

PETER LERNER, CHICAGO
Playing Music With Heart and Soul

When I was a child, my mother would play guitar and sing us (my brother, sister and me) to sleep at night. As I listened in the dark with my eyes closed, I fell in love with the sound of the guitar and her voice. At age 5, I would sneak away with her guitar and play. At age 7, I began writing my own songs. Music and the guitar have always been my life's passions. I cannot ever remember a time without them.

I grew up in the racially mixed area of Hyde Park on Chicago's South Side. Hyde Park was a bastion of political activism, and my parents were very involved in the movement for peace and civil rights. I remember Martin Luther King Jr., Angela Davis, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Black Panther leader Fred Hampton all being at functions at our home. My dad, who is a pediatrician, worked at a Panther free clinic on the westside. My mother, also a pediatrician, risked her life, not to mention being deported (she was a native of Czechoslovakia), on more than one occasion.

Even though I loved and respected my parents, I fought with them constantly, especially with my father. I was a very sensitive, angry, troubled young man and was the center of turmoil in the family. My father was an atheist; my mother an agnostic, and I was basically raised without a religion. Yet, I had a strong spiritual yearning.

I sought to fulfill that yearning with drugs and relationships. My searching led me to Ohio, where I studied philosophy. Soon I realized this was not the path for me. I became very depressed and came home to Chicago.

Then I decided to pursue the dream I had avoided for so long: that of becoming a professional musician. All this time, I had been self-taught and was afraid I wasn't good enough. But I was determined: "If I am not good enough, I will become good enough." I vowed that I would walk the path of a musician even if I should be penniless and alone.

I began music school, and while there I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism by a fellow student.

Almost immediately, I began to practice diligently. I felt liberated. I had finally found what I was searching for. Now I felt it was my turn to fight for the peace and happiness of humanity, but this time with the Gohonzon.

After one year of practice, I lost the urge to get high. After two years of practice, I became a young men's division chapter chief and Chicago Joint Territory Brass Band chief, all the while pursuing a double major of classical guitar and composition at the American Conservatory, teaching guitar, and gigging with various bands around the city, not to mention practicing with my guitar seven to eight hours a day.

The '80s were the time I built my foundation. The Chicago Brass Band played every day for three years straight at "Super Morning Gongyo." I would work till late at night playing in clubs, get up at 5:00 a.m., be at the community center by 6:00 a.m., rehearse the band, perform after gongyo and then lead a young men's division study group. I did this every weekday morning for three years.

During this period, my life was very hellish. I lived in bad neighborhoods on about \$150 a week. I had a series of abusive, hellish relationships with women. I remember coming home from activities or work, laying on my broken mattress on the floor, staring up at the crumbling plaster, tears streaming down my face, wondering if my life would ever change. I chanted, sought guidance, introduced others to the practice, studied, did many activities and, as a result, was able to persevere.

My first big benefit came in 1985 when my father received the Gohonzon. He is now a

group chief. My sister joined soon after and is now a member of the SGI-UK. Then, my mother began chanting. She's the daimoku champion of our family as she now chants two to three hours of daimoku a day.

In 1988, I joined a jazz fusion group that got a recording contract on the same label as guitar legend John Scofield. I wrote a song on the album that went to the top 10 on jazz playlists all over the country. The first time I heard it on the radio, I was with my mother and we both cried tears of joy.

Soon after, I joined another group put together by producer Butch Stewart, who had produced the O'Jays, Ramsey Lewis, Ashford and Simpson and members of Earth, Wind and Fire. I fulfilled another dream by playing on many jingle and other recording sessions, which led to work with other clients. In August 1988, I traveled to Japan with Butch to play a monthlong engagement at the Yokohama Bayside Club.

As quickly as my life had opened, by 1990 it closed. The fusion band fired me, Butch began using another guitarist, and other clients all of a sudden stopped calling. I was very discouraged and confused. Why, after all I had done, was this happening to me?

The early '90s were a very dark period for me. My attitude became one of complaint. I began to question everything, which led to a tremendous doubt that was like a nasty, disgusting stain on my life. I gained 30 pounds, became more depressed than I'd ever been, moved back in with my parents and began seeing a therapist because I could not function with my depression.

I received guidance to chant abundantly, so I mustered my courage and began to chant two to three hours a day. I decided the prescription for curing my depression was to chant two hours every morning — and it worked.

I remember driving to activities with tears streaming down my face, shouting, "I will not be defeated!" Here I was, over 35, no gigs, living at home with my parents. But I was more determined than ever. The Gosho reads: "Let the gods forsake me. Let all persecutions assail me. Still I will give my life for the sake of the Law.... This is my vow, and I will never forsake it" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], pp. 174–75).

I knew I could not forsake my vow. So I dedicated myself to the Chicago culture festival in 1995.

I became co-producer of the festival. In August, I traveled to gigs all over the Midwest, so I worked all week in Indiana or Iowa or somewhere else, traveled back on Saturday, worked in Chicago Saturday night, got up early to attend the culture festival rehearsal Sunday morning and drove hundreds of miles to a new destination Sunday night. I gave every ounce of myself, physically, mentally and emotionally. Immediately following the culture festival, I became Chicago Joint Territory Soka Group chief. Because of these efforts, I totally revolutionized my life.

I dropped 30 pounds, found a great apartment and received two major benefits on the road to financial security.

One goal I've had since I began my practice was to teach at a university or college. I secured a position at Columbia College teaching rock and fusion guitar. After my first semester, my boss presented me with a letter that states: "I appreciate your contribution to Columbia and thank you for your efforts on our students' behalf. Their futures are brighter because of you."

Then out of the blue my friend Butch called me and asked me to come back as inhouse guitarist for his jingle and record company.

At the beginning of 1996, I made a strong determination to open my life and connect with SGI President Ikeda as never before. Within a three-day period, I got sick, my car

broke down and I broke my foot. But the amazing thing was that I was happier than I'd ever been in my life. I was more confident and hopeful about my future than I had ever been.

The year 1996 then became a breakthrough year for me as:

- My brother began chanting. Now my entire family practices, and we are closer and more loving than ever.

- I found the perfect partner for me. I am happier than I ever dreamed I could be. We plan to marry this May.

- My career blossomed. For example, I toured the Midwest with the WGN Radio Noon Show Band, played for *Billboard* magazine's Dance Party Chicago with some of the top dance artists in the world; played with '70s recording stars the Fifth Dimension; played on the first fully staged production of Randy Newman's rock opera *Faust* with the same musicians who played *Tommy* on Broadway; performed the new theme music for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* with Patti Labelle, as well as most of the incidental music on the show; and so on.

For the past 16 years, I have fought with my whole heart and soul to win in everything I have done. I recently graduated from the youth division. I did so without any regrets. I welcome the new challenges that await me, continuing to fight against my own weaknesses and never be defeated.

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