

Out of West Africa
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Her life as the expatriate wife of an affluent African prince was privileged but incomplete until she ‘faced her fears and attacked her vulnerabilities.’ Now she’s thriving, independent and a light for others.

Explorer might be one word to describe me and my life. I went wherever curiosity led me. While in law school, I traveled to West Africa twice — once for research, once for a job interview. During my second visit, I met my future husband, a prince whose domain consisted of a small province in a West African country.

For many years, as the expatriate wife of an African prince, I enjoyed a privileged lifestyle and moved in a circle of aristocrats and dictators’ wives, holiday shopping in foreign countries. I traveled frequently, often aboard the Concorde, maintained a staff of domestic servants and owned palatial homes on two continents and an apartment in New York. As co-owner of a petroleum-related company and several other businesses I started with my husband, I decided when and how hard I worked.

But underneath all this, things were slowly falling apart. Around this time, in 1985, I received the Gohonzon during a trip to New York. When I went back to West Africa, I did not take the Gohonzon with me. I did gongyo only when convenient, rarely chanted daimoku, and made no attempt to study.

I met an American member in the West African city where I lived, and she encouraged me to practice more consistently, but still I refused to study. I traveled bimonthly to the United States and could have participated in activities, but didn’t. I was moving fast, but my practice wasn’t going anywhere.

In the face of developing political unrest in my husband’s country and fear for my personal safety, I had to face the truth. Something was wrong with my storybook marriage. The prince I married was descended from a king known for locking any one of his wives in a closet whenever she angered him. Though my husband outwardly rejected most tribal lore and displayed all the trappings of Western culture, there were traces of antiquated social mores that festered in our relationship, including abusive words and manipulation. It was a wound I hid from family and friends, a wound increasing in its severity when I returned to the United States to live permanently.

I gave up our New York apartment, settled into our California home and kept the Gohonzon in my bedroom. I didn’t realize to what extent, but I knew there were critical elements missing from my life. I needed to be whole. The wound on my inner self prevented me from going forward. If I were a diver, I would have been standing on the edge of the diving board afraid to take the plunge. I remained in a state of paralysis, unsure of what to do.

I increased the regularity of my gongyo but still resisted study. Deep down inside, I feared that if I held my Buddhist practice up to scrutiny I would find contradictions I couldn’t explain.

My only link to the SGI was the woman who had introduced me to the practice. She encouraged me to establish a relationship with the community center in my area. I felt I didn’t need it. I believed that if I accepted the Mystic Law as doctrine, then everything else would work itself out.

I continued with my gongyo and occasional daimoku, but, meanwhile, my emotions and finances were on a roller coaster. On a day when things seemed to come to a head, I contacted a local member because I knew I needed help. From that point forward, the SGI

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became the backbone of my life. Still, during this period, though I was deeply wounded, I maintained a facade of success as my visibility and contribution to SGI-USA activities and local government increased dramatically.

But at home, my inner turmoil rose to a feverish pitch, straining my relationship with my children and my husband. I became impatient, bitter, resentful. I replaced loving hugs with cold-eyed stares. I responded to their questions with short, acerbic answers. My daughter would look at old photographs, see the look of happiness on my face, then ask, “What happened, Mom?” I, too, began to ask myself probing questions: What is the source of my faults; what’s at the root of my inner suffering? I knew I had to take action. I moved the Gohonzon out of my bedroom into a commonly used family room — in essence, moving it into the center of my life. I began to chant vigorously to see my faults and remove them. I embraced my practice as if it was my source for air. I sought guidance from my district leaders. I wrote in my journal. I searched my soul for the reasons my life seemed disjointed.

I soon realized that fear and lack of confidence had been my stumbling blocks all along. I also had a fear of revealing my vulnerabilities. These fears had been reinforced throughout my childhood and into adulthood. For the first time in my life, I confronted these fears and made a conscious effort to remove them. I took action, just as I had had to do countless times before in my business ventures.

To overcome my morbid fear of speaking before groups, I took an acting class. I also reminded myself of SGI President Ikeda’s guidance: “When you speak with sincerity, you will have the confidence to speak before any group.” To gain financial independence from my husband, I re-entered the work force as an interim measure until my own business could sustain itself. To overcome my technological illiteracy, I took computer classes, read computer manuals and accepted projects dependent on computer knowledge. To better hone my writing skills, I sought advice from writing instructors and read craft books. To remove those qualities that locked me into a position of servility when the situation required authority, I drilled myself in guidance received from a wide variety of sources. I forced myself to take command when needed.

While attacking my vulnerabilities, I envisioned where I wanted to be spiritually, intellectually and financially. I realized more than anything that I wanted financial independence from my husband. On paper, we shared everything we owned 50-50, but in reality, he stood to control every asset in his home country — a patriarchal society.

Determined to use my expatriate experience and my knowledge of the infrastructure of non-industrialized countries to further the cause of peace in emerging nations, I decided to write. My recent work, an essay about my cross-cultural experience, was published in an anthology entitled *Blackeyed Peas for the Soul* (Simon & Schuster, 1997.) I have also written news articles.

I began to study the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren Daishonin’s writings. President Ikeda’s guidance now provides me with constant sustenance to move my life forward. Enthusiastically, I look forward to sharing my difficulties and successes in my process of human revolution with my fellow district members in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

All this is the direct result of faith, practice and study, of all the causes I made when I took action to change my life. At work and at play, I am told by non-members that I exude a positive energy, a light. Behind the compliment, I see the question in their eyes: What is it? And at that point, I know I have an opportunity to share this Buddhism.

So, I continue to elevate my life-condition, to increase the light, to show actual proof through my own happiness.

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