Dear readers of the Seikyo Shimbun, as you make your own sincere efforts to build cultures of peace in your family, work place, and community, I share these thoughts as your friend in the U.S. who likewise makes the same efforts, using the power of words to encourage, to connect, to hold space for hope, even in the darkest times.

SGI President Ikeda has been promoting a culture of peace throughout the world for 6 decades. He firmly believes that “dialogue represents the sure and certain path to peace.” That path calls each participant to their own best work in all times and all occasions. As he reminds us, “Dialogue is not some simplistic assertion of one’s own position, nor is it necessarily about persuading others to one’s point of view. Dialogue is about demonstrating respect for another’s life, and being determined to learn when confronted with differences in personality and perspective.”

While it is sadly true that many of us have been conditioned to see difference as something either to be smoothed over and erased or attacked as threatening, dialogue calls us to participate in the beautiful reality of difference as infinite potential.

Dialogue itself takes many different forms. One of my favorite kinds of dialogue is dialogue with nature in which one observes with all one’s senses—listening to the wind, appreciating the very fragrance of the air, feeling the temperature on one’s face, looking into the sky and then back to the earth, seeing what manages, against all odds, to grow in the unlikeliest of places. Nature is everywhere, always inviting us to be a dialogue partner. Given climate change, there is no more important time to accept that invitation. I am heartened by the swift and urgent response to the horrific fires in the Amazon. I am made hopeful by the young climate activists and their vision for what the future must hold and how human beings must act. Truly, they have become the dialogue partners of the natural world.

Dialogue is the most profoundly connective force between human beings. It can occur face to face, but it also takes place in writing. We cannot always physically be in the same place at the same time, and our written words speak across miles and across years.

What gives dialogue such precious possibility for
building peace is its understanding of time. Dialogue is never in a hurry. It trusts those who take part to listen and reflect and share. Most importantly of all, story is the heart of dialogue, story that celebrates the transformative power of difference. Difference means health. Difference means possibility. Difference means a creative range in problem solving. Difference means growth. Difference means that music is all the more beautiful for the exquisite overtones created through a vast panoply of instruments and players in a dynamically resonant space. Difference means I—means we—can always be learning.

But sometimes, we can feel stuck in differences. Sometimes we long for what is felt in common. At those moments, I recommend that we turn to story. As President Ikeda notes, it is always the place where he begins his dialogues. Indeed, it is where dialogue always begins anew. With every moment in dialogue, we commit to listening deeply to what it is like from someone else’s experience. What was it like the first time you went to school, you ask another. Or how did a certain food come to be your favorite? What is your first memory of friendship? Or of loss? What joy has stayed with you even in the darkest times? Whatever the answers to these questions, they are told through story. Each of us holds a story that is both our own and also akin to what another person shares with us. And I would add that when we share our stories through dialogue, we grow away from the fears of rejection that can factor heavily into our daily lives.

In times where violence takes hold of so many individuals and institutions, I listen for the strong, quiet, unyielding work of those who are willing to share stories. They are truly the every-day peace makers. Think about all the ways that even today you have or will participate in a culture of peace:

You have given or received encouragement.
You have generously shared a thought with another.
You have listened with deep attention to what another person was thinking and feeling.
You have laughed in kindness and heartiness over something that lifted your spirits.
You have looked out your window or walked down the street or stepped outside and seen the wonder of a bird’s flight or a flower’s bloom or a cloud’s pattern.
You have given thanks for something or someone that made life kinder, freer, lighter.
You have sorrowed deeply, feeling the preciousness in what was lost.

In all of these you have yearned for, or felt, connection. Even at a time when human beings face the greatest forces isolating us from each other and from the world around us, you have experienced that abiding reality of interconnectedness. Emerson commented, “relation and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always” (The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 6, p. 17). We know that connectedness through the stories we share. There is story in every aspect of being.

May we generously and open-heartedly share those stories in our undying commitment to creating cultures of peace.