

KATHLEEN SLATTERY, LOS ANGELES
A Strong Heart and Mind

Kathleen Slattery's brother and aunt suffered mental illness — and she, too, has struggled with it in many ways. Today, she works as a clinical therapist at a lively psychiatric hospital in Hollywood. She hopes to help merge Buddhism and psychology in practical application.

Brian! It's us. Open up! Brian, we love you. Open up!" My mother and I shouted up to my brother's apartment window from the street below. We were knee-deep in snow left by one of Chicago's blizzards in the 1970s. In the storm, we attracted the glares of bundled-up passersby. I, embarrassed, angry and scared, shouted at them "What are you staring at!" My mother was frantic and near tears because my brother was having another nervous breakdown.

This time he'd locked himself in his apartment for days, wouldn't answer the phone, wouldn't let anybody in. Eventually, we got a call from the police. They had arrested him for walking into traffic — naked except for his winter overcoat. My mom said his arrest was a blessing to us. Later, when his mind was sane again, he told us he had been seeing Mother Theresa and the Devil in his apartment walls. He was crouched in the corner of his living room, hearing voices. When we were begging him to let us in, he thought we were out to get him.

I've been around mental illness all my life. My dad's sister — my aunt the nun — also hears voices. She has been mentally ill since her mid 30s. The illness just took over one year, and she stopped being her witty, fun, tomboyish self. Someone found her standing on a Michigan country road in her nun's habit hitching a ride to Rome to see the pope. I was always afraid I was going to crack up like my aunt did, at the peak of success — or like my brother, right after he passed his exams to be certified in respiratory therapy. Even when I was in graduate school to become a counselor, I was afraid to study about mental illness and started imagining that I had symptoms.

But real symptoms (such as overwhelming anxiety and feeling as if I were falling off the edge of a cliff) started to come out one night after seeing the movie *Thelma and Louise*. Strange, huh? Something about that movie triggered something in me. Fortunately, I was practicing Buddhism at the time. I went home and recited gongyo twice that night and chased it away...for a while. One SGI leader and friend helped me during scary times. She said: "There's no need to fear your mental illness coming out. It has to come out to leave your life. That's your benefit of your years of practice. Just chant more during those times."

Today, I work as a clinical therapist at a lively psychiatric hospital in Hollywood. As the crisis intervention coordinator, I oversee four units: the geriatric patients who can no longer care for themselves; the mentally ill with drug addictions; suicidal patients; and homicidal patients.

The dynamics of the hospital are thought-provoking in every way, sad and passionate. I'm working with people like my brother. He trained me. My boss remarked how good I am with the patients. Because many of the patients are on the edge of life and death, conversations with colleagues and patients often turn to spirituality. Part of my job is to ask patients if they have a religion they practice.

There is a young homeless man dying of AIDS, and he is wheelchair-bound because of multiple sclerosis. I'd been chanting for an opportunity to teach him to say Nam-myohorenge-kyo. I don't think he has long to live, and I just couldn't let him die without having

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to take him on his journey. Just the other morning, he chanted...and then he found a home for the first time in years. I don't know if I'll see him again, but he has a roof over his head for the first time in a long time, and my prayer is that he dies with dignity.

He reminded me so much of my brother, who struggled all his life with his illness and his homosexuality. My brother died of AIDS at the age of 34. He didn't have the Gohonzon in his lifetime. I told this young man about Buddhism to repay my brother, with the hope that they will both have the Gohonzon in their next lifetime.

I've always had a death wish, felt like a late bloomer, that I had screwed up my life and there was no fixing it. The other day, I shared my personal story of wanting to die with a suicidal patient. He said aloud the same words I used to think before finding the Gohonzon: "I wish I'd die and start life over." I told him how I found a philosophy that allowed me to create a new life without dying.

In 1990, SGI President Ikeda said: "Lives that are full of the pain of Hell, lives that are in the state of Hunger, lives warped by the state of Anger — such lives, too, begin to move in the direction of creating their own personal happiness and value. Lives being pulled toward misfortune and unhappiness are redirected and pulled in the opposite direction, toward good, when they make the Mystic Law their base."

In the course of almost nine years of Buddhist practice, with the Gohonzon and the SGI, I have been redirecting my life toward good and happiness, embarking upon the creation of a new and joyous life. I feel — to the marrow — that I was given a new life without having to die first when I found the Gohonzon.

My creativity took off, and I wrote about my brother's life. I wrote about him in a screenplay and a play about a large family left with a crazy brother when Mama dies. I produced and starred in a one-act autobiographical play about the relationship between a sister and brother as he experiences the final stages of AIDS and dying.

As a Bodhisattva of the Earth, I chant for the wisdom to understand the patients' lives and to respect them. When I began working here, I'd freak out — I would want to cry at the sight of some patients and be afraid. Or laugh uncontrollably. Some patients would really scare me and cause my mental idiosyncrasies, such as paranoia, to emerge. I thought the job would do me in, and it would be only a matter of time before they checked me into the hospital. But my leader and friend advised me to reach my patients' Buddhahood with my life, and that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is flowing through my body. I am Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, my friend said, so I'm my patients' connection to the Gohonzon. I chant every morning with this intent and to understand my patients and respond to their needs.

My peers say I have a calming effect on the patients. And in the last three months, the percentage of patients wanting to interrupt treatment and leave the hospital has been the lowest in the hospital's history. Through my personal and work experience, I'm developing theories based on Buddhism about mental illness. I want to help merge Buddhism and psychology in practical application.

I'm not afraid of going mad anymore. My life has endured so much stress and anxiety. I have developed a more expansive capacity to embrace each challenge because of it, and I continue to forge a strong heart and mind.

I'm working toward my license as a psychotherapist, and I've earned more than half of the clinical hours required. I work four days a week at the hospital and write the other three now. I've begun working on a one-woman stage play about a therapist and her patients in a psychiatric hospital — with the idea of playing all the characters myself. Working at the hospital has also inspired one series idea and two screenplays.

I owe all my development to the Gohonzon and the SGI. Through my volunteer efforts

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with the SGI-USA publications, I've developed my capabilities and fortune and created a new career. (The publications staff and supportive leaders and fellow members believed in me long before I thought I could do any of it.) Through my volunteer efforts in writing and leadership responsibilities all the years of my practice, I continue redirecting my life toward happiness in all ways.

I still panic with moments of doubt and regret and wanting to die creeps back in like an old bad habit, but it's fleeting and less frequent now. I keep taking the medicine of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

At a recent correspondents' training session at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, a national leader shared privately with me one of her thoughts that gives her hope and appreciation. "Whenever I think I'm really screwed up," she said, "I remember I must be doing something right, because I was born as a human being, because I found this Buddhism, and because I practice in this lifetime alongside President Ikeda."

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