

## FROM A SURVIVOR...INTO A WINNER

My Buddhist practice over the last 14 years has enabled me to reflect on the true source of anger and pain in my life. My realizations have led me to understand that my feelings of self-contempt, self-hatred and the certainty that I was unloved and undeserving attracted the same type of people into my life. These realizations also have enabled me to forgive many people in my life. Now I cherish my life, every bit of my past. I would not trade a single experience that I've had. I realize my life experiences have shaped me into the person that I am today, and quite frankly, I like who I've become. I'm not perfect — I'll settle for being human.

My family put the “func” in dysfunctional. I had an older brother, a baby sister, and a dad who loved my mother with every ounce of his soul. He also was an alcoholic. My mother suffered from acute neurosis, but my father was in denial so Mom never received treatment. Dad just put her to bed, told us she was ill, and took full responsibility for my brother and me. In fact, when I was only 7, Mom went into that room and didn't come out until I was 9. After she came out, she turned my life into a living hell. Anytime she felt I'd done anything wrong, real or imagined, she'd beat me with a stack of wooden coat hangers until each one broke. I was never able to talk her out of it, so I protested by refusing to cry; I refused to be broken by her.

At the same time, my father's so-called friends were sexually abusing me. They threatened that if I ever told anyone, they would hurt my father. I believed them. Although I eventually told my parents about it, my father insisted I was a liar and a troublemaker, and my mom didn't stick up for me either.

I became angry at the world. By age 12, I was involved with the juvenile authorities. At 14, I was a ward of the court as a habitual runaway and by 17 was living in a foster home. Then I fell in love with the most beautiful Latino man I'd ever seen. I got pregnant, and in my third month, we ran off to Reno, Nev. Full of hope for a new life filled with love, I lied about my age and married my “prince charming.”

Unfortunately, my prince turned into a mean frog. Willie constantly beat and terrorized me. One beating almost made me lose the baby, so I had him arrested. I testified against him. Mom paid for an annulment. Willie was still in jail, and she was with me when the baby was born. But I was only 18, young and naive. I believed if Willie and I could build a happy family with our new baby, the violence would end. When he got out of jail and came back to me full of promises, we remarried. But he hadn't changed. After he almost killed me, I had him arrested and testified against him in court again. He went to jail again.

Of course, he came home after he was released, and, of course, the beatings started again. I became convinced I'd never be free of him unless I personally took care of my “Willie problem.” I arranged for us to use a friend's mountain cabin. While Willie rested with his eyes closed, I crept up to him and softly called his name. When he opened his eyes, I had a rifle pointed between them. I was cold as ice; I was going to blow his head off. He begged for his life. Killing him, I thought, would relieve him of his suffering. I wasn't in the mood to do him any favors, so I said: “Okay, I'm going to take this gun off of you. But if you ever hit me again and let me live, I give you my solemn promise, I will kill you.” We packed up our stuff and drove back home in silence. I felt free. Empowered. No one would ever control, terrify or beat me again. I got away, but Willie's second wife

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Subject: World Tribune 06/04/99 n.3245 p.3 WT990604p03

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Keywords: Crime Della Experiences Health Quinn Survivor Violence Winner Youth

wasn't so lucky.

For the next 15 years, I became a heroin addict. I started off with a \$5-a-day habit and finished with a \$500-a-day habit. I packed a .44 Magnum and ran with the biggest drug dealers in the Southwest.

At 21, I was sentenced five years to life for selling marijuana and sent to the California State Institution for Women's prison; I served three years and was paroled to Los Angeles. While incarcerated I earned a cosmetology license through the Chino adult school.

One year later I was married to Art, a former heroin user from Venice Beach, and together we started using again. We had two children in the process. I loved them—I did my best for them. In spite of my insanity and my addiction, I made sure they ate well, went to school, had toys and most of all, knew they were loved.

I had my own moral code: I never stole anything from my family or friends; I never sold to minors; and I never introduced anyone to heroin. I knew what being an addict meant. The last thing I wanted was to take anyone to where I was in my life.

I was a two-time convicted drug felon. If I got busted a third time, I would get a mandatory 50-year-to-life sentence. The police were always harassing me. I knew if I didn't get out of town my way, I'd be leaving their way.

Art and I moved to Las Vegas. When we ran out of drugs and money, we cleaned our lives up—"cold turkey." It almost killed us but we got through it. We found jobs and went on to build as good a life as we could for our family.

Five years later Art began using drugs again. Filled with bitter disappointment, I got a 24-hour divorce. With two nickels in my pocket, I moved with the kids to Venice. I was alone again.

I was fortunate to receive further training as a geometric hair designer. I fought tooth and nail to develop a stable existence for my kids and I. I was successful, but I was totally bankrupt in every other aspect of my life.

Fourteen years ago, at age 46, I met a client who never seemed to get caught up in the chaos of life. I thought she must be using a pill or smoking some kind of good dope, so I asked her what she used. She told me she was a Buddhist and didn't use anything. She invited me to attend a Buddhist meeting at her house that Sunday.

On that morning I called her crying. I explained that I was simply too miserable to be around people and hung up on her. Later that day, three women showed up at my door. They said my client had sent them. I was pissed. How dare they upset my nervous breakdown!

They asked me what I wanted for my life. Peace of mind was my response. Buddhism, they said, could answer that prayer. I didn't believe them. The more they spoke, the more the pain in my life was rising closer to the surface. I began to cry and eventually I found myself around the corner at a Buddhist meeting. Shortly thereafter I began my practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

I was not an easy convert. My greatest blessing was that people were committed to helping me and they never let me go. No matter how many times I hung up on them, slammed the door in their faces, or "flaked" on coming to SGI activities, they never gave up on me. In time I was completely won over by their commitment and conviction that I could lead a life of complete joy.

I began to crave a deeper understanding of this Buddhism the way I used to crave dope. I read everything I could get my hands on and barraged experienced members in faith with questions. I was determined to become happy. My life began changing positively and rap-

idly with tremendous benefits.

Eight years ago, my dad got ill, so I took care of him. Before he died he chanted with me; we had a beautiful closure. Although Art died of liver cancer in 1985, he stopped using heroin in 1984 and died clean and sober. We also had a great closure. While my relationship with my mother is still a work in progress, I chant for her happiness daily.

On Sept. 24, 1995, I married my current husband, Ed Quinn, the kindest, most generous, protective, hard-working man I've ever known. We strive for each other's happiness. My children are all adults now, two are successful, productive citizens and I'm still working on the third.

In the 14 years I've practiced this Buddhism, all of my specific prayers have been answered. Before I started chanting, I was miserable 90 percent of the time. After only a few months of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and learning gongyo, I became happy 90 percent of the time — I still battle my misery the other 10 percent. Today as a 60-year-young woman, I can honestly say my practice of Buddhism has transformed my life from being a survivor, living by my wits, into a winner living based on wisdom and fortune!

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