

**Dr. Michitoshi Soga's speech upon accepting an honorary degree
from Josai University in Japan September 30, 2008**

Congratulations to the freshmen and the graduating students. On this special occasion, I received an unimagined honor from your university and I am deeply moved. I believe that this honor was given not only to me, but to all of us associated with Western Michigan University. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Chancellor, the President and the entire Josai University community.

I offer my hearty congratulation to all of the students who stand at the gate of the next stage of their lives by asking two important questions. I assume all of you have some expectations and plans in your future at this special moment. This seems to me very natural and very good. I don't want to discourage you. However, from my experience in life, I would like to tell you that a life does not necessarily happen as expected, but rather as a succession of unexpected events. Allow me to speak a little about my life of 80-plus years.

I was born in Tokyo on 1926 when the Taisho era changed to the Showa era. At the age of 18, I experienced the defeat of the war. During those 18 years, Japan waged a succession of wars on foreign soil, such as the Manchurian incident, the Shanghai incident, the Sino-Japan war, the Nomohan incident and the Second World War. There was the 5-15 terrorism incident, the 2-26 coup d'etat and the general national mobilization of the government controlled by the military. History was moving with a will of its own. During the last two years before Japan's defeat, I was a middle school student (today what would be a high school freshman and sophomore). I suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis and was absent from school for one year. When I returned to the school, there were no classes, and all students were working at factories. I worked at Sumitomo electric company at Mita, Tokyo. Because of my illness, I was given a desk job instead of manual labor. My job in the purchase division was essentially as a liaison between the main company and the many small subcontract factories. On March 10, 1945, I experienced the great Tokyo air raid. The night before, I visited one of the subcontractors located near Kameido JR station, where about 180 people were working. I discussed a production schedule, as usual, and dined with workers in the dining hall, then said good bye and went home. All those people with whom I had had been working with only the night before went missing after the air raid that night by about 300 B-29 U. S. bombers. The next day, I went looking for the company and walked the area ruined by the fire. It was a horrible scene. I crossed a river where I could not see water because so many dead bodies covered the water's surface. I saw a dead dog, horse and men piled together on the steps of Kameido station. Yet I found the company's products inside a shelter without any damage. This is not an experience I can recommend to anyone.

I was drafted and ordered to report to the military station in the middle of September, but Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration on August 15 and signed the Document of Surrender without Condition on the Battleship Missouri on September 2; I never had to take up a weapon in the war. However, I believed without doubt that my life ended at the age of 20 years.

Once the war ended, many people suddenly became pacifists. Why did we fight this war with such enormous human cost? I was very confused for a long time. Schools began classes and we took to our studies like a starving man takes to food. But Japan was defeated in war and was occupied by a foreign military for the first time in her history. There was no food, no jobs, and people's hearts were hardened. The occupation continued about six years. A new war started on the Korean peninsula. Because of this war, Japan signed a peace treaty with all countries, except those in the Communist region, at the San Francisco opera house on September, 1951. The occupation ended, and Japan regained her status as an independent nation. Japan continued to sign peace treaties with many countries, except two: Russia,

which was then the Soviet Union; and, North Korea, which had been a Japanese colony. Under the principles of international law, Japan and those two countries are still in a state of war.

After regaining its independence, Japan officially kicked off its recovery— an economic miracle which amazed the whole world. I studied theoretical physics and during my doctorate studies, I married Ryoko (October 2, 2008 is our 53rd anniversary). A short time later I received a doctor of natural science degree (Ph.D.) and was hired as an assistant in the Physics Department of a national university in Tokyo.

A few years later, I experienced the year 1960, which is known as “ANPO NO TOSHI”, which means the year of the anti US-Japan Security Treaty. A huge number of students, workers and ordinary people gathered and surrounded the National Diet building every day and night to express their opposition to the ratification of the Treaty. As an assistant, I was assigned to participate with students in the demonstrations twice a week or three times every two weeks and went to the National Diet building. The atmosphere was unbelievable. A Tokyo University student, Ms. Michiko Kanba, was killed by a skirmish with police one night. I could understand the students’ sentiment, but at the same time, I was puzzled that the time when they should be studying was mostly being wasted in this manner.

Meanwhile, the American government was hard at work on a new space program, but had failed to launch a satellite. On 1957, the Soviets succeeded in launching “Sputnik” in space. The American government was bitterly worried about it, and President Kennedy invited scientists throughout the free world to come and study in the United States or to join the U.S. Space program. Responding to Kennedy’s call, many young scientists came to the United States from all over the world.

In Japan, too, many good scientists left the country for the United States. Even though I was not among our nation’s best scientists, I also decided to grab on to the tail end of this opportunity to work at an American National Laboratory and was granted a one year’s leave of absence from the Ministry of Education. During the war, I was taught that the “American and British are brutal”. Also, we were completely defeated by them. I could not imagine visiting America, even for one year to study. At that time, Japan had a huge deficit in its balance of international payment. The exchange rate was fixed at \$1.00 = ¥360.00. The maximum amount money one could take out Japan was \$50.00 (not \$500.00), in Japanese yen ¥18,000.00. We left Japan for America with \$200.00 in my pocket. The airplane we flew from Haneda Airport was a propeller plane, and could not fly directly to Hawaii. It had to stop at Wake Island to refuel, then flew to Hawaii. We went through Immigration at the airport in Honolulu, and then we flew on the same plane to San Francisco. We stayed overnight there and the next morning we flew to Chicago. The journey took two days.

We went to stay in a guest house of the national laboratory. There was a pond at the front of the guest house. Many wild flowers were in bloom around the pond. Tall trees were scattered about and underneath was green grass. For us who came from a ruined Tokyo, this place was like dream. We found an abundant variety of food in the cafeteria. People moved about calmly and without haste. They treated us, who came from a small Asian country, with a warm heart.

The research I started there with three American physicists was time- consuming work. It was not a project that could be finished in one year. However, I never dreamed at that time that after almost 50 years, we would still be living in America. During this period, my wife continuously helped me and taught Japanese to our three children even though we could not obtain any Japanese school books. I am grateful for her endless efforts. While we were there we observed the Cuban missile crisis, which was a hair-trigger crisis between the U.S. and Soviet Union. In 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

After that, we moved to a private research laboratory in the East Coast and spent a few years there. Finally, in 1968 we moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan and I got the teaching job which I was looking for at Western Michigan University. The city of Kalamazoo is a quiet small country town. From 1904 to 1905, one of Japan's master writers, Kafu Nagai studied there, and even now his boarding house still survives. Therefore, Kalamazoo is no stranger to Japan. The year 1968 was also a turmoil-filled year. Reverend Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee; President Kennedy's younger brother, Robert Kennedy, was shot to death in California. The war in Vietnam was becoming quicksand, sucking in a leg.

I received tenure at Western Michigan University and resigned from the Japanese University. During the next 28 years, between 1968 through 1996 when I retired from WMU, I lectured on physics in broken English, did research work with experimental physicists and also worked in the Office of International Affairs. In the last post, I came to know many foreign universities and their exchange students. I particularly treasure my acquaintanceship with Japanese universities, research laboratories and exchange students. During that time I came to know Josai University, Josai International University and Josai Women's Jr. College. I still vividly remember the day when former Chancellor Seiko Mizuta and Chancellor Noriko Mizuta visited the WMU campus and signed the agreement between two institutions.

In 1996, I turned 70 years old and decided to retire from WMU and received the title of emeritus professor in physics. Since then, I and my wife, Ryoko, have enjoyed a quiet retired life in a house in the woods which was designed and built by one of our sons, who became an architect. I have read many books which I could not find time to read before, and attended concerts and sports events of the university. Even the biggest terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, was confined to New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania and did not do actual damage to the rural town of Kalamazoo.

However, unexpected events came about once again. On December, 2005 almost 10 years after my retirement, the WMU Board of Trustees voted to establish the Michitoshi Soga Japan Center on the WMU campus, and the center officially opened in July, 2006. Now, many excellent young Japanology experts are studying religion, history, literature, society, economics, political science and so forth through the Center. In September of the same year, WMU organized a party to celebrate the establishment of the center at the campus and many people from the Japanese Consulate, Japanese businesses, universities and others gathered, where Professor Ryu read a congratulation letter from Chancellor Noriko Mizuta of the Josai University Cooperation. In 2007, a similar party was held in Tokyo. A large number of people, mainly former exchange students, came from Hokkaido in the north, Okinawa in the south and other places from all over Japan. At this gathering, WMU once again announced a new scholarship for Japanese students, named the Michitoshi Soga Presidential Scholarship. It was also a big surprise to me. And this year, 2008, I received an unimaginable honor from Josai University and now am standing at this podium. This is the short version of the story of the 82-year-life of Michitoshi Soga.

Through this story, I wanted to show you that a life does not proceed as scheduled or planned. When you encounter an unexpected event, don't complain that it is not what was promised, and face it with strong character and strong will.

For those of you just starting your college life, set your sights high in your chosen field, be it in academics, sports, the arts, or any other area. Give it your full measure and do not fear failure. When you do experience failure, learn from the experience. Failure at a young age is just like a knot of bamboo. Bamboo is strong because of the knots. A person who never experiences any failures and grows on a railway designed by parents will be broken easily when the person meets a storm just like a bamboo without knots. I have seen this type of people. I don't want you become to this type of person.

Also, a person who experiences failure will understand other people's pain. It will help you grow as a human being.

Those of you who are graduating, the world you are entering is in chaos now: energy and food, environment and health, world population, war and peace among the races or among religions. If you look at Japan, an aging society with few children, inequality in income, ethics and laws that can't keep up with new technologies, etc., all of these areas have come to a crisis. In other words, you have an opportunity to contribute significantly to what you want to do in the world. In order to survive in the world, you must have a strong character as mentioned above, but that is not sufficient. In future you will definitely encounter situations in which you must make choices. The road branches into two and you have to choose one road. The final decision will come from your values. Therefore you must have a just sense of values. To obtain this you must always ask yourself, "what is the most important thing in my life?" It could lead you to a destination which is not prosperous in the common sense. However, even if this were the case, you will not regret it because you were not forced to take the road by others, but you chose the path.

Money might be important. You may want power. However you should not be controlled by these things—rather you should control them. You should build such a society. Make Japan just, bright and energetic. Make the world peaceful for everybody.

I wish for you two things: to have a strong character and just values.

These two things are my words of congratulation to all of you.

I am sincerely grateful to everyone for inviting me to this happiest of occasions and for giving me an unimagined honor.

Thank you very much for listening.

Michitoshi Soga