

EXPERIENCE—JUDY WEBER, BRENTWOOD, CALIF. FROM VICTIM TO VICTOR

Judy Weber learns to take responsibility for her life, freeing herself from a ‘victim’ mentality.

I grew up the youngest of four kids. I have a very vivid memory of being physically as well as emotionally abused at 4 years old. I went into shock. I became extremely untrusting, specifically of men, and walked around in a total haze. I lived most of the time in my head, trying to “figure it all” out, in fear and trapped inside myself.

I learned to survive by becoming a victim. I began to compulsively overeat. I was merely trying to keep some sense of order or control; not allowing myself to get close to anyone, including myself. I was told I was a burden and wasn’t wanted. I became this chubby little girl and grew up with the belief that I wasn’t loved because I was heavy and that there was fundamentally something wrong with me. All I wanted was to be loved, accepted and understood, but was always looking for these qualities from other people because I was taught I wasn’t enough to matter.

The need to take control was so intense that by my senior year in high school, I began my journey into anorexia. And, by my freshman year of college, I discovered bulimia. My life became so obsessed and consumed with being thin that I lived in a mind-altered state. I honestly believed that if I were thin (which was never thin enough), I would be loved and accepted. The equation seemed that simple. Basically, I wanted to disappear.

As a victim, I learned to manipulate my circumstances and other people. Even with all that, I have always been a very responsible person with a good job, never living beyond my means, but through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I have awakened to the difference between “being responsible” and TAKING RESPONSIBILITY. Taking responsibility wasn’t part of my plans. Guess what? Through my practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, my plans changed.

I began practicing nearly eight years ago. I was really depressed, without direction and hopeless. I feel fortunate that I immediately connected with the practice. I tried so many different paths seeking happiness and growth, but something was still missing. Intuitively, it never felt “right” to me praying to something or someone outside myself. What I realized the first night I began to chant was that everything I would ever need, want or was to believe, was already within me. But to truly know that you are responsible for making that happen, or bringing that out, I later found out takes a lot of persistence, strength and courage.

When I got laid off from my job during my second year of practice, it was my first “real” obstacle to overcome. I found myself actually relieved, whereas normally I would have been petrified that I’d never find another job. So, the question to face was “What do I do now?”

What else does someone do when they get laid off from their job? Go on vacation.

I had always loved Italy and had been there a few times, so within a week, I was on a plane. Sitting on the plane, as crazy as it was, I thought about living there. When I saw members and friends there, they all supported and encouraged my thinking. So, I came home, sold everything I owned, someone lent me a car, housed me for two months and I

was off to Italy with two suitcases. It seemed perfect to me too. Then, I arrived.

It was as if a tidal wave hit me. It wasn't risk-taking that ran in my family; I was utterly clueless as to what I had done. I literally couldn't stop crying for two weeks. I didn't speak the language, didn't know how to get around. I was in a fog. I had to depend on this woman and her husband (who were both members) that I was staying with and was trying so hard not to be a burden. I was living in constant anxiety that I thought would never end. I felt trapped. I was afraid to stay and afraid to leave.

All I could do was chant as there was no one I could call. I started chanting about three hours a day until that too, became overwhelming for me.

Then one night when I just couldn't take it anymore, I walked to the nearest phone booth, called a fellow SGI friend in Rome because she spoke English. When I finished crying to her she said one thing to me: "Judy, you choose your life-condition. What do you want it to be?" Right then everything came to a screeching halt. I got off the phone, went back to my room, wrote down my goals and determinations about staying in Italy, and chanted with conviction that I wanted to make this work. That decision, that shift of attitude in front of the Gohonzon changed the next three years of my life.

Literally the next day, I got a job teaching English and decided it was time to connect to the SGI in Italy. I went to the community center in Milan to engage in activities. Because I didn't speak Italian, they offered me the "opportunity" to be on the cleaning crew at the center once a month, which met on Sunday mornings at 7 a.m. It wasn't quite what I had in mind, nor did I ever imagine myself cleaning the center. But I said, "Judy, don't judge. Just do what's in front of you."

So when I was washing the floors with a rag and a bucket of water, I would tell myself that I was ringing out the dirt from my life, cleaning and polishing my life from the bottom up. I was already learning not to begrudge my struggles and to be 100 percent where I was. At the time, I have to say, it wasn't pretty, but it became a benefit because soon after, when I needed to find a new house within 10 days, I found an amazing house for free, in exchange for teaching English.

I began teaching English to the Byakuren and phone staff at the community center and chanting together with lots of members. It allowed me to see the value of communication and dialogue and as a result, I began to see more clearly the value of my own life, as well as our interrelationship to others, especially my family.

No matter how many times I had heard that in Buddhism we "choose" our parents, I didn't quite hear it until my friend Reno, in Milan, casually told me how he resolved his relationship with his parents. Until this time, as horrible as it seems, I had written my parents off, as if they didn't exist.

Basically, growing up I felt my parents were not in touch with their own feelings, so they couldn't handle any of the pain that I was going through, which made me suffer and feel more isolated. After hearing Reno's experience though, I knew I had to take full responsibility for them being in my life. If I stopped blaming them, I had no more excuses, no crutch anymore. It was time to confront me.

It was terrifying to let go of who I thought they were, and my eating disorder at the same time. I was really suffering. At the same time, I had a horrific outbreak of a skin condition known as eczema, coupled with candida, that covered major parts of my body in a rash. It's hard to describe the physical and emotional pain I was experiencing.

There were so many times I wanted to give up and was discouraged, but I knew deep in my life I had to continue to chant because I was changing my karma. This lasted almost a

year. I had received guidance and started to focus on the solutions, not the problem and, sharing Buddhism. It was really my beginning to challenge the power of Buddhist practice.

So, I started chanting for my parent's happiness and to let go of this grudge. I know it sounds cliché, but it's true that the more I chanted for their happiness, my life started to feel more and more joy. And from that joy, I began to feel real compassion for them and gratitude that they brought me into the world. I chanted to be able to see their Buddha nature and not their negativity.

I wrote my parents a letter telling them about my appreciation for them and telling them, confidently what I was doing in Italy and how happy I was with the decision I had made. I felt such sincerity in my heart for them. It was bizarre how the emphasis of my feelings could just change, and I truly wanted them to have the happiness I had manifested. It was freeing and scary at the same time to feel comfortable in my own decisions and in my own life.

After several trips back to the States to visit them, and with continuous efforts, our relationship has come full circle; my parents and I have the deepest love and gratitude for one another. They have chanted with me many times. One day my mother called me in Italy to tell me her and my dad chanted on their own for a friend of theirs who was ill. The miracle is that my dad has several times commented on what a sincere and wonderful person I am.

So, after my two years in Italy and many activities, I finally had the courage to take action based on listening to my wisdom. A year ago, I knew that I was ready to come back to the States.

Among many goals, the real challenge was to face my life as a 38-year-old woman that was choosing not to run anymore. Prior to my leaving, I was given the opportunity to do an activity at Taplow Court in England where I was in charge of all the activities that transpired there for a week with a team of eight members. I was so afraid to take on the responsibility but knew I wanted to break through this fear.

During that week, I chanted about four hours a day and determined to trust. That experience completely prepared my life-condition to return because coming back to the States was way more courageous than going to Italy. I made a decision that I was not going to live in my old patterns anymore or feel trapped in any situation. Even though I was afraid, I had the confidence that I would not be victimized by the fear. I knew that although I suffered greatly and challenged my anorexia and bulimia, I had the faith that I would have ultimate freedom and health. I'm starting to believe in the things I used to think were impossible or that I never bothered chanting about.

I am challenging my life to go beyond what I once accepted as my limitations. Not only my attitude, but also my actions, have genuinely become about giving rather than the victim of "give me." I see my life expanding and how incredible it is to encourage other people.

Through all of this, I developed such trust and a deeper sense of who I am. I know now I have the power within my life to change. I have worked hard to honor and respect myself without judgment. I have abused and denied my life for so many years and I am now freeing myself in every thought I think and every action I take. This freedom has allowed me to accept my innocence instead of resisting my humanness. My goal is to share my life with those who don't believe that there is hope, happiness and the absolute possibility of change.