

TRAILBLAZERS!
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DEPENDING ON ONE'S OUTLOOK

Makiguchi was known to have said, "Depending on one's outlook, even hell can be enjoyable." (*The New Human Revolution* Vol. 6 p. 27) These bold and confident words inspired me to change my suffering into joy as an exchange student.

In July 1998, I was given a two-month scholarship to study Persian in Iran. I was part of the first official exchange delegation composed of nine students to travel there since 1979.

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, formal relations between Iran and the United States was thwarted. Through this opportunity I wanted to build trust and contribute to the reopening of diplomatic ties. However, the moment we arrived in Iran I was faced with an impasse. On the first day of class we were told that the tuition amount had changed and were asked to pay hundreds of dollars more. Since I was the only one who could speak broken Persian, I had to negotiate with the language institute. Our group was then segregated by gender, and contact between us was difficult. The dormitory room where the women students stayed was being searched on a regular basis after we left for school. Rumors were spread that our phones were bugged, and even if it was not true, the overall climate of paranoia and suspicion was enough to make us feel isolated. It was also the first time in my life I had experienced what it was like to live under authoritarian rule.

Since it is illegal to practice Buddhism in Iran, I would chant secretly in my room with the curtains drawn. I prayed to fulfill my mission, and change my feeling of hopelessness. After two months, all eight of my colleagues left with a very negative view of Iran. I, too, hadn't been able to see anything positive. Against my natural inclination to leave, I decided to stay until I could conquer this feeling.

For the next three months I prayed to understand a passage in *The New Human Revolution* where SGI President Ikeda encourages a woman living in Iran:

Rather than being attached to and constrained by idealistic standards that you've created, you should look hard at reality just as it is, then try to discover some positive or enjoyable aspects and turn them to good account. When you chant, you can see yourself and your environment exactly as they are. You can also bring forth a strong life force, gaining the strength you need not to be defeated by your weaknesses. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 6, p. 27)

I realized that I was trying to change my environment based on my narrow and pessimistic views. I then began to expand my life to see all aspects of Iranian society and found much beauty. I started having dialogue with a cornucopia of people-intellectuals who had been imprisoned, families of victims of the Iran-Iraq war, unemployed youth, secret service employees, opium smugglers, child laborers, movie actors, carpet weavers, bazaar merchants, politicians, mullahs, foreign businesspeople and one openly gay restaurant owner. In addition, the language institute I was studying at gave me a scholarship. My teachers praised me, saying I had "become Iranian." I was invited to return to Iran as an exchange scholar and I had numerous

dialogues about President Ikeda's efforts for peace. In the end, what I found to be negative was overshadowed by my love for the Iranian people and Persian culture.

I feel I owe this victory as a student to President Ikeda, who states that in the place where we find suffering, we also find true freedom:

*There is no paradise;
it does not exist.
Therefore walk forward
into this world of suffering!
And there you will see
the reality of the dream,
of this eternally bright,
eternally joyful and serene,
this eternally noble dream.
(Songs for America, p. 30)*

Moreover, Nichiren Daishonin illustrates in his letter to Shijo Kingo that in the midst of pain and suffering we create a deep and lasting bond with our mentor:

“Over and over I recall the moment, unforgettable even now, when I was about to be beheaded and you accompanied me, holding the reins of my horse and weeping tears of grief. Nor could I ever forget it in any lifetime to come. If you should fall into hell for some grave offense, no matter how Shakyamuni Buddha might urge me to become a Buddha, I would refuse; I would rather go to hell with you. For if you and I should fall into hell together, we would find Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra there” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 850).