

THE STUFF ENLIGHTENMENT IS MADE OF
BY JIM GIRARD
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John Cannella reveals his enlightenment through his multiple illnesses.

The first thing John Cannella does upon awakening is unshackle his hands from splints. Then, with his right hand, he grabs the trapeze bar hanging over his bed while lifting himself to a sitting position with his left. He removes the thermal socks he must wear during the night to prevent circulatory loss in his feet (they once turned black and nearly had to be amputated).

John then backs up into the wheelchair kept close to his bed, and with great difficulty, locks its swing-away footrest and wheels himself to the bathroom. The simple act of using the bathroom for most, is an arduous feat for John — one he can never take for granted.

He returns to the bedroom to take a profusion of vitamins and herbs, which he has strategically distributed all over his apartment for convenient access.

After he eats some fruit, he cleans his altar while reading SGI President Ikeda's *Daily Guidance*. Then he does gongyo.

The 56-year-old Cannella has a degenerative nerve condition that has paralyzed him from head to toe. He cannot move his legs at all. He also has a heart condition, arteriosclerosis, carpal tunnel syndrome, dental problems, and arthritis. His body is a minefield of maladies, and a cut on his index finger could easily trip-wire fatal complications.

A man with such obstacles could easily retreat into despair and cultivate the idea that he is the helpless victim of destiny. In fact, John had harbored these dark thoughts long before his illness, starting in childhood. "You know how you feel when you go see a movie and the images just keep flashing at you and you don't know what's going to happen next? I felt like my life was like that. I didn't know who I was or why I was here."

Cannella grew up in a working-class family in lower Manhattan, to a father who berated him for playing with black children and whose rage paralyzed him with fear. John's parents divorced when he was a teenager, and after high school, John enlisted in the Army, joining the 82nd Airborne Division.

After injuring his back parachuting, he became addicted to painkillers. He also noticed that his legs would occasionally collapse while he stood in the ranks. An Army physician asked him if he wished to see a psychiatrist. "I asked, 'Would it help?', and the doctor said, 'No, not really.' So I said, 'Why waste our time?' Then the doctor wrote, 'Patient refused psychiatric treatment.'"

It's no wonder that, soon after being discharged, racked with pain and dispirited by his encounter with the military's dehumanizing, *Catch-22* ethos, Cannella took to heroin. Not long afterward, he was arrested and lost his job as an elevator operator. His legs got progressively weaker, a condition misdiagnosed by a union doctor as a protruding disk.

During this time, he met his first wife, Gilda. "Our marriage was a disaster," he says, "we were both very confused, unhappy people." Despite having two young children, he was still using heroin, the pursuit of which became evermore dangerous.

By 1972, Cannella discovered Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism; an actress he saw on a talk show introduced him, as did a friend's uncle. He started chanting and immediately Cannella's reality began to shift.

"I was staying with my mother in a municipal housing project. She lived on the third

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floor, and the two elevators always were broken. Since I was in a wheelchair, one of the first things I chanted about was for the elevators to be fixed. One day after chanting, I went out to ring for the elevator and someone came out, and said, 'I'm sorry, the elevator is broken.' I thanked him, but just stayed there, chanting. Suddenly, the elevator came. I got in, went down, and got out in the lobby. There were many people there waiting for the elevator to be fixed and, boy, did they ever look at me strangely!"

Despite the fact that he now seemed to have his own private elevator, Cannella still harbored doubts about the practice. "Chanting to something—the Gohonzon—felt like idol worship, like chanting to a rock," he says.

Yet he continued to chant hours a day, knocking down obstacles like tenpins. First, he kicked his heroin habit much sooner than expected, despite initially being given an overdose of methadone that, he says, "left me in a coma 16 hours a day." Then, one day, while in the bathtub, he felt sensation in his legs for the first time in years. Finally, he and Gilda (who had been separated for years), were granted the divorce they'd long desired when the hitherto-draconian New York State divorce laws were liberalized overnight.

Most important, as he made his SGI rounds—going on home visits, and to study lectures and district meetings—Cannella began to cast himself in a different part, no longer the angst-ridden pessimist. "One day I was sitting in the lobby of the community center, and it occurred to me: 'I know who I am now. I'm a Buddhist, working for kosen-rufu.' And as I studied, I began to grasp that the way I used to see the world wasn't true, that we weren't doomed after all, and I was elated. I felt, 'This is it, this is the solution.'"

Inspired by this epiphany, John decided to repair his relationship with his father, whom he hadn't seen since his marriage.

"I began to realize we were a lot more similar than I'd thought, that he was a human being, not a scary monster, and that he was really suffering. I vowed I would tell him about Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. So I chanted every day for three months. Finally, I called him and asked him to say it with me, and he did." Although his father refused to practice, Cannella had taken a major step.

Chanting also helped Cannella realize that his resolve to live as a once-bitten, twice-shy bachelor was a sham, and that it was his nature to have a wife.

"For years, I'd been admiring a woman named Valerie who worked at the hospital where I went for clinics. I loved the way she looked and the sound of her voice, but I had such poor self-esteem, I figured she'd never want to be with me. One day, though, I decided to invite her to a Buddhist meeting. When she told me she was too busy to come, my leaders agreed to host a special meeting, just for her, which really touched her."

Teaching someone gongyo hardly ranks with roses and champagne, but it became the foundation of John and Valerie's unconventional courtship. While stumbling through the *jigage* (prayers), Valerie took the time to reciprocate John's feelings for her, and they were married. Although he didn't want to invite his father to the wedding, Valerie (who's also African American), insisted on it. "I told my father about my plan to marry Valerie, all right, and he didn't talk to me for a number of years. But I was determined to have both a successful marriage and a strong relationship with my father. So I kept calling him, and little by little, we started breaking through."

During this time, X-rays revealed a portentous dark spot in John's hip, which was diagnosed as prostate cancer that was metastasizing. His initial reaction was to consider the news a death sentence. He vowed to face the end with repose, bolstered by SGI President Ikeda's lectures on life and death and a quote by Nichiren Daishonin from "The Dragon

Gate”: “In the end, no one can escape death...you should be willing to offer your life for the Lotus Sutra. Think of this offering as a drop of dew rejoining the ocean a speck of dust returning to the earth” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 251).

But then something in him began to rebel against this resignation, and he recalled the end of that same passage: “Our desire is to share this blessing equally with all people, and we together with them will attain Buddhahood” (Ibid.). He decided to fight valiantly and encourage people by overcoming this obstacle.

Valerie was distraught at the diagnosis, but John told her that they should make his fight against cancer a joyful kosen-rufu activity. Wherever he went, instead of depressing people, he often left them chuckling with his jubilant confidence.

In the end, John had the last laugh on his doctors, when his “cancer” he so feared turned out to be arthritis.

Despite his infirmities, Cannella keeps his day-planner filled to the margins. In addition to learning the piano, he’s embarked on a study of Chinese so he can extend Buddhism’s message of liberation to his many immigrant neighbors. He’s a vice district leader and publications representative of Clinton Street District. Valerie, too, is an SGI leader, and John’s first wife, Gilda — “the first person I introduced to Buddhism who receive the Gohonzon” — is a vice chapter leader in the Bronx.

There are times in Cannella’s life, such as when his father comes over to eat mussels with him and Valerie, that he can’t imagine being more blessed. Then he recalls his mentor, President Ikeda.

“He says that we should share our vision with our members. So this is my dream: that the day will come when we’ve introduced so many people in the neighborhood to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, that the news reporters will report that there’s this area of downtown Manhattan where the people have totally eliminated crime, and they’ll ask us how this was done and we’ll say, ‘Ever since we started practicing Buddhism....’ And I want to do this on my two feet.”

Cannella’s ambition, like his heart, is huge, and his determination unquestioned. As he puts it: “This illness is very severe. It’s constantly at war with me, and I’m constantly refusing to let it overtake me. Yet, I feel no doubt that this is definitely the stuff that your enlightenment is made of.”