

Infinity and the Florida Nature and Culture Center

By LISA JONES

West Hollywood, Calif.

“Nothing is too wonderful to be true.” (Quote engraved on the Physics Building at UCLA, attributed to Michael Faraday)

No matter how good the food is. No matter how lovely the landscape, how comfortable the accommodations or how delightful the amenities. No matter where I am.

It’s a chore, a hell, if I don’t feel free.

So I was anxious when I arrived at the Florida Nature and Culture Center to spend four days with more than 100 fellow Buddhists. Sure enough, within an hour of the welcome/orientation session, I felt a need to get away, to hop on a bike and escape into the night. Sometimes I just have to be alone and in motion; walking, running, driving, whatever.

I pedaled along FNCC’s pathways and zigzagged through the parking lot. In the circular driveway of the Reception Center, I swooped around and around, the way I used to circle my parents’ driveway when I was a kid, finding a thrill in every turn. That was back when I lived in the fabled suburbia of yore, so safe, in a planned residential community, with not a worry, not a fear. FNCC reminded me of that feeling of sheltered bliss.

There was a pond behind my parents’ house, much like Toda Lake at FNCC, with its loamy scent and soft-lapping waves. Night air, marbled with currents of warm and cool. An occasional cloud of mosquitoes. Mysterious phrases of birdsong, and cows lowing in the distance. The tangy smell of green grass mixed with the roty smell of damp reeds. I was having a sense-memory flashback to my childhood.

As I rode, I remembered what a confident little person I used to be. Back before I knew how it felt to be humiliated by a boss, scorned by a lover, pursued by a creditor. Back when riding a bike felt like soaring through the sky. No limits, no denials, no second-guessing myself. Back when I felt free.

I coasted over the copse where the memorial trees stand, to a dark path on the edge of the grounds. Fireflies blinked, echoing starlight. When I was little, my dad taught me the names of the constellations. He used to be a navigator on a ship; you can always tell where you are on Planet Earth by looking up at the stars, he’d say. “Where am I now?” I wondered. Far from home, but at home.

Of all the paths at FNCC, I had found one that led me back to a place of wordless joy, the place from which I emerged.

As you can probably predict, the remainder of my visit to FNCC was not a chore or a hell. I did discover, however, that a basketball now feels foreign in my hands, and due to years of neglect, my jumpshot has deteriorated into an embarrassing flail.

Past midnight one night, my friend Amy and I swam in the pool until our fingertips puckered. “You say that you don’t like to be around people,” she said, “but that’s not true. Every time I see you, you’re talking with a different person.”

She was right; I had become uncharacteristically sociable. For some reason, people felt like talking with me. Each person was fascinating, and I was alternately awed and entertained.

One woman really opened up to me and shared the details of a pivotal situation that she was facing. It was as if she’d pressed a nugget of gold into my palm. I don’t know any pithy guidance, so the only things I had to offer her in return were my ear and a sincere prayer. I hope they help.

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At the closing session, one of the leaders emphasized that FNCC is a gift to us from the SGI based on SGI President Ikeda's consideration. The Jacuzzis and the PingPong; the opportunities and the memories — everything is a gift.

Lately, with the rhetoric surrounding the priesthood issue and the barrage of Internet information about other Nichiren-related sects, it has been hard for me to see clearly how the SGI alone is faithful to the Daishonin's spirit. I can't say that I've fully resolved my intellectual and doctrinal questions. But my visit to Florida has made one thing clear to me: President Ikeda's spirit is palpable at FNCC, and it's a vast spirit of freedom.

I think it's true that you can't give something to someone else unless you yourself have it. That goes for the flu, I suppose, as well as for freedom, happiness and all other things contagious. My visit to FNCC has inspired me to solidify my sense of internal freedom so I can infuse others with the same feeling.

Years hence, when I think back on my trip to FNCC, I'll remember that the gift I received was an intimation of my infiniteness. Chalk it up to post-FNCC giddiness if you must, but I feel as if I've been given a fast new car.

I can't wait to get out on the road and see what it can do.

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