

EXPERIENCE—FRANK HOTCHKISS, SANTA BARBARA, CALIF. DRIVING TOWARD HAPPINESS WITHIN

Frank Hotchkiss realizes that true happiness does not lie in the smooth ride of a new car.

I have always loved cars. In some ways, cars have been a measure of my practice. Not that a nice car meant a strong practice. No, cars could be a delight, but they could also provide a challenge.

Some years ago, I had a Porsche 944. It was the first Porsche I ever owned, and though it was used, I loved it dearly. The night I bought it, after dinner I was thinking about the Porsche sitting alone in the garage as we finished desert. My wife took one look at me and said to our teenage daughter, Lisa, “I think your father wants to go out and sit in his car.”

I jumped up from the table, gave her a big kiss and flew out the door—to sit in my wonderful new sled for a half-hour, going over its every facet. As I said, I have always loved cars.

But then times got rough. My business partner—I had a small public relations agency in Los Angeles—walked out and left me with considerable overhead and a few less clients. My daughter was headed for college, and money was scarce. I asked my wife and daughter to cut back, and I had to face reality. What was I doing in such a fine car when we were in the red?

It took six months of chanting to reach the conclusion that the Porsche had to go. With great reluctance, and some personal fears and hang-ups, I sold it. Many people will think I was a fool to be so attached to a car, and they are undoubtedly right. But I suspect Buddhism is meant for fools like me, so that one can turn a bad thing into a good.

Some months later, sitting alone in my office with the phones deathly silent, I turned to the computer keyboard and wrote a brief story about my Porsche experience, and what I learned from it. I believe I gained real insight into human values—enlightened human values—thanks to my painful parting with my Porsche. I sent the story off to a few publications, and eventually the *Los Angeles Times* called me. “We love your story. We do not know where to print it, but we want to. May we?”

They did. Friends called and commiserated with my loss and gain. Then strangers found my number and phoned to reveal they knew just what I had gone through. There were messages from unknown people on our home phone, and even a note from a young lady who said she would love to meet me. At that point, my wife said, “Enough is enough.”

From this loss came a whole new direction for me—fiction writing.

First I wrote a screenplay based on my short story. Then I wrote another screenplay. I got a Hollywood agent. Then I turned to novels, and wrote two. An agent in New York called to say she couldn’t put the first one down, and she liked the second even more. The subject matter of both came from my Buddhist practice. The first contrasted passionate love (rapture, we Buddhists would rightfully term it) with deeper, long-lasting love between two people. The second book was about dying, and how that could be a fulfillment to living, contrary to most American beliefs. Neither have sold yet, but I remain confident.

Recently, financial prospects returned to the grim stage. Looking at the future, I could

see only uncertainty and failure. In fact, my view of myself became one of failure, in complete contrast to Buddhist reality. I found the days filled with a gnawing knot in my stomach, and hopelessness in my heart. Once again, there was more red ink than black. Clearly I was a failure in life, a loser.

It was at this point that things really began to change for me. A human revolution, if you will. I heard a lecture reminding me that the true identity for those practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is that of a Bodhisattva of the Earth, and that our other identities — writer, businessman, even husband and father — are lesser identities upon which our true happiness does not depend.

The second injection of truth came in the form of a brief talk at our local World Peace Prayer Meeting about treasures of the heart vs. treasures of the storehouse and body (see "The Three Kinds of Treasure," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 848–53). Clearly I am a storehouse-type, despite growing up in the 1960s and practicing Buddhism since 1970.

I realized that the financial security I longed for was illusory. In fact, there is no kind of real security like that. Even those well off face grave problems, problems that for them are as real and as heart breaking as those the rest of us encounter. The greatest insecurity is that life itself, for any of us, can be over in an instant.

My mistake was to yearn for a false goal, the measure of its counterfeit being my unhappiness. I shouldn't be looking for security "out there," but "in here." How many times have we heard this in our practice in one form or another? Real security comes from depth of life, not duration. Separating my transient self from my real one was enormously liberating.

With that realization, a black cloud lifted from over my head and moved on. I felt light and happy — and immensely rich. It wasn't that I didn't care that my books hadn't sold, or that I needed more clients for my business. It was that those things didn't matter so much. They didn't dominate me.

As for my writing, I continue to write an ongoing column for the *Los Angeles Times* syndicate, "America on the Road." The *Chicago Tribune* has just asked me to do an interview with actor Tim Matheson of *The West Wing*, as well as write for a new auto section they plan to put out this summer.

For any materialist who might read this, there was another benefit very much in keeping with the line from the Daishonin: "When the body bends, so does the shadow" (WND, 1039).

I had long needed to replace my aging car, but felt for various reasons that I could not. I dreamed of a sports car that would be wonderful to drive and affordable at the same time. No longer plagued by doom and gloom, I took another look at my circumstances, and they were in fact pretty good. Cash flow might be down, but we had accumulated significant savings. My old car would contribute half of the cost of the new car. With a small loan I could actually make the purchase quite easily. Though my circumstances didn't change at all, my perception of them did. I am now the proud owner of an Audi TT. My wife, Sandi, loves it, too.

As I said, I have always loved cars.