

EXPERIENCE — ROBERT C. FARRAR, ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, ILL. ENHANCING MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MYSELF

Robert Farrar discovers the beauty of his own life and more through attending a conference on relationships at FNCC.

My fiancée, Kathy Hawkins, and I had just returned to Chicago from the Enhancing Our Relationships Through Buddhism Conference held at FNCC May 20-23. When I dropped her off at her home, the last thing she said to me before saying good night was, “I’m glad you were able to attend the conference with me because there is no way that I could possibly describe what has happened these last couple of days.” Those thoughts echoed in my head as I drove home, trying to decide how I would explain to the other members in our district what we had experienced at FNCC that weekend.

Interestingly, my May 21 issue of the *World Tribune* arrived in the mail the very next day and included an insert about upcoming conferences at FNCC. The flyer began with a comment that FNCC was built for SGI-USA members to “refresh their spirit and determination to practice Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism,” and included a comment from SGI President Ikeda that “there should be time for sleeping and time for chanting. People should leave energized and filled with hope.” Those statements summed up my experience at FNCC, an experience made all the more powerful by the fact that just one year ago, I had never heard of the SGI, Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism or FNCC.

In 1992, I said good-bye to my wife of 13 years and the mother of my two sons after she lost a four-year battle with melanoma, the deadly form of skin cancer. My sons Chris and Patrick and I have struggled since that time as they have missed the tenderness that a mother brings to the family. I have struggled with the demands being an attorney was placing on my time and my energies and with the demands of being both father and mother to two growing, now teenage, boys.

In late April 1998, I received a call from a friend. She told me that she had given my name to a woman who had recently moved to Chicago from the East Coast and was finding that the demands of her career were making it difficult for her to meet people. A few days later, I received a call from Kathy, and she and I made plans to have dinner together. Little did I know that that dinner would lead me to FNCC a year later!

A week or so after the dinner, I called Kathy to ask her out again for a Saturday evening. She told me that she had plans to attend a district meeting that night and could not plan a date. Since I had never been to a Buddhist meeting and knew nothing about what went on, and since I really wanted to see her again, I asked if I could accompany her to the meeting. Most importantly, however, I really just wanted to see her again.

The meeting was truly amazing and was unlike any church service I had ever attended. The men’s division put on a skit and the youth division provided music for the evening. One of the members, a pioneer member who was about to return to Japan, told her remarkable experience of being one of only a handful of practitioners here in America in the ’50s and ’60s. I must say that I was a bit confused about the chanting, and trying to follow along in the sutra book while doing gongyo without any point of reference was impossible. But I had a great time and accomplished my goal of spending another evening with Kathy.

As spring turned to summer and summer to fall, we attended more meetings together

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and met more members, but I still had not taken the plunge and begun chanting. I wanted to make sure that I was doing this because I wanted to do it for myself and not to impress Kathy or anyone else.

Then it happened. Kathy left town for several days on a business trip and I agreed to feed and walk her cats. On my first day of watching the cats, I walked past the room where the Gohonzon was enshrined and warily eyed the alter. I didn't chant because I still wasn't sure if this was right for me. The second day met with a similar result. By the third day, I thought, "Oh, what the heck" and sat down in front of the Gohonzon. I chanted for 15 minutes. When I finished I thought this wasn't so bad, so I did another 15 minutes the next day. When Kathy called home from San Francisco that night to see how everything was going, I could feel the surprise, but satisfaction, in her voice when I told her that I had tried chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, especially since it was my own choice. I couldn't wait for her to get home to see if I was doing it right and chant with her.

From that point on, things have simply exploded in my life. At our New Year's meeting, we were all asked to set goals for ourselves for 1999. One of my goals was to learn to practice better. Pretty soon I started doing gongyo, slowly and haltingly at first to a blank wall. When we attended meetings together, I was still getting lost during gongyo and wondering why we had to chant at such a rapid speed. Slowly I got better, and I told Kathy that I was tired of chanting to a blank wall. I wanted my own Gohonzon! I attended a new members' class and started the process of becoming a member of the SGI. While all of this was happening, I somehow found the time to buy a diamond ring and ask Kathy to marry me. We became engaged in March and will be married Memorial Day weekend next May. On April 25, I took and passed the Entrance Examination, became a member and received the Gohonzon.

Less than three weeks later, I was at FNCC, marveling at how much my life had changed in the last year.

As the conference progressed, we had the opportunity to meet and spend time with the other participants. So many things transpired that it is difficult to describe them all. Certainly the food and accommodations were first class, but that is not what FNCC is all about. It is about learning. I learned more in one session about the temple issue than I had previously learned from reading the "Questions and Answers on the Temple Issue" booklet. I also learned about how things have changed since the early days of the organization. I learned about relationships, as the discussions were very open and informative and the leaders were exceptional. Their energy and enthusiasm kept things hopping.

The 175 members in attendance were also exceptional. Some brought guests who had never heard chanting or been exposed to the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, much like I had been a year earlier. Some came to the conference with difficulties in their lives and their practice. Others had extraordinary tales of their own human revolution and how their practice had helped them overcome obstacles. The group quickly formed an adhesiveness, a spirit of camaraderie. What impressed me the most was the compassion that the attendees exhibited as members opened up and related their experiences or troubles. Surely if someone had looked in on the group they might have thought that everyone's allergies were acting up based on the number of red eyes and sniffing going on, but, in actuality, it was just everyone revealing their humanity and compassion.

As SGI President Ikeda states in his May 1 speech: "Buddhism is based on the principle that everyone is equal. Fellow members reaching out to each other in friendship, linked

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arm in arm, eager to talk with one another and have enjoyable activities — this, I believe, is what SGI meetings should be like.” This is what I saw happening at FNCC that weekend and in our district meetings.

As the conference drew to a close, I sat down on the patio, gazed out over the lake and wrote a letter to President Ikeda, thanking him for his vision about FNCC and to thank all the members of the SGI for continuing to support this wonderful facility. I was ready to leave FNCC energized and filled with hope.

As we were waiting to leave, we had the opportunity to attend the South Florida members’ Diversity ’99 celebration. It was wonderful to see the many displays and exhibits of the various Latin American countries, to listen to the happy sounds of their music and watch them dance in their native costumes. Just when we thought it could not get any better, word began circulating the grounds that Nestor Torres was there and he was going to perform later that afternoon. Just minutes before the buses were to take us back to the airport, Kathy and I sat in the sun-kissed amphitheater, looking out over the clear blue waters of the lake and listened to Nestor play the title song from his CD *Treasures of the Heart*. We sat there, mesmerized by his talent and awestruck by what had happened over the last several days.

As we walked across the campus to the bus, we felt energized and filled with hope. Our spirits were refreshed, and we were filled with a determination to encourage all of the members back home to visit the FNCC and to continue with their practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

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