

## FINDING MEANING IN THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

In the following dialogue, four young women, Chelsea Honderich, Sandra Nakasone and Kim Butler-Thomas of Washington, D.C. Region, and Keli McHale of Virginia-Carolina Region, share their personal experiences on how they used their Buddhist practice to find meaning from the death of a parent during their youth.

Keli was 2 years old when her father died in a car accident, Sandra was 16 when her father committed suicide and Kim was 30 when her father died of a sudden heart attack. Chelsea was 24 when her mother died from brain cancer.

Along with using their practice, they were able to find other support they needed in overcoming their grief such as counseling and having dialogue with family and friends.

Chelsea speaks on behalf of the group: “Through our friendship and sharing our personal experiences, we learned that each of us shared a bond through the loss of a parent. We were able to help each other better cope with the mourning process and deepen our faith and understanding of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

“In holding dialogues about our parent’s death, there were several ‘Ah ha moments’ among us all! We continue to have many realizations that reaffirm that grief, like life, is a process, and our faith and connection to SGI President Ikeda are the engines that propel us forward, helping us give meaning to our loss.”

### **Part one of the dialogue appears here.**

**Kim:** Although it’s only been a year and a half since my father, Dr. Anthony Butler, died, I can really feel the importance of giving meaning to the loss of my parent. When my father died, he and I had reached a point where we were beginning to understand and respect each other. He saw me not only as his daughter, but also as an individual who has her own life and dreams. In the past, my dad and I struggled with the issue of respect. I felt he did not respect me as a person and I didn’t respect him. But I had just reached another turning point in my relationship with my father. I began to understand more about who he was and what he had been through. Then he died of a sudden heart attack during a family vacation on Nov. 26, 1999, at age 52.

Because it was so unexpected, I often struggled with feelings of regret. There were many conversations I wished I’d had with him. I expected to grow old with him and I imagined he’d be there for the birth of my first child or to see my first house. I regretted the times that — because of my resentment toward him — I wished my dad out of my life. Through my Buddhist practice, therapy and talking with close friends and family, I now realize that in the end, we did have a good relationship and were able to start spending more time together. I began to enjoy being around him and I’m thankful we didn’t end on a sour note. Finally, I discovered that although we were different, in some ways, we were alike. I was able to develop into who I am through my relationship with my dad.

**Chelsea:** It sounds like you have come to truly appreciate the times that you did spend with your father.

**Kim:** Yes, the biggest benefit and most important lesson learned from my dad's passing is how important it is that we live life to the fullest. It became clear to my whole family just how profoundly he was able to touch other people's lives, no matter how brief the encounter. We received so many letters, cards and calls from people all over — some of which we didn't even know — to express how glad and fortunate they were to have known him. More than 600 people attended my father's memorial service. The service was not at all somber; it was a joyous celebration of his life. I don't think he realized how profoundly he touched people. It reminds me of a quote from SGI President Ikeda: "All of us die eventually. The crucial thing is how we have lived. It is important to live as long as we can, but length is not the measure of a good life. What matters most is what we have done with our lives. That is what determines whether it has been a good life or not" (March 16, *World Tribune*, p. 4). Although my father's life was relatively short, he accomplished a lot and I feel he really did enjoy his life.

His death is still a painful and personal experience for me. For a while, I felt numb. Other times I couldn't understand why it was so hard for me to move forward. In our society it seems as though, since death is a natural part of life, we're supposed to "get over it." Have you guys felt this way?

**Chelsea:** Definitely. This July 6 marks seven years since my mother, Judy Honderich, passed away. For years after she died, I tried to be strong, take care of others and keep myself busy, pursuing my master's degree at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, while working and doing SGI activities. Yet, in being so busy, I was avoiding my true feelings of anger, despair and sadness, thus building a very shaky foundation. Only recently have I begun to tear down the wall between my emotions and myself.

The other day, as I shared with a trusted friend how much I've struggled because I felt I had to just "get over the loss of my mom," it felt so good to hear her say, "Why would you want to?" She encouraged me to integrate my mother into my life. Rather than denying her as an integral part of my life, she encouraged me to take my mom with me into all of my relationships. This really struck a chord in my heart.

**Kim:** What do you think helped you start breaking down those walls further?

**Chelsea:** At the beginning of last year, I chanted to break through my internal struggles to show victory in all aspects of my life for kosen-rufu. I wanted to win as President Ikeda's disciple and my mother's daughter. Since then, my life has opened so much. I've begun to take better care of myself. The following guidance from President Ikeda has inspired me: "All of these seemingly adverse situations are exactly the right nourishment you need to grow even stronger. You must courageously spur yourselves on, reminding yourselves that the deeper the pain and grief, the greater the happiness that awaits you. Have the determination to become pillars of support for your family. Buddhism teaches this way of life" (*Discussions on Youth*, vol. 1, pp. 32-33).

**Kim:** My father's death was also sudden and traumatic for my family. How do you change poison into medicine with a tragic way of dying like suicide?

**Sandra:** It has been 16 years since the death of my father, Edgar Nakasone. Only now am I truly beginning to heal and come to terms with it. This tragic event in my life enabled me to take faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Through my mother's prayers and a visit by a caring women's chapter leader, Mrs. Helen Ishigaki, I was encouraged to participate in SGI youth activities. This led me to build friendships among other youth members and to learn about President Ikeda.

It was through my prayers that I was able to meet a compassionate graduate school professor who helped me recognize important issues in my life. He suggested that in order for me to become a great agent of change, I needed to break through my deep-seated suffering as a survivor of suicide, an adult child of an alcoholic and a life lacking in personal discipline. Now, I am able to lift the rug and deal with the stuff that was once swept under it. My family has been supportive of my healing process and I am grateful that they have been willing to answer questions about my past. Through e-mails and phone calls, we are able to learn from each other's perspectives of our once dysfunctional family life and my father's death.

**Keli:** That has been my experience as well. My father, Michael Thomas McHale passed away in a car accident on March 16 when I was 2 years old. I really didn't know my father other than from looking at his pictures and hearing stories about him from my mother. I used to wonder what my father's voice might sound like or what he would say to me if I could see him for even 10 minutes. I asked myself what I was supposed to understand and learn from his death.

For years I did not feel a connection to him. Then one day when I was 23 and struggling in school, I went to his grave for the first time alone and told him my situation and future dreams. I couldn't comprehend exactly why so many emotions came over me at the time. I cried and cried, but I felt so good.

**Kim:** It sounds like grieving is a process that is different for each of us. That is why it's important we acknowledge our true feelings.

*In the June 8 issue of Seize the Day, this dialogue will conclude with in-depth discussion on how the loss of a loved one enabled each of the young women to strengthen their faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. As Sandra states, "I came to feel in my darkest moments that my SGI friends and President Ikeda understood what I was going through. This has given me hope to carry on with renewed determination and to return to having faith in the Gohonzon."*