

PERSPECTIVE: Fresh Paint Takes On a New Meaning

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LOS ANGELES

I'm going to paint the ceiling of my kitchen nook the blue of the sky. The bold orange and yellow colors of the sun will outline the hand-sized panes of glass in the bay window, the window that can swing open on its hinges to let the cool morning air tumble in, scented with February L.A. flowers. Yes, the ceiling will be sky blue; the walls a magenta, a fuchsia, a deep, rich, red-violet tone that emanates a life of its own.

The built-in table and bench seats will be the blue of the Sea of Cortez on a summer's day, like the blue of the hand-carved table and chairs that I saw in that shop in Mesilla, N.M. The center of the table was a sunburst, primary yellow with orange highlights.

Oh, how I wanted that table when I saw it. For when I looked at it, and its four matching sunburst-in-impossibly-blue-sky chairs, my heart felt happy and free.

Quite a contrast to the heavy burden I'd been laboring under. I had been lamenting about having to help take care of my Alzheimer's mom — and grandmother with Alzheimer's, too, and my stepmom with her multiple surgeries. And I agonized over the relationship with my (ex?) boyfriend. When I thought our relationship was over, I ached with a deep love for him and cried out with the hope, "Somehow we'll work it out!" But then it seemed that to be with him, I would have to give up my dreams.

The house, mine to live in since my mom moved into the retirement home, was a monochromatic off-white, like a cold, dense fog settling around me, cutting off my vision of the distant vistas of possibility. I feared that maybe Alzheimer's was contagious, and I would get it, too, taking on the house full of possessions and responsibilities that my mother had rescinded in a blank-eyed stare.

I wondered why I should go to all the work of living my dream of being an artist, when in a few short years, I'd have to pack it all away, like my mom and grandma, and get ready to die.

"I'll help you paint the house," my brother once offered. "What colors do you want to paint it?"

"Oh, just leave it the same," I shrugged, like the long-suffering Eeyore of the *Winnie the Pooh* stories.

Staggering under those perceived burdens, I continued on the journey of consistently chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon, studying the Gosho and President Ikeda's guidance, attending meetings, seeking guidance from seniors in faith and struggling to further develop my compassion for others.

Be like the sun, for the sun shines on serenely even though not all of the stars will reflect back its light, and even though some of its brilliance seems to emanate only into empty space.... The more you shine your light, the more brilliant your [life] will become. — Daisaku Ikeda

The sun has again risen in my heart. The fog has burned away, and those burdens have become lighter, like a movie prop rock that has all the appearance of a heavy granite boulder, but when you lift it, it bounces in your hands like popcorn.

Like it says on p. 33 of *The Liturgy of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin*, which we recite every day (as I translate it): "It appears that we are living in the flaming hell of incessant suffering, but in actuality, we are living in the Buddha land, where *mandara* blossoms of blessings are constantly raining down on us."

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It's all a matter of perspective.

My Alzheimer's mom is my benefit. "I find that as the physical deteriorates," she told me, "that I am becoming a human *being*, rather than a human *doing*."

My grandmother, with Alzheimer's, too, now praises me with the delight of a child and the experience of a lifetime.

"You are so adaptable," she said in a lucid moment, looking me straight in the eye, "I know you will accomplish whatever you set out to do!"

"Oh," she caught herself, suddenly remembering her longtime training and turning to my mom, "but we mustn't tell her that, for she'll just get a big head."

Wow, I thought, if her dementia hadn't caused her to forget her mental habits, I never would have known that she admires me; that the reason she never praised me wasn't because she was disappointed in me but because she believed that was how to help me grow!

And my stepmother's surgeries are helping her to get healthier!

For Valentine's Day, I started a million daimoku campaign to find my soulmate. My heart is strong with the prayer. Thank you for this opportunity to change my karma in all areas of my life!

And the house, why, it's the type of home that I have been chanting for from day one.

"You can have Buddhist meetings there," my mom offered. "Put your ceramic studio in the basement. Teach pottery classes. Why not convert the hall closet into a darkroom?"

Hey, if I live to be 100, then I still have 62-and-a-half years ahead of me to make art, teach classes, and travel around the world!

Yes, the walls of my kitchen nook need to flow with an inner light. I'll learn how to do that transparent wiping technique that's so popular in the Southwest — many colors layered and blended in streaks that mimic the antiquity of 500-year-old wooden doors set in crumbling adobe walls; the layers of paints, of history, of lives, flaking off, revealing the continuity of humanity.

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