

Mending the Broken Ship of My Life **By Eugene Bolánde, Los Angeles**

I HAD the distinct honor of being asked to recite my poem, "The Promised Man," at this year's New Year's activities to the guitar accompaniment of musician James Neal, a friend and fellow SGI member.

I first learned about the lives of Shakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin during study sessions I attended soon after I started practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism in 1984. I was so moved by what I learned that I tried to convey the sense of my inspiration in poetry.

I was born in the Caribbean Islands, and deep inside me I always felt that I was on some mission, that I could do great things. I just didn't know what. So I read everything that I could get my hands on, to find the answer to the anxiety and fear that resided in me.

Much of it was about being black in America and what it meant. I didn't really want to be white, I just wanted what they seemed to have. I wanted desperately to be able to make choices about my life and my destiny that were my own, not based on other people's opinions, but based on information that was true to me—information that came from inner sources of truth so I could place all my energy behind it. This only happened to me once and it was years later that I finally knew that I had done something I truly believed in.

All of my life I have been pursued by nameless demons, dark of the night terrors, anguish, weeping, suspicion and doubts so deep I could almost drown in them. It was as if things just happened to me. I was a receptacle, a dump site. I didn't know who I was. I had no life plan. Nothing in school taught me about me. I was just this "black boy."

Subsequently, I lived my life through movies and books. They were the only worlds that were real to me. I hated being a child. I hated being black. I hated being in such terror. At one time I thought the answer lay in white people—they loved me, so I surrounded myself with them. I mistrusted them, but at the same time, I loved them. I grew up longing to find someone I could respect, yearning to find a trustworthy mentor or even a friend.

So I created and adopted a fictional identity called Gene Bolánde. That person did not care about others. That person did not love. I was never really an evil person. I was into status. The better your address, the more likely I'd befriend you.

When I came to California, I got a part in a play directed by Burgess Meredith. Later, I found work in the industry as a screenwriter and playwright and was hired on the staff of a major television show. When I protested that my work was being rewritten by white writers, I was told in essence, "Take the money and shut up, you're one of us now." I found out that I couldn't shut up. I was fired.

Two magnificent mentors finally appeared in my life. One was Academy Award nominee, Beah Richards (who played Sidney Poitier's mother in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*), my first friend in the theater, who taught me practically everything I know about the theater—a great actress and woman. She led me to

the man who would become my second mentor, a gentle iron-willed Buddha-of-a-man, Jack Jackson, of the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles. The Inner City Cultural Center was founded in 1965 for the purpose of using the arts to bridge the gap between Los Angeles' diverse communities.

Beah told me: "Eugene, your work will take you wherever you want to go. Trust your work, not guile." Mr. Jackson always said, "Our art may be the only tool we have left to save us from destruction." Jobless, frightened, without hope, and overcome by despair, I was employed by the Inner City Cultural Center as a director of new playwrights. My job was to establish a theater where multiethnic authors presented works related to their experiences in a multiethnic society. Two thousand writers passed through that program.

Two years later I had a kidney stone attack that paralyzed me. At the time a friend asked me, "Eugene, what are you doing in your life that you're turning to stone?" I could not answer. I eventually overcame my illness and my fictional life went on. My search went on. My study went on. I had been a Baptist, a Mooney, a Religious Scientist, a Transcendental Meditationist, a Scientologist and a Catholic. Nothing was working.

Then in 1984, Beah told me of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. She said: "Eugene I have known you all your adult life, and I have told you everything I know, and nothing has helped you. But I have found something that I think will help you. And if you try it, I will try it." So I did.

These days when Beah asks me where I'm going, I say, "I'm going to a Buddhist meeting." And I go because I can give something and get something that keeps me going. From 1984 on, my house became a focal point for Buddhist activities.

I see now that mine was a world in which any behavior was justifiable. Jesse Jackson tells an awesome story of a ship that was wrecked, its stern broken, but the ship made it on broken pieces to dry land. And that, through my practice, is what I found I had to do with my life—use that thing called instinct. I do think, at last, I have grasped compassion. My dear friends, whom I may have offended, I say: "Forgive me, I was wrecked. My stern was broken. But I will, through my practice, make it on broken pieces, to dry land."

Then in 1994, out of the blue, I received a call from the NAACP three days before the event, requesting that I accept an Image Award as someone "who had great fortune in the industry and did not hesitate to give back to the community." I was flabbergasted.

I wrote the acceptance speech of my life. From my heart. From my gut. Preparing this acceptance speech forced me to think about what I had given up and why, those long years ago. As several hundred people stood weeping and cheering, in standing ovation, I felt, "Well done, Gene Bolánde." It was then that I became aware that I was on the road to knowing who I was and that I owed it to my Buddhist practice.

I gleaned from President Toda's guidance in *The Human Revolution* (vol. 1, p. 47): Man needs a religion. That without one he is condemned to a vulnerable, helpless, lonely life. But it must be a true religion—for false religion is frightening and its destination is disaster.

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So I practice and study to find the word, the phrase, the sentence, the paragraph, the happy tune. The tune that will take me past the primal fears, the doom, the gloom, karma from ancient times that has poisoned my very spirit, so that in the last analysis, I can be true to the Buddhist teachings.

Through President Ikeda's encouragement, I have learned that an active examination and integration of what is happening in our daily lives—coupled with the theories and teachings of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism—enables us to further deepen our faith and practice. As Buddhists, we practice to make some sense of the real, daily events and to place those events in a broader perspective. □