

EXPERIENCE—JOELLE GONCALVES, SANTA ROSA, CALIF. VICTORY OVER VIOLENCE, VICTORY OVER SELF

Joelle Goncalves overcomes her fear of confrontation at her workplace.

On March 11, I celebrated my 11th year of practicing Nichi-ren Daishonin's Buddhism. One of the greatest challenges throughout my practice has been my deep fear of confrontation and my lack of self-esteem, which weakened my ability to stand up for myself. I have also been known to hold grudges as a convenient way to avoid confrontation.

Three years ago, I was hired to work for a local peace organization in Santa Rosa, Calif., the Peace and Justice Center. I felt I must have changed my karma to work at a place where everyone would get along peacefully. This was the peace center—how perfect, right? Wrong!

The best way I can sum up the challenges I experienced while working there is to include my resignation letter. It was read at the monthly board of directors meeting by the executive director.

The director had only been working there a short time but was the first person to recognize my struggles and encouraged me to write this honest, yet compassionate letter:

“When I was hired as the assistant to the director two years ago, I arrived with a fresh determination as to how I could make a difference in the Peace and Justice Center. Although there are a multitude of things that I have learned since then, the most important has been perseverance.

“When our previous director left a month earlier than had been expected, I caught the ball with no prior training. I was asked to move into her office and began juggling the many tasks that a director has. This included correspondence with members of our community who were left with unanswered questions, unfinished business and unfinished projects due to the abrupt departure of our director. Though fulfilling director tasks without the title, I challenged myself and I persevered.

“Feeling pride in having run the Center alone for six months, I was deeply saddened when I was asked not to apply for the director's position, all the while fulfilling the director's responsibilities. I recall the day I was abruptly told we were hiring someone new and not asked until the following day how I felt about it. Shocked at the lack of straightforwardness, I was speechless. Though stunned, I persevered.

“I created and sent dozens of applicant packets and typed a thank you for applying letter on letterhead that I had recently redesigned. As the pit in my stomach grew due to feeling ignored in the process, I received many calls from certain board members—not about how I was feeling—but inquiring about the number of applicants.

“How did my feelings fit into this equation? I wanted my opinion to be heard because I would be working every day with this person. I continued to persevere.

“I welcomed our new director, Suzanne. Actually, she was the first to sit me down, ask about my feelings and validate my growing concerns. She immediately recognized my strengths and was comfortable in hearing a difference of opinion. Suzanne is aware of the real challenges that take place: not only the injustice abroad but here in our own Center.

“My final stage in personal perseverance came during the annual dinner meetings. This

was the second year in a row that I had suggested we begin the program during dinner so that the evening would not run late. I was not listened to. Other ideas I had were overlooked and oftentimes, with Suzanne as my witness, I was reprimanded for them.

“What could have been different had my ideas been used? The silent auction is the example. I created all of the silent auction materials without review from the committee and coordinated all of the donations as well. The auction went perfectly bringing in nearly \$1,000. For the first time ever, I oversaw a project and used my creativity to the fullest extent. Perseverance.

“I was well aware it was time to give my notice. Before I left, however, what was to be my final contribution? How could I use my experience to create a more welcoming environment for future employees? One of course is this letter, which is a plea that asks, ‘If you’re going to Celebrate Diversity, then recognize that it involves difference of opinion, and a willingness to trust those of a differing opinion—particularly from youth. After all, are youth not the future?’

“My second gift was in organizing a Thursday Night titled “Youth Victory Over Violence.” It was a new and creative Buddhist-based dialogue about taking ownership of the passive violence in our lives. I’ve always felt it hypocritical to work for peace in Kosovo while we are unable to treat difference with respect here in our own immediate environment. The night was a huge success with over 25 people in attendance, 20 whom had never set foot in the Center before.

“In closing, I would like to trust that the experiences described in this letter will be taken into deep consideration and not dismissed because they may be different from the experiences of the board.”

After this letter was read at the Monday night board meeting, according to two reliable sources (I was not there) silence fell upon the room. A group that was always so eager to talk over one another had nothing to say. After 30 seconds of silence, someone said, “I believe we should give this serious consideration.” Another agreed. A volunteer who was there to make a presentation decided to talk about my letter instead of giving his report: “I agree with Joelle and I have had similar experiences in the past where I was not listened to.”

The final consensus among the board was to hold a special meeting to discuss my letter and the future treatment of all employees. My letter then became a reference tool for future relationships between the board and the staff!

All of this, of course, was made possible through my hours of chanting, forging ahead in local SGI activities, my years of training as a young women’s leader and participating in the Byakuren Group. It sounds like a lot of causes, but the key difference for me (this time around!) was taking action. It would have been much easier to not write the letter at all and leave the Center with my tail between my legs. This type of behavior, however, would be contradictory to what SGI President Ikeda is hoping for from the youth of SGI. Being courageous at the crucial moment became my focus.

Two days after the board meeting, I met with the board president at my house for lunch. Before she arrived, I became paralyzed with fear. The guts it took to write the letter paled in comparison to the confrontation I was about to have. The reason? It was the president whom I had spoken of throughout my letter and she and I both knew that.

She arrived. We made small talk. She then plunged into the letter and critiqued my analysis. We were both on the defensive, there at my kitchen table. However, I knew that my prayers to the Gohonzon would surely manifest and somehow I would turn the

conversation around. As I watched her speak, I began realizing that it was our similarities—not our differences—that caused such conflict between us. We were both controlling and strong-willed in order to cover up our deep insecurities. I finally opened my mouth and said, “You know, we are far more similar than we are different.” That was the turning point. No more attacks, just raw human emotion and the feeling of meeting a long-lost family member. We had arrived to our personal victories.

At the end of our conversation, she apologized deeply and asked that “I forgive her.” Fighting back the tears was difficult, but I managed to say, “...and if we’re as similar as I think we are, what you just said was extremely difficult.” She laughed and extended her hands across the table. We held hands and I felt absolute victory in my life. I felt that any grudge I have ever held could be reconciled through this same technique. One week later, she announced her resignation as the board president.

As I look back, I realize that what I wanted most out of my position was to be the Peace Center director. I wanted to flaunt that I had a big position. What ended up happening however was much deeper and quite the opposite. My role was not the directorship—it was to change the way that people treated each other. I laid the foundation for all future employees to have a comfortable working relationship with all members of the Center.

In addition, I was reminded about the importance of standing up for myself and taking action based on the determination I made in front of the Gohonzon. This is the transformation that happened internally as a result of my prayer.

With regard to taking action, I would like to share a quote from President Ikeda that inspired me: “Buddhism is found in the reality of society and daily life. Because Buddhism is in no way separate from this reality, we must strive through our actions to be exemplary models for others” (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 227).

That is what my struggle was ultimately about.