

**PERSPECTIVE: MY AWAKENING  
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My grandmother, Iris, doted on me intensely when I was a child. Her daughter, my mother, committed suicide when I was just eight months old. My time with Grandma Iris for many years was carefree, and one of the only places I felt the unconditional love I yearned for. But Iris suffered from mental problems, which became exacerbated with age. My relationship with her changed dramatically when I was 10. I began to feel scared by behavior that I didn't understand. Our relations became strained, and I didn't see her for several years.

At 15, I decided to live with Iris again. In my heart I knew she'd do anything for me, and I was desperate for a place to live. Soon after I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. After attending a meeting with me, Iris accompanied me to receive a Gohonzon so I could begin my practice and we enshrined it in her home.

I didn't stay with Iris long. My contact with Iris was as limited as I could get away with—a phone call every six months or so.

Fast-forward another four years. Iris had a stroke and was placed in a nursing home. I visited her, reluctantly. My feelings hadn't changed. Only she had changed—she couldn't walk and her speech was thick and slow.

She's been in bed now for nearly 12 years. Admittedly, my visits with her throughout the years have been obligatory in nature. I knew it brought her some level of happiness to see me; it seemed the right thing to do.

Early this year I began a campaign to enhance my leadership abilities within the SGI, and to deepen my ability to care for and encourage the members with whom I communicate. I faced a variety of challenges; as many of them had serious problems, yet were not terribly motivated to challenge their lives—some were reluctant to practice Buddhism at all. I didn't really know how to “care” for these members.

For nearly a year after I took leadership responsibilities, I simply made excuses to myself: “Well, they're not interested in practicing” or “I can't change them.” In reality, I simply wasn't rising to the challenge before me. But something clicked and changed early this year; I started chanting for them—serious daimoku, not obligatory. The results have been incredible. In the past six months, one by one, they have been finding joy in their Buddhist practice, begun to make goals and have overcome serious difficulties.

So who should pop up in my mind as I am chanting one morning? Grandma Iris. I realized that I needed to go visit her. When I arrived, two nurses were changing her sheets. She was screaming at them. I'll leave out the expletives, but it was an unsettling scene.

As I entered the room, my eyes met Iris', which were glazed over. I looked deep into them. “Not feeling too well, huh?” I asked her. She murmured phrases of torment and anguish. Strange, this woman who brought me nightmares, whom I avoided for years out of disgust and contempt for her life...I felt deep compassion for her at this moment.

I grasped her hand. She clenched her fingers around mine. I began to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo into her ear. I pulled back my face and continued chanting, gazing into her eyes, as she tried to remember who I was. I stroked her head, continuing to chant. I stopped, and in unison with me, she said, “I love you.” I whispered some more things to her, and continued to chant a while longer. Then I told her I had to go. She smiled at me and said good-bye.

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It occurred to me later that there is an obvious correlation between my stretching to care for members, and my ability to transcend my own feelings and care for Iris. I've learned not to underestimate others, the power of daimoku, or myself and my ability to care and have a positive impact. Human revolution or inner change is such a gradual process. And sometimes it seems that progress is at a snail's pace. But over time, I think it's the small encounters like these—the brief moments of significance—that make for a meaningful existence in the end.

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