

THE POWER OF A MOTHER'S PRAYER BY KIM HAWKINS, NEWBURY PARK, CALIFORNIA

The liver failure of seven-year-old Janelle revealed the strength of her mother's faith

One of the benefits we gain from our practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is the ability to handle difficulty with composure. I say this as an understatement. When I nearly lost my precious seven-year-old daughter Janelle last year, my twenty years of practice paid huge dividends of confidence, wisdom and fortune — even joy — in my darkest hour.

On July 7, my husband, Mike, and I noticed that Janelle's eyes looked yellow. Urine, ultrasound and repeated blood tests yielded no diagnosis. Within two weeks, Janelle was entirely golden and sick with vomiting and high fevers. My SGI-USA Area Leader Millie Cohn told me this was happening to expand my life and to trust the Gohonzon. Her words became my life raft. Starlet Vinci, my chapter women's leader, and Kelle Green, my district leader, assured me I would not have to face this alone. We talked on the phone on a daily basis.

Janelle was admitted to Los Angeles Children's Hospital on Friday, July 21, with her liver failing rapidly. Medicine bought time, but failed to correct the toxic ammonia buildup and erratic blood sugar levels that put Janelle at risk for seizures. I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo continuously and unabashedly without worrying about what others thought.

A surgical biopsy on Sunday revealed extensive liver damage. That night Janelle was placed on "the list" and moved to the ICU, which, because of my life-condition, looked like the "Buddha Land." Only heroes and gods worked here. As her life hung by a thread, Janelle looked "peaceful and at ease." Instead of panic, I experienced joy and clarity, scribbling this in my diary: "My twenty years of practice have all been for this moment. It took this for me to take the fine medicine of the Lotus Sutra. I am at last, free of doubt, and feel boundless joy from the Law. I really do. I am crying and shaking with it now. People looking in from the outside think I am sad, but I am not. I am the happiest woman in the universe. Janelle, we are one. I will never leave you. You will recover, I promise. We will do whatever it takes to keep you with us, no matter what!"

The next day, I was screened as a living donor for a transplant, but miraculously, a liver became available that very night from a cadaveric donor. In fewer than twenty-four hours of being on the list, Janelle would receive a new liver!

Despite stressful quarrels over religion the day before, my Catholic husband and I enjoyed a beautiful day of supporting each other, just the two of us. With our different faiths, we united as parents in prayer for our child.

Everyone in the ICU was ecstatic after the seven-hour surgery. One nurse said to me: "Do you have any idea how lucky you are? Do you realize that if Janelle had looked good for one day longer, she might have missed this chance?" What stunning proof of the rhythm and fortune!

Despite the baffling onset of her illness, Janelle's recovery was textbook, her new liver functioned perfectly. She was discharged within two weeks.

I went home exhausted and soon felt overwhelmed. I had less than a month to complete projects and prepare lessons, as well as find daycare for Janelle, before resuming my teaching position in September. My husband and I did not agree on priorities. I resented his suggestion

that I consider finding a job that paid more.

That month, our district began studying “Letter to Misawa,” which explains the workings of the three obstacles and four devils that appear in our lives as a challenge to our Buddhist practice. I wrote in my diary: “The devil king surely is ‘most vexed’ and has summoned his underlings to harass me and test my faith.” Paraphrasing *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, I wrote my declaration of war on him: “Sorry, Mr. Devil King. Yes, I will free myself from the sufferings of birth and death. And I will lead others to enlightenment as well. Yes, I will take over your realm and change it into a pure land. What shall you do? You shall fail! Go torment the slime at the bottom of the ocean or perhaps retire on some frozen planet! Just get lost!”

The road to recovery took a sudden steep and rocky turn. Janelle’s platelet count fell through the floor, putting her at risk for spontaneous bleeding. She was readmitted to the hospital on September 1, and it soon became clear that her bone marrow wasn’t working.

I decided to take a leave of absence from my job and trust the universe. Somehow we would survive the money shortage.

My boss and principal immediately waived my older daughter’s tuition, and began driving her to and from school. Mike’s parents did everything in their power to support us — visiting the hospital frequently, bringing food, books, games and videos. I called my dad in Cleveland right after one of his trips to Las Vegas. He’d hit a \$10,000 jackpot and instantly mailed me a check for \$5,000 to help cover expenses during my unpaid leave.

The doctors tried various strategies with no effect on the crashing platelet count. Soon her white blood cell count took a dive as well. With her immune system suppressed and her body having virtually no white cells, Janelle was vulnerable to “opportunistic infections.”

She contracted a respiratory virus, which required tent treatments in the infectious disease ward. If the ICU was heaven, the fifth floor was hell, with everyone in gowns, masks, goggles and gloves, and ominous signs everywhere, like “Negative Air Flow” and “Stop, Do Not Enter,” and posters about “Pain Management.” The stage was set for my “meltdown.”

I totally lost it when I couldn’t get help as Janelle fought against one of her medical treatments. Completely hysterical, I ran down the hall and called my husband from a payphone. It was 6:30 am on a Saturday. When I roused my knight, he went on a charge complaining up and down the hospital chain of command.

Still hysterical, I called Starlet next. She came through as a model leader. “You know, your daughter’s going to be OK,” she said matter-of-factly. “Keep chanting to change this karma. Use this emotion. Use this passion for Janelle. Chant the kind of daimoku only her mother can chant!”

President Ikeda’s guidance for September 25 in *For Today and Tomorrow* struck like a lightning bolt: “Everything depends on whether there is someone who is willing to wage a desperate all-out struggle, someone who will take 100 percent responsibility without relying on or leaving things to others, someone who will work with selfless dedication for the sake of people without concern for what others think. Such a person is a true leader and a genuine Buddhist” (p. 293).

I wrote in my diary: “ I am that Buddhist! But what? What? What haven’t I learned yet? Universe, teach me fast! Janelle must survive and encourage many others. I will never abandon my faith, but others may be deeply discouraged or blame my faith. Where is the dawn?”

That day, my husband and I met with Janelle’s doctors in a conference room. It was serious; there was no hope in their eyes. Janelle might need a bone marrow transplant. Our older daughter Michelle was not a match. Despite slim odds for success with an unrelated donor, a marrow registry search was initiated.

Janelle's own immune system had done all the damage. The plan now was to try ATG, a horse serum that would kill all of her misguided T-cells, giving her bone marrow a chance to recover and make new white cells that would function properly. The four-day ATG infusion, plus weekly shots thereafter, could take anywhere from two months to two years to achieve the desired effect. Until then, Janelle would require frequent transfusions of platelets and blood.

After the ATG, we skated out of the hospital on very thin ice.

Within two weeks, Janelle was readmitted with a potentially lethal fungal infection. The doctors took aggressive measures to locate, diagnose and treat it, including more broncoscopies, CT and MRI scans, and a lumbar puncture to sample her spinal fluid. Janelle's condition went up and down, as days turned into weeks, with no end in sight. She was sick with coughing, vomiting and fevers — a lung infection was determined to be the cause.

I received guidance from a senior women's leader who told me to pray with absolute conviction that I have the solution. "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the medicine for this karmic illness. Everything depends on your determination."

In case I didn't get it, Janelle's movie choice the next day brought it home. We watched *Free Willie*. That kid Jesse had determination. He never gave up. Janelle's karma to die, my karma to lose her might close in like those fishing boats at the end of the film, but my faith and determination would carry her over the rocks and home by Christmas, no matter what!

We learned that Janelle's lung infection was related to mold in our house. A leaky, old water heater had left mold growing in the platform, which fed into our return air duct, spewing spores all over the house. Stained carpet and puckered wallpaper signaled past water damage. As Michael put it, our house was "Club Med for mold."

Mike's parents bought an air purifier for Janelle's room. We replaced the moldy platform and installed a new furnace with an electronic filter. The carpet, potentially full of spores, had to go. A classmate's dad, who owns Howard's Carpet, gave us an inside deal on hardwood floors for the bathrooms and Janelle's room. With that we'd spent our limit, so we planned to suffer bare concrete in the family and living rooms until we could afford new flooring.

Then a friend in my chapter, Kim Halbeck, spilled our story to the local Home Depot. They stepped in and donated beautiful Pergo flooring as well as vinyl verticals to replace our dusty, old drapes. The newspaper said they put \$12,000 worth of material and labor into our house, but only after Jarret Construction came and fixed a major concrete problem at no charge.

Besides piles of gifts from family, friends and colleagues, Christmas brought a big check from Padre Serra Church through a special collection initiated by my good friend Jane Maiello. The universe came through!

As for Janelle, she and I had the time of our lives in the hospital. I kept her laughing, and Grandma waved dollar bills to keep her eating and drinking. One doctor remarked: "There's an aura in your room. And I've never seen so many doctors so interested in one patient."

Janelle was finally discharged on December 13 with a white cell count of 7.54, which is within the range of normal! She celebrated Christmas and her eighth birthday on January 7 at home!

Three brief hospitalizations in January and one in March were mere speed bumps along the road to recovery. Janelle started back to school in February, and managed to stay out of the hospital for more than six weeks without any transfusions. Her bone marrow has started making platelets, and the registry search has been cancelled. We haven't cleared all the rocks yet, but I won't give up until we do. My determination for Janelle's complete recovery remains unbending.

I'd like to thank the twenty-three people who responded to the call for blood and platelets.

And, I'd like to thank the friends and SGI members around the world who supported my family with gifts, greetings, prayers and daimoku. And I'd like to thank my SGI-USA seniors in faith whose wisdom is a bright beacon as I navigate this stormy sea using the ship of my Buddhist practice.

In his letter titled "A Ship to Cross the Sea of Sufferings," Nichiren Daishonin states, "Even a single phrase cherished deep in one's heart will without fail help one reach the opposite shore" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 33). To this I would add, don't wait twenty years. Cast off your doubts now! There is no greater ship for the crossing than practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism with the SGI and President Ikeda.