

EXPERIENCE – JACK DIPETRO, RANCHO SANTA MARGARITA, CALIF. WRITING A NEW HISTORY FOR MYSELF

Jack DiPietro explains how his life went from ‘hell to happy’ during his 26 years of Buddhist practice. Besides enjoying numerous treasures of the heart, he is currently working toward acquiring a Ph.D. in English, despite being diagnosed with congenital aphasia, ‘a total or partial loss of the power to use or understand words.’

In 1971, I was devastated over the murder of my friend Eddy in Santa Monica. Stabbed 13 times because he owed some guys \$30, Eddy died at my feet, begging, “Help me, Jack, I’m dying.” Though I had nightmares every night, and feared for my own life, I fingered the guys who did it, which led to the police finding the murder weapon and a bloody jacket in the home of the primary suspect, the makings of a strong case — or so I thought.

At the arraignment, the judge threw the evidence, the eyewitness (me), and the case out of court. At this point in my life, I became a practicing nihilist; I believed in nothing; the physical world was all that existed for me, and I was convinced the universe was totally indifferent toward me. I believed in no supernatural or spiritual existence, influence or significance. My life was hell. Sartre was wrong. I remember thinking back then, hell isn’t “other people,” hell is me. *Webster’s* should have had my picture next to the word *hell* — an 8 x 10. Then, when my girlfriend, Tricia, a Playboy bunny, left me a year later, I plunged into the deepest and darkest, the mother of all hells.

Fortunately for me, however, my friend Cleve had joined the SGI-USA in 1971. Cleve had been my guru, of sorts. For a couple of years, I had a quasi teacher–pupil relationship with Cleve. However, I broke off that relationship in 1971 when he joined what I figured was some kind of weird cult. Nevertheless, it was Cleve whom I called when Bunny Tricia left me. I was totally incredulous, to say the least, when he told me to chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo to get my girlfriend back. Despite the fact that I would miss *The Sonny & Cher Show*, I attended my first Buddhist meeting that night, and there and then I joined the SGI-USA.

Twenty-six years later, I’m so incredibly happy I did. Everything changed — my life went from hell to happy. Since practicing this Buddhism, I’ve received extraordinary benefits, overcome tremendous obstacles and steadily deepened my faith in the Daishonin’s Buddhism. To illustrate, in 1976 I married a young woman who has since become the touchstone and mainstay of my life. I had joined the SGI-USA because I wanted Bunny Tricia back. I really believe that I got back instead my wife from my eternal past, my soul-mate. Ironically, her name is Tricia, too. We call each other Wyatt and Doc, as in Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. I’m Doc.

Over the course of our 22-plus years together, we’ve backed each other’s play in many an OK Corral. For example, for 12 years Wyatt and I tried desperately to have children. The many doctors we went to over the course of those years, however, couldn’t diagnose why we couldn’t. Finally, we sought advice from a senior in faith who told us to treat the SGI members as our children, figuratively speaking, that is. As chapter leaders practicing together at that time, we put her guidance into action immediately. Shortly thereafter, the problem was diagnosed, and today we have two precious children, Tom and Tracy, whom we are raising with tremendous joy, love and appreciation. This memory and these chil-

Title: Writing A New History For Myself

Subject: World Tribune 06/04/99 n.3245 p.4 WT990604p04 Rancho Santa Margarita

Author: Jack DiPietro

Keywords: DiPietro Education Experiences Health History Jack Margarita Myself Rancho Santa Writing

dren are both my precious treasures of the heart.

SGI members are also precious treasures of the heart for me. I remember back in 1992, for example, how Jon, a member in my chapter, saved my life. He was just returning the favor, actually, because a few years earlier I had helped save his. I'll never forget, when he called to tell me his doctors had just given him 30 days to live: advanced stages of lung cancer. "Jack," he said, "the doctors told me to get my things in order." I was stunned. I almost told him I'd get someone more experienced to call him back because I felt I didn't have the wisdom to help him. Then I remembered that almost 20 years earlier my friend Eddy had died at my feet while I stood by helplessly, and I knew I wasn't going to let that happen again. After all, I wasn't helpless this time.

Amazing confidence surged to the surface of my life; the words came out of my mouth almost as though they had a life of their own. I said to Jon: "Your doctors don't know about the power of the Gohonzon, Jon, the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. You're not going to die, I promise you! You're going to live because you have a mission for kosen-rufu to fulfill! Why don't you chant 10 hours every day so that you can live to fulfill that mission?"

Jon lived. He confounded all those doctors at the City of Hope Hospital who incorrectly foretold his doom.

A couple of years ago, Jon came up to me after a discussion meeting and asked me if I remembered telling him to chant 10 hours a day. He said: "I never told you this before, but I couldn't chant the whole 10 hours. I felt so ill all the time, what with the heavy doses of chemo and radiation I was taking. So I could only chant three hours each day. I'm sorry, Jack." Members are indeed such wonderful treasures of the heart.

As I said before, though, Jon was just returning the favor.

By January 1992, the family business — Wyatt and I are self-employed banking consultants — had been "circling the toilet" for the last couple of years due to the awful economic downturn California suffered in the early to mid-'90s. We had already lost our three-acre estate, cars, horses and savings. We had experienced similar obstacles 10 years earlier and had overcome them with our Buddhist practice. For some reason, however, I was dumb enough to think that by overcoming such financial obstacles once, I would never have to confront them again. And so I was surprised when they recurred, on a much larger scale, 10 years later.

Nevertheless, I started chanting two, then three, four, five hours each day to overcome these obstacles. But no matter how much I chanted, nothing seemed to change. After almost two years of this, one Sunday morning in January 1992, after doing gongyo, I told Tricia I was quitting the practice. Boy, I've never seen my wife get so angry before; but, no matter what she said, I was determined to quit after almost 20 years of practice. I was frustrated and angry that I couldn't break my karmic deadlock, no matter how hard I practiced.

While my wife was still yelling at me, however, the phone rang. It was Jon. His group was having a meeting, the theme of which was favorite quotes from Nichiren Daishonin's writings. He asked if I could locate a particular passage for him. I knew exactly which passage he was looking for. I read it to him over the phone: "This time I am sure that you will give up your faith. If you do, I have not the slightest intention of reproaching you for it. Likewise, neither should you blame me, Nichiren, when you have fallen into hell. It is in no way my responsibility" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2, [2nd ed.], p. 243). How wondrously amazing that Jon should call me at that crucial moment and

Title: Writing A New History For Myself

Subject: World Tribune 06/04/99 n.3245 p.4 WT990604p04 Rancho Santa Margarita

Author: Jack DiPietro

Keywords: DiPietro Education Experiences Health History Jack Margarita Myself Rancho Santa Writing

prompt me to read this most appropriate guidance. As I read the passage, I felt as though the Daishonin was speaking directly to me.

So there I found myself back in the life-condition of Hell, from which I had emerged 20 years earlier when I first started chanting. I knew at that moment I was *not* going to quit; I realized I was not going to give up on myself, this Buddhist practice, Jon and all the other members who counted on me. I remember thinking: “I swear, Daishonin, I’ll never quit; never give up; never forget my promise. I will win, no matter what; just watch me.” At that moment, I broke through my deadlock.

Consequently, in the next three months our business earned over \$100,000. Since then, while three-quarters of our competitors have gone out of business, our little two-person company has become one of the foremost executive search firms in the Southern California banking industry. In contrast, I dread to think of what would have become of me if my dear friend had not called me that Sunday morning in 1992.

For many years now, I have wanted to write my experience in faith. I haven’t, though, because I have a very difficult time with language. I have aphasia, which *Webster’s* says is “a total or partial loss of the power to use or understand words, usually caused by brain disease or injury.” While I did suffer a severe skull fracture as a child, I’ve actually been diagnosed as having congenital aphasia, which makes sense because my 10-year-old son has inherited it from me. Tom’s case is more severe than mine, however. Whereas mine results in a moderate loss of verbal ability, his results in a substantial loss of the ability not only to use words but also to understand them. Tom did not speak until he was 7, and did not use complete sentences until he was almost 9. Because of these symptoms, an elementary school psychologist once told us that our son was retarded.

Two years ago, however, after chanting a tremendous amount for Tom’s sake, his true aphasic condition was finally diagnosed. We found a very special speech therapist, whose skill and determination have empowered Tom to advance his language skills exponentially over the past two years.

Because of Tom, my own aphasic disability also became clear to me. I was so happy to finally discover that what had plagued me all my life was clearly physiological. The words just wouldn’t come, especially whenever I tried to express them in writing. I had always thought I was just plain stupid.

Despite this condition, however, I’m completing a Ph.D. in English at Claremont Graduate University. I started on my master’s in January 1992, and have been working very hard ever since. How hard? Well, for example, whenever I’ve had to write a paper, I would take four times as long to write it as would my classmates. Since 1992, I’ve had to write 68 papers. In addition to my studies and my full-time consulting business, I’m also an adjunct professor of English at Saddleback College. I’ve been teaching college part time since 1993. Freshman composition — how ironic!

I’ve finally completed my Ph.D. course work, and my qualifying exams are in August. Then I will have to write a 200-page dissertation.

Because writing is so difficult, this dissertation has worried me from the very beginning of my graduate studies. Yet I have just got to do a good job — no, a great job — on this ultimate paper of mine. I’m writing about SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, comparing his writing to the Transcendentalist writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. My dissertation committee will be: the chair of the English department at Claremont Graduate University; the chair of the English department at California State University, Los

Title: Writing A New History For Myself

Subject: World Tribune 06/04/99 n.3245 p.4 WT990604p04 Rancho Santa Margarita

Author: Jack DiPietro

Keywords: DiPietro Education Experiences Health History Jack Margarita Myself Rancho Santa Writing

Angeles; and Dr. Alfred Balitzer, professor of political science at Claremont and the honorary president of Soka University of America. This is why I think the time has come for me to write this experience.

Title: Writing A New History For Myself
Subject: World Tribune 06/04/99 n.3245 p.4 WT990604p04 Rancho Santa Margarita
Author: Jack DiPietro
Keywords: DiPietro Education Experiences Health History Jack Margarita Myself Rancho Santa Writing