

LITTLE VICTORIES

BY MARK BENNION, VASHON ISLAND, WASHINGTON

Thirty-two years ago I thought painting would give my life meaning. I was 19 years old and the world was all about me. I quit the art classes I was taking and lived in a little cabin outside of Seattle. Painting, making movies and taking drugs, not necessarily in that order, seemed to be the thing to do in 1968.

I had mixed feelings when a friend asked me to go with him to a Buddhist meeting. I had pretty much rejected religion in general and organized religion in particular. It was arguments over religion that had caused me to leave home two years before, and I still had deep, unresolved issues with my fundamentalist family. It was so out of character for my skeptical friend to be positive about anything, much less a Buddhist meeting, that I thought there might be something to it. Reluctantly, I agreed to go.

Much to my surprise, something about that first meeting was overwhelmingly familiar. I felt like I had come home somehow. It wasn't an intellectual awakening. (I don't remember much of what was said.) I started practicing right away and before I knew it, the kid who hated anything organized was on his way to a gathering in Los Angeles with a busload of singing Buddhists.

After practicing for about a year, I was fortunate enough to meet SGI President Ikeda while on a trip to Japan. We talked for just a few moments, but he treated me like I was the most important person in the world. "The road to kosen-rufu [peace based on Buddhist principles] is very long," he told me. "Try to accomplish your daily goals. With common sense, be in society. Try to become a good person."

I remember thinking on the plane home how I would devote the rest of my life to world peace, and, of course, achieve instant success as an artist. For the first time in my life, my worldview was beginning to change from being all about me to one of beginning to understand that there was value in trying to help other people. But the reality was that I got off the plane flat broke with no idea where I would sleep that night. Lofty ideals had run headlong into real life.

As time went on, the realization sunk in that even after some fairly successful gallery shows, I couldn't make a living through my art. "With common sense, be in society," President Ikeda had told me. OK, so I went to work building fishing boats in the shipyards. I thought at the time that this was a real setback, but I needed some kind of job so that I could keep a decent apartment where we could hold discussion meetings. Sharing the practice of Buddhism with people had become a big part of my life. I was about to get married and I needed to be, you know, responsible. My wife, Nancy, and I started a family and began the challenge of building a life together. Living in an artist's studio would have to wait. I told myself, "I'll work on my paintings when I get a bigger workspace," or "I'll paint in the evenings when I find the time."

Time passed, and finally we scraped the money together to buy a house. It was a small place on two-and-a-half acres with an outbuilding that I could use as a studio. I was so happy to finally have a place to work. Of course, the reality was that in order to pay for this place, I needed to keep building fishing boats.

I think life is occasionally about big breakthroughs, but it's mostly about little victories. "Try to accomplish your daily goals," President Ikeda had said to me. Looking back, I think he was trying to get me to see that big dreams are accomplished one day at a time. World

peace is helping one person at a time. Raising a child is taking the time to read a bedtime story.

I kept painting while working in the shipyards for the next fifteen years. Every couple of years, I would have a gallery show and would usually sell a few pieces, but it was never quite enough to make a living. The gallery shows were always nice emotional highs. When a show didn't sell or got less than rave reviews — or no review at all — it was always sobering. I learned to take both in stride and challenge what's right in front of me and live my life.

Nancy and I have raised a family together. We've been through adversity of all sorts — our relationship, illness, no money, doubt, trying to teach our kids about life, our kids teaching us about life, working at a job that sometimes seemed to be going nowhere, dumb choices, really dumb choices, the death of friends and family and the feeling of being up against a wall and things were not ever going to change.

Things do change, however. What took me awhile to figure out was that just because I was practicing Buddhism, things were not going to change as a matter of course — all by themselves. As I took responsibility for all my circumstances and acted accordingly, I could see my life change for the better. I refuse to let my life be defined by my weaknesses. I have seen every seeming defeat turn into victory. The relationships have lasted and grown, the sickness has become health, the doubts have been steadily resolved, and our daughter, Whitnie, and son, Patrick, are independent and thoughtful people.

Even my stormy relationship with my father has changed. Before they died both my parents supported my Buddhist practice. While we remained at odds in our beliefs, we all learned to respect one another and solidified our bonds as a family.

Building fishing boats for twenty years has taught me how to weld, how to move heavy steel and the skills of good craftsmanship — to find beauty in simple shapes. These are all things I use in my sculptures today. Getting up and going to work every day taught me discipline, and as much as I hate to admit it, to challenge my lazy nature.

Six years ago, circumstances at work (and within me) told me it was time to finally begin working for myself. It has not been easy, but I have been able to make a living with my painting, sculpture, public art projects and designing and building architectural steel. In 1997, I collaborated with Daniel Winterbottom of the University of Washington and the Seattle Arts Commission to build a perimeter fence for a hazardous waste facility. The storyline panels that were installed tell the history of the local neighborhood. It was very satisfying to have longtime residents of the neighborhood say how much they enjoyed seeing their history come to life in those panels.

In 1998, I was selected to build a series of steel arches for the main entrance to the new King County Regional Justice Center in Kent, Washington; and my paintings and sculptures have been in four gallery shows in the last two years. For so many years I struggled with not having enough money. Now, with projects lined up for more than a year, I struggle to manage my time.

I have always had a hard time trying to explain to people what my art is about, why I've needed to do it and why it helps me understand myself. If I could put it into words, I would have become a writer. It is not everyone's cup of tea, but I'm OK with that. The great sculptor Isamu Noguchi once described his work as "Recapturing the ancient innocence." Perhaps there is a little of that in my own search. What I have found is by continuing to challenge myself in Buddhist practice, nothing is wasted — defeat becomes victory, foolishness becomes wisdom, perseverance becomes confidence and confidence becomes

true happiness.

Making things with steel and paint has been something I've found I am good at. I do it because it helps me understand my life. Building a home, raising a family, challenging my weaknesses, staying married for thirty years (this is much more to my wife's credit than mine), and in some small way to have contributed to the SGI-USA are what I'm most proud of.

To me it is the teachers and plumbers and carpenters and nurses and engineers—and shipyard welders—who live with hope and confidence, who use their talents to make the world a better place who are the artists. They are the artists of humanity and my heroes.