

PEDIATRICIAN LEARNS TO FACE REALITY BY MARIE-CLAUDE ANGELIQUE, FRANCE

My father was in the military, so I spent part of my childhood in Africa, where everything seemed to be beautiful and peaceful. I was told there that wisdom developed with age and that our mission in society was to take responsibility for our community and guide our juniors toward the same goal. To my great disappointment, when I was 14, in 1961, my family had to move back to Paris.

In Paris, my life changed drastically. I had to have knowledge and be competent and productive, showing concrete results. As my mother plunged into the hell of severe mental illness, my father found himself alone in taking care of his eight children. In order not to cause my father further worries, I decided to help him as much as I could and study hard. I had a passion for science and math, but didn't want to become a calculating "robot" like my friends. I found myself naturally drawn to the medical field, in spite of the lengthy and costly study involved.

I was soon shocked and disappointed by a world of doctors who lacked compassion toward patients and medical students who were more worried about excelling and profit-making than easing others' sufferings. I was trying to help other students in their studies and reassure them, but the truth is that I was suffering inside and crying before and after class. I was going to the hospital in the morning, to the university in the afternoon, to work at night and on the weekends, and I was always on duty in pediatrics, the emergency room or the intensive care unit. By the time I graduated from medical school, I was falling apart.

Unable to cope with society, I soon escaped to Zaire to co-manage a pediatrics unit. After a period of two years which was extremely rewarding, I returned to Paris with a growing interest in humanitarian medicine and decided to equip myself with further specialization in tropical medicine, public health and research. Unable to face staying in - one place and revolted by a society that I found heartless, I also became a member of the board of directors of an NGO whose motto was: "Let doctors, agronomists and engineers be where life is." Based on health education programs and primary health care systems, our team developed solutions according to people's needs: digging wells, creating water supply and sanitation systems, planting trees, implementing farming methods, establishing local schools and promoting craft industries. This experience was the realization of my childhood dream: becoming a human being by helping others.

In 1985, soon after I was introduced to Nichiren Buddhism, I qualified as a pediatrician. Buddhism helped me understand that I could be happy, as I was, where I was. I surprised my friends and relatives by settling down and starting my own medical practice in Paris. At the same time, my mother and two sisters also became members of the SGI. Faced with financial challenges and the need to be there for each of my patients, I had to look reality squarely in the face. I couldn't escape my own suffering and decided to take on this challenge, to become truly happy in this situation.

Today, I feel I have won over myself. I am happy to be alive. I am able to teach each child how to take care of his or her health, and bring comfort and warmth to parents. I can freely share my hopes with my colleagues. Finally, I have been able to realize what really seemed impossible before now: the life force and the wisdom I have accumulated through my daily practice enable me to speak out in front of others, confidently and in any situation, to correct erroneous knowledge and protect the dignity of life.

My goal is to find the best way to realize my childhood dream: To improve health conditions for all — especially children and women — so that they can live full and creative lives, in the South by improving access to health care for those in need, and in the North by protecting and defending the dignity of life, and by helping develop responses to human suffering that go beyond the merely medical. □

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