

EXPERIENCE — MARY MCCONNELL, BUFFALO, NEW YORK THE INSEPARABLE LOVE BETWEEN A FATHER AND DAUGHTER

'Buddhism teaches the inseparability of our lives; we all are connected at the deepest level,' says Mary McConnell. Over the past year, faced with her father's cancer and ensuing death, Mary came to terms with the reality of their relationship. 'There was still a distance between us. It was a source of pain that I needed to resolve.' In using his illness to challenge her Buddhist practice, she explains, 'I felt like I renewed our relationship — I was his little girl again. Every prayer to the Gohonzon for my father came true.'

My experience begins in April 1998. It was springtime in Buffalo — the sky blue, the sun shining, and all the flowers in full bloom. My life, too, was blossoming, filled with happiness and fulfillment I had never known before.

I had just married a wonderful man after years of unhappy relationships, including a previous marriage that ended in divorce and, at age 37, was expecting my first child. This was a child I had chanted for, and dreamed of having, for more than 10 years. After practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism for more than 18 years, my cherished hope of having a happy family of my own had finally become a reality.

My bliss was suddenly shattered with a phone call from my parents, who told me my father had just been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. It was stage IV cancer, the final stage of the disease. It was inoperable. There were no treatments, not even chemotherapy, that could prevent the progression of the cancer. The only role of the doctors was to attempt to manage the pain, which would rapidly increase with time. The prognosis was that he had from two months to six months, at best, remaining to live. My father, who had always been in perfect health, who had always been a pillar of support for my family, and with whom I shared a closeness and respect that had sustained me throughout my life — to lose him was simply incomprehensible to me.

My relationship with my father has not always been a perfect one. When I was a child, I worshipped him; we were very close. However throughout my adolescence and early adulthood we drifted apart. My dad was multitalented; he was brilliant. I never felt I measured up to his expectations. He was also not an openly affectionate person. He had a close relationship with my brother that I envied. I was jealous and I wanted so desperately to renew our closeness. Through my 18 years of Buddhist practice, our relationship became closer but there was still a distance between us. It was a source of pain that I needed to resolve.

My family and I were suddenly confronted with a heartbreaking and devastating situation. Two days after his diagnosis, my father was admitted to the hospital in excruciating pain. The cancer apparently had been growing for quite some time; it had spread from the lung throughout his bones, into his pelvis, vertebrae and rib cage. He had become completely immobilized and unable to even sit up or feed himself. Due to the fragility of his bones, he had unknowingly fractured his pelvis. Lying on his back, he screamed and cried out from the pain, despite being administered the highest doses of morphine. The members of my family, and my dad himself, believed he most likely would never walk again, and possibly never leave the hospital and return home.

The night I received the news of my father's cancer, I spent crying and chanting in front

of the Gohonzon. It would be the first of many nights — for I knew, only prayer to the Gohonzon could help my father. I reread one of my favorite passages from a letter Nichiren Daishonin wrote to Nichigen-nyo, a follower whose daughter, Kyo'o Gozen, was suffering from illness: "Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?" and "Kyo'o Gozen's misfortune will change into fortune. Muster your faith and pray to this Gohonzon. Then what is there that cannot be achieved? You should believe the Lotus Sutra when it says, 'This sutra fulfills one's desires. It is the pond's cool, clear water that quenches thirst,' and 'They will have peace and security in this life and good circumstances in the next'" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, pp.119–20).

The only way this nightmare could be transformed was with the power of courageous prayer. I began to chant wholeheartedly for the pain my father was experiencing to subside, and for him to regain his strength. He received 15 days of inpatient radiation treatment in hope of alleviating some of the pain. The treatment had a remarkable effect; my father's pain immediately began to subside. Day by day, although he hadn't been able to eat for nearly a month, he began to regain his strength. I arrived at the hospital, having flown to North Carolina, where my parents live, to find my father leaving the hospital in a wheelchair, rolling joyfully down the hallway kissing all the nurses good-bye. He was so grateful to be going home.

Soon he was using a walker to get around the house, and was slowly regaining the 30 pounds he lost while in the hospital. A short time later, he discarded the walker and began taking daily walks all around the neighborhood.

The day of his diagnosis, I had made a promise to myself that, no matter what, he would live to see the birth of my daughter, nearly four months away, to be there to share this happiness that he, too, had waited a long time for. In late June, to the amazement of everyone, my mother and father got on a plane to fly home to Buffalo. On July 19, I gave birth to a healthy baby girl. My dad was there at the hospital to hold her in his arms, his face filled with joy. It was truly the happiest day of my life.

In the midst of challenging my father's life-and-death situation, we were thrown into yet another crisis — my 3-week-old daughter was admitted to the intensive care unit due to the sudden onset of convulsions. The probable cause: a case of spinal meningitis. Fortunately she was discharged 10 days later in stable condition, but we were told by doctors that she could sustain permanent neurological or brain damage. Since that time I chanted every day for her health and development. Eight months later she is completely healthy, happy and medication-free.

My father is an internationally known scholar and author, and professor of musicology at the University of North Carolina. When he got sick, he was writing his fifth book; the culmination of years of research. It was his dream to complete this final book. I chanted day after day that he could fulfill this dream. Despite his condition, he was able to work and write five to six hours a day for the following three months. He completed the final revisions of the book, which will be published by the University of California at Berkeley.

My family spent the summer months together, time with my father that we all cherished. We had a deepened appreciation and renewed love for each other, and believed how important it was to treasure every moment we spent together.

In the fall, my parents returned to North Carolina, and my dad resumed working part time at the University. My daughter, Christine, and I had spent many wonderful visits with them. I was blessed with this beautiful baby daughter who brought happiness to all our

lives, especially to her grandfather. They shared a very special bond. My father cried each time we left to return to Buffalo. Only the promise that he would see Christine again gave us the strength to say good-bye.

In mid-January, a three-day conference was planned to be held at the University in honor of my father's retirement. Scholars and friends from as far away as Europe would be coming to honor him and his 40 years of accomplishments in his field. To still be present for the event, my dad would have to continue to outlast the predictions of all the doctors.

However, just two weeks before the conference, he refractured his pelvis and was bedridden. He became extremely weak and stopped eating, and seemed to be fading away. I began to chant, along with so many of my friends in the SGI, that somehow he would live to enjoy this celebration that meant so much to him, and which he so truly deserved.

At this time I received a long distance call from the hospice nurse who was caring for my father in his home. She told me: "I just saw your father. I was amazed to see him full of energy and enthusiasm, directing preparations for the conference from his bed. He told me, 'Never give up!' This is his motto, and I know he will never give up. It is an inspiration and a privilege to know your father."

The conference was a tremendous event. Although my dad could not leave his bed, he watched everything on videotape, and also videotaped himself to present to the lecturers and participants at the University. When my brother gave a speech in his honor, everyone was in tears. Nearly 100 people came to his bedside to see him, and he enjoyed every moment.

My father died peacefully, surrounded by family, on Feb. 23, ten months after being diagnosed with cancer. This has been a difficult time, yet one of unforgettable and treasured memories. My dad enjoyed a remarkable quality of life even in the final stage of his illness. He achieved all his personal and professional goals in the short time he had. My father was so loving and we communicated our deepest feelings and forgave past hurts and mistakes, which would otherwise have remained unspoken between us. I felt like I renewed our relationship — I was his little girl again. This was my greatest gift, and I have no regrets. I know my father was happy and proud of all that I had become. In moments of grief, it gives me solace and comfort that he loved his granddaughter and shared in the beginning of her life, and in the new life I am beginning as well.

Buddhism teaches the inseparability of our lives; we all are connected at the deepest level. Because we share the same inner core of life force and Buddhahood, our prayers penetrate the lives of the people around us, activating their own healing life force. Every prayer to the Gohonzon for my father came true, from the practical prayers for relief of symptoms, the best doctors and care, and so forth, to the most profound prayers for his life to be prolonged until he accomplished what was important to him, and to experience a sense of completion and happiness in the final phase of life.

Through illness and death, I have learned and continue to learn invaluable lessons. I've learned how precious it is to give, and receive, love from others, and how fortunate I am. Although we experienced our share of ups and downs, my family now has a greater strength and closeness in our relationships.

I want to thank my husband, Tim, for his unending love and support and the members of SGI who were at my side throughout the past year, and prayed for my father and daughter as if they were members of their own family. Words do not adequately express my gratitude and appreciation for the support and friendship you gave to me and my family. I will continue striving in unity with all of you, and the SGI organization of which I am proud to be a part.

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