

**PERSPECTIVE  
APPRECIATING MYSELF AS I AM  
BY M. LAVORA PERRY  
EAST CLEVELAND, OHIO**

**Lavora Perry says she is ‘coming to understand that there are not two me’s — the good me and the bad me. There is only me, and I am always a Buddha.’**

Since the early 1990s, I’ve tried to answer SGI President Daisaku Ikeda’s call for us to contribute to our local areas. He says: “Because of the profound way our lives interact with people around us, it is vital that we reach out to others, that we be engaged with our environment and with our local community. A self-absorbed practice or theory without action is definitely not Buddhism” (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 62).

I have been a participatory parent in my preschooler’s and kindergartner’s schools, a socially engaged employee and an active resident of East Cleveland. In addition to my SGI activities, my efforts to support my community have been a hodgepodge of whatever I had the time and inclination to do.

My contributions were recognized at a recent city council meeting. I joined several others in being awarded with a certificate “in appreciation of devoted and invaluable services rendered to the Greater East Cleveland Community.” The awards were the brainchild of council member Saratha Goggins, a hardworking neighbor of mine. She gives them out each February in celebration of Black History Month.

When I arrived back home from the council meeting, I decided to fax President Ikeda a copy of the certificate, as I believe the award is fundamentally the effect of me following his guidance.

My ankle’s broken right now and I’m on crutches, so I avoid going up and down stairs too often. So before hobbling up to the fax machine in my third-floor writer’s studio, I stayed downstairs at my altar to chant about what the award meant to me. Through chanting I realized that, once again, I was devaluing my own efforts, and therefore, I was devaluing my life. I found myself thinking “I didn’t really do so much” and wishing that I lived somewhere where there isn’t so much that needs to be done.

East Cleveland, where artfully designed, turn-of-the-last-century, mini-mansions in need of sometimes-major repair stand regally, is a 95 percent African-American municipality. For a city our size (population 33,000), our racial make up is a rarity. In the 1970s and ’80s, we boasted Ohio’s first African-American female mayor and youngest African-American female city council member. Both women are still active citizens here, and today we are a city rebuilding itself after a couple of decades of constantly living the blues.

Before the Gohonzon, I looked my self-slander in the eye. I felt ashamed about where I live. But, in chanting, I realized that this shame was not the result of me living in East Cleveland. It was a shame I carried in my heart, the childhood shame of not being pretty, thin, rich, popular, smart or “fill-in-the-blank” enough. It was the shame of being me.

This shame judged me, instead of appreciating me. It also prevented me from being able to really appreciate, and not judge, others. No matter if my efforts were way behind-the-scenes or way out front, this shame said, “What you do doesn’t count.”

I am coming to believe that the same type of low self-value I saw within my life was at

the root of what held our city down during the last part of the 20th century. During that time, white residents fled in staggering numbers, and I think black people took it personally. African-Americans have too often accepted this type of reaction from whites as an indication that being black is something to run away from.

It seems to me that, throughout the long course of slavery and its inhuman brutality and lingering evils within our society, blacks' self-esteem could not have been negatively affected by some whites' poor opinions of us had we truly believed we are precious as we are.

In terms of the effects of low self-value on our communities, I've concluded that while blacks' weak self-esteem was reflected in the downward spiral of many neighborhoods, whites' devaluing of themselves was played out in the way many of them fled from homes they loved, simply because new people were moving into the area. It was as if they had so little appreciation for the priceless nature of their lives that they thought having black neighbors could reduce their worth.

The truth is, what makes a person's life worthy of respect is not skin color, wallet size, educational degree, owning a home or anything like that. Nichiren Daishonin taught that a person is worthy of respect simply for being alive. Hopefully, respect for ourselves and for all others is the lesson we are learning from our past experiences in trying to build strong, harmonious communities in our diverse nation.

As I kept chanting on the evening that I received the award, I repeated the determination I've been making lately: I prayed to really appreciate everything about me—imperfections and all. This included appreciating my chock-full-of-potential city. I vowed that, “Because I am a disciple of Nichiren Daishonin and a successor of President Ikeda, I will value my life, and the life of all others. I will pray and take action to make this city known to all as the Buddha land that it is. I will continue to work with the many others who value our community, and together, we will show just how East Clevelanders shine—our city's phenomenal rebirth will inspire and encourage the people who live in many others. In all I do, I will prove the power of my Buddhist practice.”

Nichiren Daishonin says, “There are not two lands pure and impure in themselves, the difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 40). I'm also coming to understand that there are not two me's—the good me and the bad me. There is only me, and I am always a Buddha. As such, I am a shining, wish-granting jewel who can create any reality I want.

Being the Buddha that I am, I can freely travel the entire universe. So, if my family decides to relocate someday, that's OK. But, while we live in East Cleveland, I vow to make all the difference in the world.