

EXPERIENCE—KATE HUNGERFORD, MARINA DEL REY, CALIF. GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Kate Hungerford says she now has ‘a solid expectation of success, regardless of circumstances.’

I grew up in Philadelphia. When people ask me which part I just laugh—we moved so much that in the eight years of grade school, I attended 11 schools. We often lived in federal housing projects and I saw life as something to be endured, or rather, home as something to be endured. Violence, addiction and tragedy were the norm. I had one safe harbor, and that was my ability to draw. It flourished in school and so did I, although I lied about where I lived and had the parents of “nice” families drop me off in front of stranger’s houses. Kids from “the projects” were not welcome in the tight little circles of the honor roll, where I had my away-from-home identity.

If high marks in school were enough to produce happiness, things might have been different. But they are not. By the end of high school, I was desperately looking for a way out. After a few years of half-hearted attempts at working my way through art school, I landed in Los Angeles, met and married a talented guy from a good family, forgot all about my art and became a fashion model. I thought I had finally escaped my roots.

By 1984, despite the birth of my son and our financial fortune, I was deeply unhappy. My marriage was in bad shape and I felt trapped again. I blamed my husband for his drug problems as well as mine. Under it all, I felt that I was basically from “bad stock.”

What I recognize now was that deep karmic patterns were firmly imbedded in my life, and I carried the same destructive tendencies and behaviors as my family and brought them all with me—wherever I went. Of course, when I received the Gohonzon, I had no idea of how critical the timing was, and that I was about to radically alter the direction of my life.

As my marriage disintegrated, the fear that my child would suffer like the five kids in my family had suffered really woke me up. I started going to the library and checking out religions. I found Zen Buddhism interesting, but it seemed to have nothing to do with real, everyday life.

A designer friend invited me to dinner one night, and the first thing I saw when I walked into her house was her Buddhist altar. With tremendous skepticism, I accepted her challenge to “chant for my desires for 30 days.” I attended SGI meetings and did my best with gongyo, chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo a lot and before the 30 days was up, several of the things I had written down had come to pass. That’s the beauty of this practice. It was those very desires that have caused me to chant and lead my life into a rhythm with the universe whereby I am at the right place at the right time—usually in spite of myself. “As is,” I call it. Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism is not just for elevated, spiritually oriented-anyway, ain’t-got-a-life-so-may-as-well-be-holy types, but for people like me, with all kinds of human weaknesses and strengths and the baggage to go with it.

Two years ago, when the collapse of a large company ended my high-paying career as a securities broker, I cashed in my retirement so that my three children and I could live while I went back to art school. I had no idea what I would do for money after that, since I was not getting teaching credentials and there’s not a great demand for painters in the work

world.

In “The True Aspect of All Phenomena,” Nichiren Daishonin says, “If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 385). That means doing the things a bodhisattva does. So instead of allowing my fears to guide me, I based my action on my Buddhist practice. I have been a district leader in the SGI-USA for 14 of my 16 years of practice, so I know how to anchor myself and my life-condition to kosen-rufu. During this time I participated in the Linus Pauling exhibit, the women’s general meeting, my district general meetings, weekly chanting sessions at my house and regularly introducing people to this practice. Whenever my fear snuck up on me, I reminded myself of my true identity.

Last November, I was desperately looking for work and getting no where. I had my own ideas about what pay I needed, etc. One of my seniors in faith said that he’d recently decided that often what he thought he needed and what he actually needed were two entirely different things; that these days he has more or less given the Gohonzon the job of delivering, while he himself just does the footwork.

I chanted for the universe to send the job I needed for my happiness ASAP, and promised to take the next one that came up as an act of faith. Later that day, a friend called and when I told her I had registered with a temporary agency, she said, “Well, darn, if you’re going to temp, why not come up here to the J. Paul Getty Museum and temp?” I started to hem and haw about it not being enough money, and then I remembered my promise.

I based my action to take this position not on some outside force magically “sending” me a job, but on trusting my prayers as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

I was sent to the conservation laboratories that day at the museum, and the staff assistant who I was sent to help would hand in her resignation. Two months later, despite my lack of seniority, I was interviewed and awarded the job. I am sure that my attitude of willingness and determination, skills polished by my Buddhist practice, got me the job. But what is truly extraordinary about my situation is that my job, which is administrative in nature (filing, bookkeeping, travel arrangements), would ordinarily have nothing at all to do with my own artwork. Also, working full time, being the single parent of two young children would leave me no time to pursue showing my art.

There are some 2,000 employees working at the Getty, and I have yet to see a situation like mine. Of all the departments, there is not one other space like ours; it is a spacious, beautifully lit suite of labs with big, white, empty walls—well, they *were* empty. When our department head saw a photo of my work, he invited me to hang my paintings anywhere I wanted. There are currently six pieces up and lots of room to add more.

As my paintings hang in the conservation lab of one of the largest and most publicized museums in the world, the heads of several departments as well as conservators, scientists and all kinds of people from all over the world are requesting my price list. The head of museum operations bought a painting last month. As a painter, this allows me an exposure that most emerging artists attempt to achieve by spending huge amounts of time, money and work chasing gallery owners and schlepping long distances to group shows. It also allows me a salary, great medical and dental benefits for my whole family, a pension fund, an environment loaded with art, artists and one extraordinary view of the city.

Recently, as part of the Getty’s biannual staff art show called “The Getty Underground,” I was invited to participate in the Art Talk series, where I gave a talk at the Getty Conservation Institute about my art. As I watched the projected images of my paintings,

all that kept running through my mind was that anything is possible. Instead of the technical art talk I'd planned, I wound up talking about my life and encouraging the audience to never give up on their dreams. I got back to my desk and there were emails from people I don't even know thanking me.

For me, for every hour of time dedicated to helping others practice Buddhism, whether I am chanting or doing activities, I get back one hundredfold. I'd say my dream of being an artist is alive and well, and living in Los Angeles. More important, however, is this: After 16 years of experiences that defy the odds, where there once was an innate fear of things not working out, there is now a solid expectation of success, regardless of circumstances. This is real freedom.