

Tomoko Weller, Huntington, N.Y.
My Job's Not Done Yet
By Brigid Witkowski, New York Correspondent

The very appearance of Tomoko Weller reflects her faith of some 60 years. I perceived it in the rich flavor of the coffee she brewed for me, the sheen of the wide-wale corduroy slacks she wore, her clear complexion, the slim grace of her figure and the elegant, uncluttered beauty of her altar. Appreciation for her life and the lives of others is evident in her every word and gesture. How encouraging simple actions can be to others!

Mrs. Weller now lives in a comfortable home in the pleasant community of Huntington, N.Y., on Long Island with her son, Ben, her daughter-in-law, Kay, and her treasured granddaughters, Katie and Olivia. Her journey of faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism began many years ago in Japan, in an unusual way.

As a child in Yamagata Prefecture, Tomoko and her mother followed the formality of visiting the local Zen temple to offer prayers for ancestors, but the family really had no religion. Tomoko was sickly as a child. Her mother, wanting to help her to develop a talent in spite of her poor health, hired a neighbor to teach her the koto (Japanese harp). One day during a lesson at the neighbor's, Tomoko blacked out. She was 6 at the time.

"I was so scared, I didn't know what to do," Tomoko recalled. "I ran to my mom and hugged her so tightly, but I couldn't explain what had happened to me. Mother thought I didn't want to practice my koto and was making excuses. But a little while later, I passed out again, and then she realized that I was not a spoiled girl. Mother realized that I had a real problem."

This was the start of recurring blackouts. Approximately two or three times a year they happened, with little or no warning, and each time the period of unconsciousness got longer. Sometimes Tomoko would feel warning signs of the impending blackout — headaches, nausea, dizziness, chills, cold sweat, upset stomach — and then an empty feeling like all her life force was being drained away. The symptoms resembled epilepsy, but doctors were at a loss as to the exact cause of her illness.

"One time I woke up in the hospital to see all my aunts and uncles gathered around my bedside," she says. "They said, 'We came to see you,' but I realized later the doctor had told them all I would probably die, so they came to say goodbye."

When Tomoko was in the fifth grade, she saw a movie in school that changed her life. It was a movie on the life of Nichiren Daishonin, showing his exile to Izu Peninsula.

"I was young but I was so touched by the Daishonin's life," she says. "He had such a hard time. When I thought he was going to die in the movie, I buried my face in my hands. I couldn't watch, and I was crying and crying. My classmate told me: 'Don't worry. He didn't die.' The last scene I remember was when two men in a boat rowed the Daishonin out to a rocky cliff by the ocean. The waves were high and whitecapped as they dashed against the cliff, and the Daishonin was left to die as the boat receded in the distance. The Daishonin chanted daimoku courageously with serene composure. That magnificent scene I never forgot. It saved my life. Ever since then, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo stayed deep in my mind."

As a teenager, the periods of unconsciousness became even longer, and Tomoko began to have seizures in which she was in danger of cracking her teeth or biting her tongue in half. At times, she wished to die, to save her mother from the suffering.

"When I was in my late teens, the family was desperate for a cure, and my uncle's friend introduced me to a heretical Nichiren sect in which followers chant," she says. "When I heard the sound of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I jumped. I told my mother, 'I'm going to

chant,' and my mother and I chanted daimoku together. I thought, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo saved the Daishonin's life and it can save my life, too."

This was wartime, and Tomoko remembers chanting in the house with black curtains all around because of air raids. She also visited the sect's headquarters, but she was disappointed by the atmosphere — no one greeted her, and she was troubled by a vague sense that the place didn't match her feeling for Nichiren Daishonin. She didn't return, but she kept chanting and her desire to die disappeared. After the war, she heard a report on the radio denouncing that sect as a money-making operation.

"I was really disappointed — I couldn't even cry because I was so angry and frustrated," Tomoko says. "But my mother was calm. She said: 'Well, wait and see. Just continue chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.' After a while it occurred to me that my blackouts had ceased. I got very excited and told my mom. She said, 'I know.' We both realized that I hadn't had a blackout for a very long time. We hugged each other. Once in a while I got a little blurred vision, but the last blackout was when I was around 21 years old. I was always holding faith in Nichiren Daishonin inside my heart, even though I didn't actually see the Gohonzon until years later."

She married an American and moved to the United States in 1955. In 1959 her Japanese friend introduced Tomoko to the Soka Gakkai by letter and sent her Gakkai publications, prayer beads and a sutra book.

"I was looking for members in Pennsylvania, but couldn't find them and didn't know what to do," she says. "So I decided that I was going to practice by myself. Then my friend in Japan died."

It would be another 20 years before Tomoko connected again with the organization. In September 1976, her husband died. The next February, after surgery for a severe intestinal obstruction, she almost died.

"I had a vivid dream while I was in the intensive care unit," she says. "My bed went up in the air, flying up through blue sky with lots of white clouds... The bed was flying at supersonic speed, and it landed first in China, then Africa, then Sumatra and finally Chile. Then it came into a big hole, very beautiful, with a red carpet and Indian people standing around the bed, all dressed up. One old lady talked to me and said, 'We made a grave for you.' I said, 'Thank you, but I'm looking for my husband.' At that moment the bed flew up in the air again, and then I woke up."

For Tomoko, this dream reflected her determination to live. Had she landed in Japan, where her mother was, or had she found her husband, she would have given up her life and died to be with them. But she lived, and her health improved.

And she kept chanting.

In 1982, Tomoko moved with her son and his family to Elmira, N.Y. There, in a Japanese food store, she became friends with several women who were Gakkai members. They took her out to lunch and showed her the *Seikyo Shimbun* [the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper in Japan], which, to their great surprise, Tomoko already knew about. When they brought her to a meeting and Tomoko saw the Gohonzon for the first time, she was overcome with joy. The same week, after 40 years of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and receiving benefits, Tomoko finally received the Gohonzon on Oct. 2, 1982.

"Every day I give thanks to the Gohonzon and the Soka Gakkai — I really appreciate the organization from the bottom of my heart," she says. "From presidents Makiguchi, Toda and Ikeda, and all the members, I get so much encouragement. I can't find words to explain. I'm always thinking of kosen-rufu and the members' happiness."

After a long and winding journey of faith, and now in her third stage of life, she is truly a wonderful example of the spirit to stand alone exemplified by the Daishonin and the

Gakkai presidents.

“I wish to live longer,” she says. “My job’s not done yet. Fighting together with SGI President Ikeda gives me energy.”

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