, poetry is this process. Sharing is its hallmark. In my own experience I have seen how encouragement deeply roots that process. When I met President and Mrs. Ikeda, now six years ago, I felt this definition of poetry come to life. The time we measure by the clock ceased to be relevant. We were in that timeless time above time, truly present, part of that long process of peacemaking that is ever the heart, indeed the poetic heart, of Pres. and Mrs. Ikeda's tireless work. When I use the word "work," however, I want to free it from the negative connotations it often carries. How often we complain about work. . .there is so much to do, it weighs us down, and it exhausts us. But here, I met with two people for whom their work felt like tireless joy. They thanked me as well for the work I was doing, and I remember feeling awed and humbled. My work seemed so small, and often thankless. Did it do any good? Would I ever see any results? But that time with the Ikedas truly opened a new possibility, the real action of encouragement that transforms each difficulty into a poem in process. Here again, it may not have been the specific words we exchanged, but the feeling behind those words, as well as the poetic spirit which they brought to the occasion and in which I gladly participated.

The past tense is not an accurate rendering. That time continues.

### **“Mutual Non-Dominant Discourse”**

As I was writing these words for you, I must admit that I was feeling, well, shall I say, a bit discouraged. My time was shorter than I would have liked. I had been pondering this topic for some time. Journal entries spoke from various pages. Walks had taken me up into the woods around my house in upstate New York and when I visited New Mexico

in the summer, I was looking to sky and mountains to help shape thoughts on the interwoven nature of the word's power. I had been reading, thinking, walking, reflecting, but still, to write flowing words was difficult and unnerving. I like to take time with my words. I love finding the exact word or imagining the most vibrant phrase that will speak to an audience's imagination. But here time was shrinking and my words were still scrambling to find a way onto the page. Also, there is nothing harder than to write about the "power of the word" during the middle of a political campaign. For those of you who may be following some of what is currently being said in the United States, it is a discouraging time to think about words. Their power seems reduced to a mere brute force weapon. They manifest violence, but show little of the poetic heart. They attack, they blame, they condemn, they deny: here are words at their worst, what Emerson would have called "rotten diction."<sup>11</sup> And in that climate it is difficult not to feel those negative effects.

Writing about meeting the Ikedas returned me to a different reality. Again I was standing with them reaffirming my dedication to the work I do as a literature teacher. Their firm appreciation and vibrant encouragement sounded the note by which I bring my poetic heart back into resonant tuning. At a time when literature is increasingly seen as an outmoded technology and where words all too often become tools for manipulation, I cultivate, in the slow process that cultivation is, the other words that bring power back to its true meaning.

As Carolyn Heilbrun (1926–2003) wrote, "The true representation of power is not of a big man beating a smaller man or woman. Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter."<sup>12</sup> What we strive toward is, as Audre Lorde said, "mutual non-dominant differences"—ways of speaking with each other that allow full participation on each person's part.<sup>13</sup> It invites and indeed expects us to question and carefully consider what our thoughts are and how we arrived at them. It seeks to express those thoughts in a way from which others can learn. It is truly poetry in Muriel Rukeyser's sense: sharing and giving.

President Ikeda calls upon us all to become poets, to use our words accordingly—whether those words appear on the page or in dialogue and heartfelt conversation or in thoughtful, empathic silence or ready action. He reminds us that the greatest relationship we can have to each other is as a poet, for the poet is the one who "sees the light of boundless potential hidden within the individual." In the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami, the poetic heart responds again and again, from those who had suffered so much and from those who were

suffering in deep sympathy. If we allow that heart its full power, there is no wasteland that cannot be transformed.

My appreciation resounds. I am grateful for the invitation from the Institute of Oriental Philosophy to deliver this talk, and for making possible my many conversations in the Tohoku region with women who had been so profoundly affected by the tsunami and whose courage and resolve I seek daily to uphold. I am also deeply grateful to the women who were so vibrantly part of the lecture in Sendai. Each of those conversational exchanges continues the fine and demanding restorative work of peace making in a violence-torn world. My gratitude to Nanae Kimura for her friendship and for sharing with me Mrs. Nakano's, and Mrs. Takahashi's and Daiki Oikawa's stories shortly after 3/11/11. Stories that are shared amplify the possibility that connection and understanding will come to frame our 21st century ways of living.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, Joseph Slater, Douglas Emory Wilson, Ronald A. Bosco, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971–2013), 3: 4.

<sup>2</sup> Sermon CXXXIV, *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3. Ronald A. Bosco, editor. Chief editor, Albert von Frank. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991, p. 264.

<sup>3</sup> *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, Joseph Slater, Douglas Emory Wilson, Ronald A. Bosco, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 1971–2013), 2: 113.

<sup>4</sup> Tenth World Congress of Poets, September 28, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> "Poetry is Not a Luxury," pp. 36–39 in *Sister, Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> *An Atlas of the Difficult World*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> "The Education of a Poet" (1976), reprinted in *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, Jan Heller Levi, ed. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994, p. 283.

<sup>8</sup> First published in 1977, collected in *Sister, Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984. p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> "Poetry and the Public Sphere" in *Arts of the Possible*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> *The Life of Poetry*, with a new foreword by Jane Cooper. Ashfield, MA.: Paris Press, 1996, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> *Nature*, in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, Joseph Slater, Douglas Emory Wilson, Ronald A. Bosco, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 1971–2013), 1: 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Writing a Woman's Life*. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," pp. 110–13 in



*Sister, Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984. Speaking of the building blocks of this discourse, she writes, “Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future” (111).