

EXPERIENCE—KRISTI BENNETT, LOUISVILLE, COLO. NOT JUST A PERSONAL TRAGEDY

I would like to share an experience that concerns the suicide of a very dear friend of mine one year ago. What I have learned from this event is that with our practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, we can always create something positive out of a negative situation. I feel that I have created a stronger identity for myself and gained value by challenging my pain with my Buddhist practice. Because all our lives are connected on many levels, the value I can create from my friend's death can influence his "life entity" as well. I felt reluctant to share what I have considered a private tragedy, but I feel now even more strongly that the process of dealing with difficulties — and winning over them in our own way — is valuable for all of us to hear and experience.

Fourteen years ago, my friend and I were co-workers who shared adjoining office spaces. Dan and I enjoyed each other's company. He was a very funny man, and quite conversational; if we weren't laughing, we were talking. I have to admit that a year later, when he moved to a different job, I found it much easier to get my work done.

I felt a connection with Dan from the first moment we met. Together we could look at each other and know what the other was going to say before either of us said it. He was well-liked and respected by all with whom he came in contact, and he showed interest in people because of who they were, not because of what they could do for him. His interest in my life made me feel like accomplishing all of my dreams. Largely because of his interest, I went back to school and majored in economics, traveled, remodeled my house, made new friendships. I took up bike riding and running. Dan was there whenever a problem arose and was helpful just by being there for me. I've never known anyone else like him in my life, before or since.

We could talk about anything, and of course he knew I was a Buddhist and chanted Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. He had said it himself. He often remarked admiringly about how cheerful and peaceful I was, or how well I coped with life. He somehow never believed that those possibilities could exist for him.

The last time we had lunch I was struggling through a difficult time in my life. It felt so great to talk with him again; he felt the same. Underneath the surface, though, I sensed in him an underlying heaviness, a sort of resignation. But life as an adult has its ups and downs, so I thought nothing of it. I just felt so happy to see him again.

During the first week of June, I felt unexplainably depressed. I had no specific reason for it, just a nagging overall feeling of hopelessness. My dear friend shot himself on the first of June. I didn't hear about it until a week later. Although his wife reported him missing after his failure to return home that Monday, and the police found his car soon after, the snow accumulation hampered their mountain search and his body was not located until the following Sunday.

I've shared many of my memories of Dan and our friendship and what it meant to me, because when we hear *suicide*, we think "how horrible," "how could anyone do that," "how selfish," — basically we're appalled and angry. But it's also true that inside the ugly statistic lies a human being, in this case someone who made other people laugh, and someone who in many ways tried their best to do the "right thing, all the time."

In my own thoughts about why my friend committed suicide, I wonder if he hadn't found himself in a box — a box of expectations about life that didn't turn out the way he

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thought they should. I read a lot. I ran across a statistic about men and suicide. Did you know that men commit suicide four times more frequently than women do? This makes me realize that this suicide was not just my personal tragedy. It makes me think about the isolation many men must live in.

For me, during the months after his death I fulfilled my responsibilities, but I was numb to them. If I talked about what happened, I found myself sobbing. I repeated the whole sequence of events like I was a war victim. My suffering over the loss could not be turned off like a television show. It went with me everywhere, all the time, and while other people empathized, when they went home or hung up the phone, the loss was turned off for them because, of course, it wasn't their life. It pained me how difficult it was to explain why this loss so impacted me, because our friendship didn't have a label that other people could understand. He wasn't my husband or a family member, but he wasn't just a co-worker either.

I chanted many hours because that was my only solace. I read SGI President Ikeda's lectures; they were a lifeline to hope. I was stumped about what to chant for as a goal, because, no matter how much I chanted, my friend was not going to reappear. I realized this was an example of the impermanence of life, but that left me feeling, "Why bother?"—and somehow I knew there had to be a reason to bother. That was when I began to have a feeling of appreciation for having a sense of purpose in life, an appreciation at how eternal this purpose is and how untouched it is by all of life's impermanence.

A fellow SGI member, a person who continually exerts herself in this practice for self and others, really encouraged me by pointing out how fortunate I was to have been able to talk with Dan that last time, to end our friendship on a positive note. I began to see a little glimmer of the positive, and that helped lift me out of the well of suffering. President Ikeda also replied to a letter I wrote him about my friend's suicide and my great appreciation for my practice at such a time.

Finally, after many hours of chanting, I was able to make a determination: to somehow continue creating value with my life, using this experience as a springboard. After a year, one day I said to myself, "I am not going to suffer anymore about any of this." The time had come when I knew the remaining suffering was within my own life, not the fault of my external circumstances.

This was a turning point. I am discovering an unfading sense of my own Buddhahood—a benefit I never expected. I feel a strong loyalty to myself for the abilities I have, and a challenging spirit for my weaknesses. It's almost as if I have become the source of encouragement that Dan provided for me.

My suffering is at rest, although I still miss him. I feel more deeply the passages from "Happiness in this World": "Suffer what there is to suffer and enjoy what there is to enjoy," and "Never let life's hardships disturb you. After all, no one can avoid problems, not even saints or sages" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 161). I am comforted to realize that sometimes, no matter what precautions or preparations we make, life is difficult, we just have to face it. Since we are human, we have the capacity to suffer. I also note here that the Daishonin doesn't say we need to make careers out of suffering by being victims. To me, being a victim occurs when I stop taking action and responsibility for my life.

I recently reread an article about benefit from the February 1992 issue of the *Seikyo Times*. A passage from that really struck me: "[C]hanging poison into medicine (*hendoku iyaku*) [means] transforming obstacles or threats into something positive. This begins at

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first with our attitude...how to face problems with a spirit of hope-filled challenge rather than with resigned defeat” (p. 40).

I have finally regained my hope. Hope that I can be happy. Hope that I can contribute value to people I know. Hope that I can resolve whatever problems I encounter. I feel I have won a hard-fought battle against the hopelessness resulting from both the violence and tragedy of my friend’s death.

On the winter solstice this last December, I woke up with a poem in my mind. I would like to end with that poem, which is called “Solstice”: in the chocolate velvet darkness / of solstice I slumber / true self warmed / with the nectar of timeless power / — source lost in rapture/ found in sorrow — /my winter of pain / recedes / I waken / fragrant blossoms / strong in their fragility / greet me.

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