

EXPERIENCE — DEANNA PINO, NEW YORK CITY DESTINED TO CHANT

The day I met this practice was also the darkest day of my life. I had just stepped off the plane to meet my mother, Betty Santoro, for the first time in 18 years. I was experiencing unbelievable emotional distress and felt like a time bomb ready to go off. It was all so strange. I felt high as a kite, and my adrenaline was pumping. I hadn't hugged my mom since I was 6. Part of me wanted to feel complete the moment we hugged; perhaps my mother could answer some questions and fill the empty void in my heart. But that's not what happened. I was desperately trying to keep it together, but inside I was falling apart.

As I hugged my mother, we both knew something was terribly wrong. My behavior was very odd; I didn't recognize myself. My palms were sweating. I started to hallucinate and became paranoid. My mother knew that I was in trouble. She calmly sat me down on the couch and asked me to repeat these strange but familiar words—*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*—and thus my journey began.

The next day I was worse. I woke up in such a state that while eating breakfast I picked up my mother and threw her against the wall. The hallucinations were bad, the voices in my head would not stop, my eyes were dilated and I was foaming at the mouth. I had no idea what was happening. I was out of control and ran out of the house, and was finally arrested for disturbing the peace.

The next day I was taken to the Martin Luther King Mental Facility in Los Angeles. I had suffered an acute psychotic break caused by years of accumulated emotional and sexual abuse by my father.

When I was 6, my father visited me at school and asked if I wanted to go for ice cream. I was so happy to see him since my parents' divorce was taking its toll. I smiled, put my hand in his and joyfully walked away. In the blink of an eye my whole life changed. We were on a plane to Canada to get our passports and then off to Europe. For two-and-a-half years, we traveled from country to country, always on the go. I had no idea if I would ever see my mother again.

When my father thought it was safe to return to the States, we landed in Boston, his birthplace. We moved from state to state until finally, when I was 10, we settled in Massachusetts, where I stayed until my early 20s.

When I was 12, my mother found us, and I went through a series of custody battles. I met my mother for the first time in six years; however I was carefully watched by my father and his lawyers.

I was never allowed to be myself with her. Deep down, all I wanted was to hug my mother and be with her. By this time, my father had subtly brainwashed me into believing that his love was special and that no one could ever love me like him. He convinced me that my mother wasn't capable of loving me. I was his possession, his special girl. There was no chance for my mother and I to develop any type of relationship. Looking back, it's shocking that the courts decided that my father should have sole custody.

At 24, I graduated from college in Boston and moved to New York City to pursue a career in theater—why I needed more drama in my life I'll never know. I was finally on my own, alone with my thoughts. My father's lies and deceit began to reveal themselves, and for the first time I realized that I had been kidnapped. Being away from him allowed deep memories to surface—memories of sexual abuse—and the pain and suffering of my

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life became very real. This period was very difficult. My life was changing, and I felt that I needed my mother.

I strongly believe that without the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, my life would not be what it is today. I am living proof of endless obstacles that have turned into positive lightness. Somehow, I knew throughout my whole life I would be protected. When I was 15, I received this strange newspaper called the *World Tribune* through the mail; I didn't know what to make of it and often threw it away. I later found out my mother had secretly subscribed for me, in hopes that I would read an article.

Growing up I was always spiritual. I feel that I was destined to meet the Gohonzon. When I later found out my mother had been on a chanting campaign six months before we were reunited, it all suddenly became clear to me. As I was flying out to see her, I knew I was changing something powerful between us. I am convinced that because of my mother's chanting, I was protected and that we are together again to help others through our experience.

As I lay in that hospital, going over the events of my life, I knew somehow that the connection between my saying Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that one time, while sitting on my mom's couch, had inspired me to want to live and tell my story. The doctors were amazed that I didn't need drugs to keep me sane and how quickly I recovered from this traumatic event. Most people never achieve emotional stability once they experience a breakdown, but somehow I made it through. There was too much happening to call all of this a coincidence. I knew my mother had given me a tool to help me through the rest of my life.

I can't say that I took to chanting right away; chanting was something my mother did, but I chanted on and off for two years and noticed I was getting great benefits. I went from being penniless to having a good job, a nice apartment, a great therapist, a husband, etc. More than that, chanting was stabilizing me, keeping me emotionally sane. My mood swings and depression were lessening, and I had unbelievable strength and courage to fight for what had been taken away — my freedom.

On Sept. 20, 1994, I received the Gohonzon and have been thankful ever since. This is not an easy practice; there have been moments when I get scared, when it's hard to make the decision to continue for my happiness. Last year, when I attended a youth division meeting, I was so inspired by the experiences. I made a deep and real commitment that I, too, deserved what they had — unshakable happiness and the right to be my true self. This has been an ongoing struggle for me, to know that I deserve to be happy.

I've come a long way and have further to go, but like the lotus flower sitting in muddy water, it takes courage to face your life. One of my favorite passages comes from *Women Who Run With the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes: "This is how to clear the polluted river. If you're scared, scared to fail, I say begin already, fail if you must, pick yourself up, start again. If you fail again, you fail. So what? Begin again. It is not the failure that holds us back but the reluctance to begin over again that causes us to stagnate.... It is better if you meet it head-on, feel it, and get it over with, than to keep using it to avoid cleaning up the river."

What's important to recognize in my Buddhist practice is that chanting hasn't changed me into this everything-is-wonderful-because-I-chant-person. Instead, it's given me the courage and the strength to face my obstacles — the demons in my everyday life. The realization that, while I had no control over my childhood, from this moment forward, I take responsibility for myself and my actions — that can be the greatest empowerment. This is

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not to say that I don't have my moments of doubt about this practice. But deep down, I know that if I keep shining my "mirror," I will find what I've been looking for.

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