

PERSPECTIVE: Looking Into the Heart of Another's Faith

By TERRY MITCHELL

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After focusing her efforts on the SGI-USA community, one member ventures out into the larger community — and finds a whole world waiting for her, a world full of people also working for peace.

I began practicing this Buddhism at age 18 — 31 years ago. At the time, there was an endless pit of despair widening in my soul about life. I felt like a pawn in the universe, and that something greater than myself was maneuvering us all into painful circumstances over which we had no control.

That began to change after my first SGI-USA meeting. The joy, spontaneity, explosive energy and diversity overwhelmed me. I left that evening with two messages: 1) I had the power to change any painful circumstance into something glorious; and 2) I could contribute to world peace.

My major focus over the years has been the SGI-USA community. And during these years, I can honestly say I have grown in many ways.

In 1992, I began my journey into the community that I live in. This journey started with volunteering at a child abuse counseling center, which led to the position of volunteer director for four years.

Soon after leaving that job, my husband was diagnosed with cancer — Hodgkin's Lymphoma — and I spent the next six months fighting the greatest battle of our life. Again, my friends in faith surrounded my husband, my two daughters and me with deep love and support, and I thank all of you who were there for us. Your prayers and kind words are deeply imbedded in our hearts. I am happy to say that my husband has had two cancer-free CAT scans since then.

Over the last few months, I have ventured back into my community. I recently became involved in an organization called United Religions Initiative 2000. Its mission is to create a permanent assembly where the world's religious and spiritual communities can gather daily, in prayer and meditation, dialogue and cooperative action to address peace among nations, urgent human needs, and the healing of the Earth.

As I attended planning meetings for the Los Angeles Regional Conference for this initiative, I learned many things about myself. How narrow-minded and ignorant I was about other religions! My tolerance or acceptance of other faiths, I discovered, was superficial.

Over the years, I felt great pride in my efforts for peace through SGI activities. What I missed by focusing only on my own organization is that there are thousands of people all over the world diligently working for peace who do not practice this Buddhism. SGI President Ikeda said at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute: "The trend of the times is clearly for religious matters to be left to the discretion of individuals. This is all the more reason education must help assure that religious sentiment does not become self-righteous or intolerant and is always directed toward the most peaceful and valuable outcome."

I realized that I was guilty of denying the power of prayer of others and having the attitude that the SGI alone will achieve world peace. How arrogant.

Through the interfaith activities I have attended, I have met people with beautiful hearts and people committed to the same values and dreams we in the SGI have for ourselves, our families, our communities and the world.

President Ikeda is always reminding us that one person standing alone can make a

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difference. Over the years, he has shared many examples of common people creating monumental changes in education, art, science, government, etc., by continuously working for the good of humanity — Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and numerous others. Most of these great human beings did not practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

President Ikeda said in the same speech: "When mistrust is directed against others, it takes the form of the refusal of dialogue and ultimately violence. Mistrust breeds mistrust. Hatred breeds more hatred. How can this deadly cycle be broken? Here, I believe we need to call forth what might be termed a holistic, or even cosmological, humanism, one that regards the life of the individual human as extending out to and embracing the entire cosmos, and therefore meriting the most profound reverence."

My underlying attitude that only we, SGI members, can create peace and harmony on this planet is a cause for disharmony with my fellow human beings.

I have come to the realization that the SGI cannot achieve peace alone. For me to become a world citizen, a person who seeks to include and embrace others, I need to open my heart to the others' faiths, to discover our commonalties instead of our differences.

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