

DANIELLE OPYT, CHICAGO
Winning the Struggle With Myself

Your victory is determined by whether you win or lose in the struggle with yourselves, with your own limitations in this battle with the devilish nature of life. — SGI

President Ikeda

Aug. 20, 1990, *World Tribune*

As the youngest child in my family, I was a follower and never developed a strong self-identity. I started failing math in elementary school and began to put myself down. I tried to apply myself, but it was very difficult and I became discouraged, which affected my other classes. The school system labeled me as slow.

I didn't understand the importance of education. I didn't like myself, lost my self-confidence, became depressed and turned my frustration and anger inward. Instead of dealing with these issues, I blocked them out of my reality and dug myself deeper into darkness. I was completely dependent on the environment for solutions to my problems.

I did have a talent for sports and became very involved in athletics, which took me further from academics and reinforced my dependence on the external. Eventually entering a fine arts college, I was determined to apply myself 100 percent to my studies — but the second week my father was killed in a car accident. My life was destroyed. I couldn't break this chain of misfortune and genuine sadness. At 18 I was shocked and scared.

My father left us in such a terrible financial situation we had to sell our house. I had based all my security on my father and that house. Now I felt abandoned, alone and without a home. I wanted to continue college but had to work full time instead. I was angry with myself for wasting time at sports rather than scholastics. I thought if I were smarter I might get a better job, but I did not want all this responsibility. It didn't seem fair. I was miserable and begrudged my life.

Hoping to start over, I moved to Chicago from the suburbs and became a maid at an upscale hotel. I went back to college, paying for it myself. I studied acting, percussion, music and the music business. My dream was to work for Island Records because my favorite band, U2, was on that label.

Around this time I started practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I was terrified to chant at first, and my practice was very inconsistent. There were already enough negative effects in my life, however, and I was ready to make some positive causes. I joined the Fife and Drum Corps to strengthen myself and my practice and especially to develop courage. I worked full time and carried a full class load, keeping very busy, but still not dealing with my issues of responsibility and self-esteem. In 1990, after five years, I finally graduated with a degree in arts, entertainment and media management.

I was exhausted from struggling and didn't know what to do with my life. Finally starting to chant and do gongyo consistently, I quit my job at the hotel and began working as an extra in several major movies being shot in Chicago. I applied for better jobs but was never hired because I had no experience; all the jobs I had held were menial.

Using the experience I had gained during college working for small local record labels and bands, I started my own business booking and promoting local musicians. I now had three part-time, low-paying jobs that barely covered my basic needs. Finally, I took a job as a cashier at a sports store. It was there my human revolution began.

With this job, I was back in the same situation as when my dad had died, except that now

Title: Danielle Opyt: Winning the Struggle With Myself

Subject: World Tribune 02/14/97 n.3126 p.7 WF970214p07

Author: Danielle Opyt

Keywords: Animator Artists Career Danielle Experiences Myself Opyt Struggle Winning

I was 24 and a college graduate. I was embarrassed — my life was going backward. Depression resurfaced and grew deeper. I sat around or slept most of the time. I read President Ikeda's guidance that "Buddhism is the mirror that perfectly reflects our lives" and realized that something deep in my life needed to be resolved.

I heard that U2 was coming to Chicago on their Zoo TV Tour. My excitement and strong desire to connect with the band helped me to never miss gongyo; I chanted for a total of 27 hours. To my surprise, the band walked into the nightclub where I was working part time — right up to me! This encouraged me to challenge my inner life as I saw how I could change my environment with sincere and consistent practice.

At the sports store I got my first promotion and quit two of the part time jobs. I had management responsibilities and was learning accounting and bookkeeping. Again I struggled with math, but this time I was determined to defeat this karma. The more I chanted about defeating the devilish functions in my life, the more my faith deepened and the more my life started moving in a positive direction.

Slowly I developed the courage and wisdom to face issues that had long been buried. I realized that my depression came not from external circumstances but from deep within my life. My consistent practice allowed me to see the negative tendencies in my life and take responsibility for changing them. I began to break out of my depression and self-slander.

I joined the Byakuren to change my negative attitude about work. I learned to think of other people's happiness and get beyond the "poor me" syndrome that weighed me down. I began to feel compassion for others and learned what value-creation was all about.

With my new attitude, I soon met the president of a local record company owned by Island Records and one of his artists, LaTour. I wanted to create value in my personal life and determined to do three things: to go on tour with LaTour; to get a job at the local record company; and to work internationally. Soon after, I became LaTour's road manager for his first U.S. tour!

I worked directly with Island Records in New York and was responsible for the budget, income, expense reports and paying everyone. After a couple of weeks on the road, however, the record company decided not to give us any more financial support. I couldn't believe it.

We were devastated but decided to continue. Now my responsibilities were doubled. Buddhist practice on the road was very difficult, and I often called fellow members for encouragement in faith. I used my practice to become more centered and to develop the confidence I needed to handle this responsibility.

The reason I had always been defeated before was my tendency to base my happiness on the environment. This time, I put the practice first and my worries later. With a strong life condition, I developed self-reliance and confidence. The crowds came, and we completed the tour.

When I returned home, the record company was out of business. For the first time, I was concerned about the people who had lost their jobs rather than myself. When I went back to cashiering, I knew something deep in my life had changed. I had pride and self-respect; I accepted and liked who I was. I was finally ready to take full responsibility for my life and was at peace with myself for the first time.

One day before my 27th birthday, I got a surprising phone call. The former president of the record company offered me a full-time job. I didn't even need to interview. Island's founder was extending one of his European companies into the United States. Manga Entertainment, a film and video company marketing and distributing Japanese animation nationally, would be located in the offices of the old record company in Chicago.

I was hired as the theatrical publicist and fan club director. Our animation studio in

England created and produced the drawings in U2's music video for *Batman Returns*, which won an MTV award for Best European Video. One of our theatrical releases, *Ghost in the Shell*, has a U2 song on the soundtrack.

Through my practice of Buddhism I have reconstructed my inner life. I now have the life and career I was so desperately seeking when my father died. By strengthening my practice, I strengthened my life. I no longer judge my worth by how others see me. I take responsibility for my successes and failures and no longer blame my environment.

I am determined more than ever to develop my intellect and create value in my life. I want to thank President Ikeda for his guidance and all the SGI members for their support in helping me win. I am now taking responsibility as a young women's division group chief and am determined to work with the SGI and President Ikeda to share the joy and truth of practicing this Buddhism.

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