

Never in My Wildest Dreams
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When I started practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, members told me that through chanting I could expand my life and capability and fulfill my wildest dreams. In 17 years of practice I have found this to be true.

However, spending a year in South Africa, as I am currently doing, was not among my wildest dreams or something I initially chanted for.

I was very much opposed to and negatively impacted by South Africa's oppressive history of apartheid. I never wanted to visit South Africa. I recall becoming even more convinced of this when the late Arthur Ashe was denied entry into this country. I remember thinking, "How could such a gentleman and champion of sports and human relations be rejected simply because of the color of his skin?" I had dismissed the reality that this was once a part of American history as well.

In 1995, despite my earlier feelings, I accepted the invitation to travel to South Africa as a citizen's ambassador with the U.S. People to People program. During my visit to Johannesburg, I met an impressive young women's division member who had moved from the United States and had made a commitment to work for human rights and greater equality here. I felt her passion and was very encouraged by her commitment.

She made me realize that taking a proactive and positive approach to changing whatever does not please us is more effective than the negative, begrudging attitude I had adopted. In addition, SGI President Ikeda's guidance and encouragement that SGI members become global citizens forced me to reflect upon and discard my narrow view that as an American my major efforts should be toward America.

I chanted to expand my perspective, my life-condition and my capacity to work for world peace.

I began to investigate the possibility of living and working abroad, something I had not done before. A research employment opportunity through the Fulbright Program came directly into my path and would not let me pass! The program is designed to increase mutual understanding among American citizens and citizens of other countries.

I applied for a position at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, chanted extensively about it and was awarded the opportunity. Currently, my husband, 9-year-old son, Bradford, and I have been in Capetown for eight months and will remain here for another four months.

Our experience in South Africa has been educational, rewarding and a pleasant surprise. The country is racially and geographically diverse. It occupies 472,359 square miles at the southernmost tip of the African continent and is about one-eighth the size of the United States. Its 39 million people (1997 estimate) consist of four major ethnic groups: Africans/blacks (75 percent), whites (14 percent, primarily descendants of Dutch, French, English and German settlers), coloreds (9 percent, people of mixed race) and Asian (2 percent, largely of Indian descent). There are 11 official languages, and I am often overwhelmed by the variety spoken by just one South African. I am also reminded of President Ikeda's encouragement that we SGI members learn a language other than our own.

Among the many highlights of our visit here was witnessing the signing of South Africa's new constitution by President Nelson Mandela. Its preamble is very moving (see box on p. 15).

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Carving Out a Home in Capetown

Upon our arrival in South Africa, we were told that the best place for visitors of color and English speakers to live was in the southernmost suburbs. We were also advised that the “better” and more compatible schools for our son were in the southern part of the city. All my co-workers lived in the southern suburbs.

We soon learned that the northern suburbs were historically Afrikaner (South African whites, often of Dutch heritage), pro-apartheid and still very conservative. I chanted for the best school for my son and the best residential location for my family. We ended up in a northern suburb!

Our son attends an Afrikaans school where he struggles with two languages (Afrikaans, which is derived from 17th-century Dutch, and Xhosa, the dominant Bantu language), plus cricket and rugby. However, he has made some friends and is persistently challenging himself. By teaching English through art to non-English-speaking immigrant children and by working with other volunteer teachers, my husband has also made friends in the township.

We have accepted our mission in the northern suburbs, and I am determined to introduce the people living here to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism before we return to the United States.

Meeting Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Another highlight of my stay was a recent opportunity to meet Archbishop Tutu. As a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, he is world-renowned for his persistent and compassionate efforts toward peace and social justice in South Africa and the United States. He is the chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission here, which investigates and conducts public hearings on human rights violations committed during apartheid throughout South Africa’s nine provinces. The commission believes that “truth is the road to reconciliation.”

In its November 1996 newsletter, Archbishop Tutu said that while reconciliation is not easy, “It is better to live in a country which is stable and peaceful, where people are reconciled, than in one which is torn apart by strife because people are angry and wanting revenge.”

Thanks to a good friend, my family and I had the privilege to meet Archbishop Tutu and give him a book by President Ikeda. I am chanting that President Ikeda will visit South Africa and have great dialogues with the archbishop and Nelson Mandela.

President Mandela recently celebrated his 79th birthday with the children of South Africa.

He said that he loves all his country’s children, and that the most important thing we can give them is our love. He held a Q-and-A session with some children on a local TV talk show. One child asked him why, after spending 28 years in prison on Robben Island, he was not angry.

Mandela responded, “When you have a mission to fulfill, there is no time or room for anger.” I was very struck by that response.

Practicing Buddhism in South Africa

There are approximately 150 individuals practicing the Daishonin’s Buddhism in South Africa. I continue to be impressed with their stand-alone and self-motivated spirit.

Many have extensive knowledge of their country and its history. They are actively involved in local activities to assist the massive process of social and educational transformation here. Many have lost comrades in the struggle and have a deep appreciation

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for life. Our discussion meetings are filled with joy and heartfelt dialogue, and are relevant to daily life.

Recently, friends and I experienced the joy of visiting a family practicing Buddhism in Soweto, the well-known township where massive protests, uprisings and violence occurred during the anti-apartheid era.

The father was the first chant. His wife noted with a bright smile that she never thought her husband could change so much for the better. Their teenage son said that after watching his father become happier, he just naturally wanted to follow his lead. All now practice the Daishonin's Buddhism.

I also went to Kampala, Uganda, to visit a research training project that I codirect for Texas A&M University's students and faculty. The project is designed to investigate the massive prevalence of AIDS there, especially among women and children.

I never thought in my wildest dreams that I would be coordinating or conducting research in Africa, or that I would have visited all four corners of this continent. These experiences are actual proof to me that with the Gohonzon all is possible!

I am determined to expand my life and truly become a world citizen, and I continue to be deeply grateful to President Ikeda for his warm encouragement, his great example and his efforts in showing me the way.

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