

**Sandy Patrick, Van Nuys, Calif.
Honoring Sorrow**

The treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 238)

At 11:10 a.m., Saturday, March 21, I had my cat, Chef, put down. I held him in my arms, with my daimoku sounding in his ear. I made a plea to the protective forces to come get him, that he might not be abandoned, not even for an instant.

The lesser self, I think, must be the one that loathes itself. Its shell can be as adamant as a bank vault door. It took a small, old, lonely little cat to put the first crack ever in mine.

I started practicing Buddhism in 1968 and have spent the intervening decades in a struggle, occasionally passionate, usually desultory, to care whether I lived or died. The animal in me made me eat food, made me work to buy the food, made me dodge cars and lock my door at night. My human self has mostly been a sleepwalker, only seemingly alive.

This is one of the common effects of childhood abuse, molestation, betrayal and abandonment. In a study of male and female adult molested children, when asked what object they saw as themselves, some 68% said, “A toilet.” My heart tripped when I read this — I had believed this to be my very own “vain little melodrama.” We find it hard to honor even our sorrow.

In 1980, unable to anymore endure the terrible intimacy of intermingling with masses of other human beings at a karmic fever pitch, seven nights a week for 12 years, I, body and mind, retreated from the organization.

After several weeks of huddling in my room, someone said, “Look, you’ve been relieved of your position, and you should leave town.” I was in such a low place in my life that I didn’t question. I just obeyed.

And I ran. I practiced, more or less, on my own for the next seven years, until vague dreams of SGI President Ikeda in some kind of distress pushed me to consider rejoining the organization. But the idea so unnerved me that I had a breakdown, lost my job and was evicted. Still, I moved into a motel, got temporary jobs and sort of reconnected to the SGI.

A year and a half later, a stranger broke into my motel room and raped and nearly murdered me. Two months later, he did it again. It took that to move me out of the paralyzing lethargy of despair into an apartment with an SGI-USA member as a roommate.

Clearly, all these years, I’ve needed therapy. But if you don’t care to live — and I never did — therapy seems expensively pointless.

Eventually, I moved on to a small place of my own, but still no “real” job. A company hired me as a floater — no benefits, no security — and I settled for that.

Then, one day at work, somebody asked, “Can anyone take a sweet old gentleman cat for a month ’til he goes into a permanent shelter?”

I said sure — who knows why. A woman brought him to my place that night. She said his name was Chef, and this was the third time she’d given him away because she was moving to Europe.

She said she’d kenneled him many times, so he’d do fine in a permanent shelter. He’d been declawed by his first owner, who had continued to let him go outside until he’d been caught by a dog he couldn’t fight off and had nearly lost his life. He did lose his tail. He was standoffish and hated to sit in laps and didn’t much like to be petted. That I could understand — to this day, I can hardly bear to be kindly touched.

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For the next two weeks, he huddled: crying by the door, in the closet, in the bathtub. He wouldn't come near me. I couldn't wait to get rid of him in two weeks' time.

Then (you'll say, "at last!"), one night, I sat down and chanted for his happiness for 20 minutes. Whereupon he jumped in my lap, curled up and started purring. After that, he never missed a gongyo. He became a petting addict and my dear friend.

I found myself promising him, again and again, that I would never abandon him, not even for a moment. Gradually, I came to mean it — my first commitment in 50 years to another living being.

I lost my job, such as it was. Another failure, and I was so very, very tired of failing. But I had to go on. I had sworn to never abandon Chef. We were evicted, but were able to move in with a friend and then another friend.

After seven years of temporary jobs, I got a "real" one with benefits. Of course, it was a nightmare of a job. So bad that, on Feb. 23, 1997, my boss shot himself to death, in part because of work pressure that he was not whole enough to withstand.

I, however, had made a vow to a cat. And I went on.

The company encouraged us to get psychotherapy, insurance-paid, if we wanted. A few months later I vaguely inquired, then dropped it. And Chef began to get sick.

When I first got him, he was 11 and had had a hard, hard life. Though daimoku and love gave him the best four years of his life, the past caught up with him and his kidneys started to fail. Around that time, I contacted a psychotherapist.

Chef, his work done, began to die.

One morning, bleeding from the mouth, his hind legs not working, he insisted, after gongyo, on going downstairs to his beloved bed by the window (his very own present from our roommate) to watch once more the children and other cats playing in the courtyard. It took him a full five minutes to drag himself down those stairs, but he did it.

Later, when somehow I knew it was time, I took him, in his now-bloody bed, to the hospital. There, with his face pressed to mine, his ever-possessive paw wrapped around my arm and an anthem of daimoku in his ear, the feline protective forces came running from all over the universe to accompany him to Eagle Peak.

I will undergo psychotherapy — though I'd rather eat glass — and, if it is possible for me to heal, then *I will do it*. And then I will tell the world.

"More valuable than treasures in a storehouse are the treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all. From the time you read this letter, strive to accumulate the treasures of the heart." (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 238)

Oh, Cheffy-Chef, what a gift you were.

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