

**GET REAL: DEVELOPING A BIG HEART
BY JIMMY KING,
SGI-USA JR. HIGH/HIGH SCHOOL DIVISION LEADER**

Have you ever felt like a jellyfish just floating around and going in no particular direction? Did you feel so sad that you just wanted to shut everything out of your life so you couldn't feel any more pain? I have been there.

During my high school days, my father became very ill. Seeing my father in such a weak physical condition was very difficult. In my mind, I would pretend that he wasn't ill and that everything was fine. It was my way of coping with the situation.

One day I called up my mom after I had gone to the mall with one of my friends, and she told me to come home right away. When I got home, she told me that my dad had passed away. I just remember falling to my knees and crying. The day of the memorial service, all I wanted to do was be alone. For the next few months, I fell into a depression, not really talking to or seeing anyone. However, my close friends never gave up on me. Many of them didn't know what to say, but just knowing that they cared meant so much to me.

I then spoke to this person whom I respected and asked him for some advice about the way I was feeling. He encouraged me to think about my mother and try to be there for her. He also said: "When people go through tragedies or something painful in their lives, they can try to escape the pain. But, it will still be there if you don't confront the situation. You can challenge those circumstances by trying to grow from them and become a stronger person."

He also told me that this was really a great chance for me to develop my heart. At that time, I thought what he said was a bunch of bull. However, I understand now that he was telling me the truth. I was able to use this experience with my father as a source of inspiration. I started to chant to the Gohonzon to open up my heart. I realized that everything that occurs in life happens for a reason. It was up to me if I wanted to use it as a springboard or if I just wanted to fall off the earth.

Recently, President Ikeda said something that continues to encourage me: "View all hardships as the material that will enable you to develop a big heart and become individuals of depth and substance" (*Discussions on Youth*, vol. 1, p. 28).

Looking back, I totally believe this to be true. I think of all the heartaches, disappointments, joys and laughter that I have experienced and they have all made me into the person I am today. Because of this experience in particular, I realize how precious life is and how important each person's unique mission is. It has made me want to open up my life and help others.

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