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Determination, Daimoku
and a Little Help From His Friends

He has less than three weeks to live.” Those were the words my doctor told my brother as I lay in a coma in the middle of February 1996.

Until that point, my life was, I thought, pretty good — I was going places, literally. I had been practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism for about two years and was working as a computer programmer. I was on the verge of moving to sunny California from Atlanta when things starting crashing around me.

I was admitted to the hospital after a short illness. The doctor informed me that I had a serious case of fungal meningitis, an inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal column. The meningitis had already begun damaging my eyesight and hearing.

I was in so much pain the nurses had to give me the maximum dosage of morphine allowed. The last thing I remember before slipping into the coma was my joint territory chief sharing encouragement from SGI President Ikeda, saying, “chant until... never give up!”

As my coma began I was plunged into a strange world controlled by a demon. In my hallucination, he was holding me hostage and trying to defraud the insurance company. One of my first encounters with the demon stands out clearly in my mind to this day. I was fighting him with my left hand on his face and chanting with all my might: Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I began to push him further down and down, and the fire in his eyes began to cool. I began to think I was winning. Suddenly he grew stronger and his eyes began to glow a fiery red once again. I chanted as hard as I ever had, but I found my right hand was tied down and I could not push any further.

Later I thought it represented our daily struggles and how, without faith, our hands are tied and we cannot realize our power.

My fight with the demon continued for two months until I slowly awoke from the coma. I gradually became aware that three of my closest friends in the district were holding my hand and encouraging me to chant. It was at that point — in that twilight between dreams and consciousness — that I had my last encounter with the demon. Encouraged by my friends I was able to look the demon in the face and say, “I’m not listening to you anymore!”

I woke up fully at that point and realized the severity of my situation. My vision was severely impaired and my hearing was gone completely. The only way to communicate with me was for someone to use one finger and write words, letter by letter, on my forehead. I also became aware that my left arm was paralyzed and my fingers and toes were numb. I later learned I had lost 57 pounds — I was too weak to walk or even feed myself. To make matters worse, I found myself no longer in the hospital but in a nursing home. Three of my worst fears were to go blind, deaf and be institutionalized — I got all three of them at once!

I could not watch television or listen to the radio, and the hours became long and painfully slow. The only thing I could do was chant and visualize in my mind what I wanted my future to be.

In May 1996 I took my first steps assisted by a walker. By June I was able to give my experience at the World Peace Gongyo meeting at the Atlanta Community Center.

The members in my district — Marietta District — had held weekly chanting sessions for my recovery since the beginning of my hospitalization. They had chanted 2 million daimoku for my recovery. As a representation of their daimoku, they created two colorful

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groups of cranes. The cranes were made from folded slips of paper, each one representing 1,000 daimoku.

In August, I attended a meeting with Japanese exchange students visiting Atlanta. I participated in an introduction to a skit I had written the previous year titled “The Bus Incident — The Rosa Parks Story.” The theme of the skit was “one person can make a difference.”

In September, I was well enough to move to my own apartment, which was one of the first goals I had chanted for in those early days after waking from my coma. My vision and hearing gradually improved so significantly that I could cross streets and do my own grocery shopping.

In November I took the SGI-USA Elementary Exam. Because I was still unable to see and read clearly, several members read the sample questions and answers into a tape recorder to help me study. Unlike the rest of the members, I had to take the exam orally. With much determination, daimoku and the support of the members, I passed.

In December 1996 something extraordinary happened. When I gave my experience back in June, what I didn’t talk about was that the meningitis was the direct result of my HIV infection. I really hadn’t admitted it even to myself. At the December World Peace Gongyo, youth division members were giving a skit on AIDS awareness for AIDS World Day. They asked me to speak about it from my perspective. It was frightening at first, of course — human revolution usually is.

As I chanted about it, I realized I had the power within me to overcome my negative circumstances. I hadn’t told everyone about my status because I was afraid they would treat me differently. However, as I began to speak, I imagined how Rosa Parks must’ve felt as she took a stand (actually, a seat) alone against the tyranny of racism and refused to give up in the face of all odds.

I didn’t know what to expect after I gave my full experience. Much to my surprise, the response was overwhelmingly positive, even heartwarming. In fact, several members told me that because I had opened up about my situation, they were able to let go of preconceptions they had about gays and HIV. One person can make a difference!

This year I have grown by leaps and bounds in both my practice and my daily life. The things that used to be so difficult after my coma — the same things that I used to take for granted — are once again becoming second nature, such as getting a checking account and paying monthly bills.

My eyesight and hearing are improving every day. At this time I am walking two miles a day. I have gained 35 pounds, and people tell me I have a healthy glow. Through my daimoku I am handling new challenges, both mentally and emotionally. Recently I have finally been able to read the regular sutra book to recite gongyo (before, I was using copies that had been enlarged five times the normal size!).

Even though this experience cost me my sight at one point, it also has given me a new vision. I am now awakening to my mission for kosen-rufu. I want to share this Buddhism with those who may ordinarily not hear about it — those who cannot see, those who cannot hear, and those living with the hardships of HIV infection.

My faith and strength have reached new heights. Even though I’m faced with challenges every day to do ordinary tasks, I find my life enriched and full beyond my imagining.

If someday we meet on life’s highway — remember to give me plenty of room.

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