

EXPERIENCE— CURT YOUNG, LOS ANGELES IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO MAKE DREAMS COME TRUE

Having challenged the ‘negative feedback’ he received as a child, Curt Young pursues his dream of living a valuable and contributive life.

As a child growing up in Chicago, I was plagued with the question of what is justice? I wondered why people couldn't get along better than they did in my home, in my neighborhood, in the world. I loved to read and I looked for answers to my questions in everything I picked up.

My father called me a “dreamer.” He constantly told me that I was “a worthless, no good scoundrel,” to use his exact words, who would “never amount to anything.” Those words sunk deep into my life.

I wanted to become a lawyer when I grew up and fight for justice, but in fact, every action I took ensured that I would never accomplish anything meaningful in my life. I had failed since the third grade. In my senior year of high school, I was expelled for cutting classes; the teachers said I was incorrigible and couldn't be educated.

My father cried and told me that he knew this would happen. My mother, a teacher, was disgusted with me. I had no vision of a life outside of school and didn't know what to do or where to turn. I was so distraught that I seriously considered suicide. Having grown up Catholic, I went to a priest for help, but he was too busy to talk to me.

Next, I called my best friend. We hung out all night long and got drunk. The next morning I joined the Air Force. I was 18 years old.

I passed the High School Equivalency Test in the Air Force, so when I got out four years later, I moved to New York City (a place I consider my true home) and went to a community college. But that was in the '60s, and I was so distracted with the times that I gave up on school and my dreams and went to work.

By the time I was 30, I had worked as a laborer in the steel mills; swept floors in factories; loaded mail trucks at the post office; was a gate agent for the airlines; and a salesman for *Ebony* magazine. An executive at an ad agency thought I might have a talent for writing. With his encouragement, I soon became an advertising copywriter. It was my first real success. I worked in the advertising business for the next 20 years. It was during those years, in 1976, that I became a Buddhist and joined the SGI-USA.

I practiced sincerely and did very well in my career, progressing to senior vice-president and creative director of an ad agency. In 1986, I left New York and after spending a year in Chicago, moved to Los Angeles, where I drove a cab before going to work for the Nissan Corporation as manager of media relations.

In 1992, I was laid off. This would be the real turning point in my life. First of all, I couldn't find another job. My wife and I got a divorce. I was living in an apartment in Santa Monica that wasn't mine. The new SUV I left Nissan with was stolen. I got another one, but it was soon repossessed. Finally, since I was living illegally in a rent-controlled apartment, I was told to move. I was given a month. I had no job or money, and I used a bike to get around L.A. I couldn't believe that I had practiced Buddhism for nearly 20 years and was actually facing homelessness on a bicycle. I appealed to a real estate agent but to no avail.

Finally it was down to a week. The only thing I could do was chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. On Monday of that week, I chanted the better part of the day. On Thursday, a friend called and said she was going out of town for a month and if I knew anyone who could look after her house. The next day, I moved into her house. By the time she returned, a staff member at the *World Tribune* called and asked if I could work for them while the managing editor went to Boston to cover SGI President Ikeda's visit to Harvard. Another friend had an apartment for rent and he wanted me to have it. I earned just enough to move into that apartment.

While I was working at the *World Tribune*, I met my new wife. When I was chanting, I determined to take a life built on circumstances and rebuild it on prayer. Since getting kicked out of high school, I had gone where the wind blew me. If someone offered me a job, I'd take it. Not so much because it was the job I wanted, but because there it was in front of me. I had lived my life like that. Now I wanted to develop the courage to make a determination and stick with it until I had a result. I chanted to use whatever talent I might have for kosen-rufu. I finally was contracted as a writer for the *World Tribune*, but that's another experience for another day.

My wife and I dreamed of living in France someday, a country we both love dearly. However, while she's spoken French fluently since her early teens, I couldn't say a word. So I decided to enroll in a French language course at Santa Monica College. I got my first "A" ever. I was so encouraged that I took another course in French, then one in history and political science and math. And before I knew it I was graduating from Santa Monica College—my first graduation since elementary school. I applied to UCLA and chanted to get accepted. But my prayer to the Gohonzon went something like this: "With my background, there's no way I was going to be accepted at a top research university." The more I campaigned, the more I was filled with doubt. While waiting to find out, it occurred to me just how full of doubt my prayer was. So much so, there truly was no way I was going to get into UCLA. I immediately changed my determination and my prayer from doubt to a prayer of "Yes, I absolutely will be accepted."

A few days later, the thin letter of rejection showed up in my mailbox. But that didn't deter me one bit. I had determined that I was going to UCLA and that was that. I finished up some unfinished coursework from years before that was the culprit, and when my GPA was recalculated, I had a 3.78 out of a possible 4.0 and had in fact graduated from Santa Monica College with honors. The following quarter I was accepted for early admittance to UCLA.

Now all these years, a committee of voices had found a home in my life, internal voices that, at every opportunity, would remind me of my father's words. Whenever I would set to a task, they would remind me, in no uncertain terms, that I had no ability whatsoever to do anything meaningful in this life—that I was a total failure.

Writing has always been excruciatingly painful. I'd have to fight through that with every writing assignment I ever had, whether as an advertising copywriter or for a script or an article for the *World Tribune* or *Living Buddhism*.

You can imagine that for most of my adult life, my self-esteem and confidence were about as low as possible. So it would always surprise me when people would tell me they liked something I wrote. Then the "committee" would say, "Yeah, you got away with it that time, but it'll never happen again."

But with my victory, I was able to tell my father and my internal committee that they were wrong! I truly was a valuable human being. The committee couldn't stand up to my

prayer and my connection to my mentor, President Ikeda, who I think of as the conductor of this grand orchestra we call life. I am one of the musicians. So for me, it is crystal clear that my victory is a result of my having never, ever taken my eyes off the conductor, and playing with all my heart.

When President Ikeda spoke at Columbia University a few years back, he said, “The task of education must be fundamentally to ensure that knowledge serves to further the cause of human happiness and peace.” That was my dream as a child. Thanks to him, my dream will come true this lifetime.

I finish UCLA in a few months. I am a history and political theory major with a minor in French literature and, yes, I am in an honor’s program. In September, I will be in France, where I will spend the month researching my thesis. When I return, I will submit my application to two graduate schools: Columbia University and Harvard University. I’ll be back after I earn my Ph.D. So you see, it really is never too late to make our dreams come true.