

EXPERIENCE — CESARE CIVETTA, FT. LAUDERDALE, FLA. 'BEST FRIENDS WITH MY BROTHER'

Cesare Civetta's Buddhist practice enabled him to close the emotional distance he had with his older brother, Gerald, before Gerald's death.

My brother, Gerald, was eight years older than me. We were never really close growing up. He was very much a part of the hippie movement of the '60s, and to protect me, he frequently pushed me away when I was a kid so I wouldn't see him high on drugs. He was my only brother and as I grew older, the emotional distance between us became frustrating. It's not that we didn't get along; we didn't communicate at all.

Gerald's first major victory in his life was conquering a 16-year heroin addiction. Unfortunately, right after his victory, he was faced with an even greater obstacle when he discovered he was HIV-positive. This battle was made even more intense by his feeling that he had to keep it a secret from his family for 10 years. My dad was fighting cancer, and Gerald didn't want to lay this extra burden on us.

My brother worked closely with my dad over the years, and loved him deeply. My dad's death devastated Gerald, and shortly thereafter, he was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS. Still, for nine months, he kept it a secret, not wanting to further burden my mom.

After he finally told us, I determined that he and I would become best friends, for as long as we shared this lifetime together. I didn't know how this would come about. Gerald's anger about being HIV-positive evolved into depression about having full-blown AIDS. He grew even quieter, and it became practically impossible to carry on a conversation with him. It is so common nowadays to point out the flaws of our organization of the '80s. However, one thing that same organization taught me was the spirit to never give up. My determination, backed by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and praising the law of cause and effect at every opportunity, enabled me to persevere with this determination. It took three years.

Gerald lived in New York; I had moved to Florida. During this time, I visited Gerald every other month, and he came to visit me on the alternate ones, so we spent a few days together each month.

Because of what he was going through, and because we were not used to being close, Gerald found it very difficult to speak, and at times this was extremely frustrating. On each visit, I racked my brains trying to ignite some dialogue. Sometimes I would ramble on about something, just to fill up the silence, but he often responded with a grunt, or a half-smile.

I kept chanting every day to change this situation. Eventually he stopped reading and watching TV and sometimes during those visits we sat in silence for hours. It drove me crazy, but he seemed to like it. He appreciated our time just sitting together, not saying anything. There was so much I wanted to tell him, to share with him how wonderful life had become for me.

How I yearned for him to know the joy that I have come to know practicing Buddhism. Yet, his heaviness seemed to overpower my high life-condition. I chanted that Gerald would not experience pain, and I continued chanting for us to become best friends.

Even when I was working in China, I found a way to e-mail with Gerald. Upon my return to America, I visited him for one week. The day after I returned home, his wife

called to explain that he had fallen off the sofa, and couldn't stand up. She was unable to lift him, and so they stayed on the floor for an hour. I offered to return to New York and help, which he welcomed. I stayed with him for another week, lifting him and carrying him around the apartment.

He was frightened about dying, and stopped sleeping at night. Now and then he dozed off for short naps, during which time I ran into the next room, where I had set up an altar. I began chanting every moment I wasn't physically with him. Soon I was staying on his bed when he napped, and chanting next to him. The chanting increased until in the last days, I was chanting four, five, six, seven hours each day. The candles were burning in offering to the Gohonzon around the clock.

I asked him what his favorite song was, and he told me it was George Gershwin's "Summertime." We began listening to "Summertime" every day. Midway through the week, my mother and sister arrived to help nurse him. He took to wearing his sunglasses because of the bright light in his apartment. And we listened to Reggae music, especially Bob Marley, and also to Jimmy Buffet.

He was uncomfortable discussing the issues of life and death, but I made a promise to him. I said: "Gerald, one thing I will tell you: When you die, you won't have to worry about anything. I'm going to be in front of the Gohonzon chanting, and you will experience the most magnificent voyage, wherever you're going."

I continued chanting, and he became relaxed and quite light. He made jokes, sang and frequently thanked me. What I had never realized before was that during all those years I yearned to have an intimate relationship with my brother, he, too, had the identical desire. Now that it had manifested, he was incredibly happy.

Every time I stepped into his room, the look in his eyes and the expression on his face were unmistakable: he was just oozing love. He kept saying that he never imagined our relationship would be like this. There was the most beautiful current of love flowing between us. Sure, he was slowing fading, but we were on cloud nine.

The night before he died, his wife, my sister and I were all sitting on his bed with him well after midnight, knowing that we'd be up all night again. I proposed opening the two bottles of champagne I'd seen in his refrigerator, to toast the beginning of spring. There was a beautiful view of New York's Central Park, which had burst out into the first green buds and cherry blossoms. We joked, listened to music, laughed and sipped champagne. It was our little party.

The next day, as I rode with him in the ambulance on the way to the hospital (still chanting), he lay on the stretcher, saying: "I'm so happy. I'm so happy!" He spent his final hours mostly sleeping, peacefully, without fear, without pain.

After Gerald died, I chanted until the next morning because I promised him a magnificent voyage. My sister and sister-in-law stayed up until sunrise. They watched the sun rise over Manhattan and told me later that it was the most magnificent sky they had ever seen during a sunrise, and that they had felt his wondrous voyage at that moment. At his funeral, a friend of ours sang "Summertime" at his tomb.

He'll be back soon, and we will pick up on the beautiful vibration where we left off.

I will always be grateful to our great Soka Gakkai for teaching me to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, to never give up and for enabling me to become best friends with my brother, Gerald.

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