

PERSPECTIVE: The Living Spirit of a Bodhisattva
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ATLANTA

In 1976, I began working in the Atlanta City Jail as an identification clerk. I was about to graduate from college with a degree in criminal justice. Around the same time I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I worked for Atlanta in its Police Department, City Jail and Municipal Courts until 1996.

Prior to the arrival of millions for the 1996 Olympic Games, the Atlanta City Council began enacting new laws aimed at keeping the homeless population away from the downtown area. In addition, the police were becoming increasingly aggressive (there was harassment, intimidation and arrests without probable cause) toward individuals who happened to be homeless. The Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless, a non-profit organization providing services for and protecting the rights of the homeless, strongly opposed the city's shortsighted response to Atlanta's homeless situation.

The task force was determined to challenge these mean-spirited laws and inappropriate police behavior. Unfortunately, due to timing, politics and the sensitivity of this issue, it was difficult to find a local law firm who would agree to take the case. Finally, in March 1996, a Boston law firm agreed to work with the task force on a pro-bono basis to defend the constitutional rights of homeless people.

On June 11, a federal lawsuit was filed by seven homeless men seeking protection from unconstitutional violations of their civil liberties. On July 11, a federal judge held a preliminary injunction hearing in Atlanta. Six days later (and two days before the opening of the Olympics), the judge granted a preliminary injunction against the enforcement of one newly enacted ordinance and parts of another.

In addition, the judge put city officials on notice that the city must immediately cease what appeared to him to be a "disconcerting pattern in which Atlanta police officers have arrested and detained individuals engaged in lawful activity." This resulted in an immediate need for the Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless to hire a local attorney to monitor police activity and coordinate evidence-gathering efforts.

Up to this time, I had never given serious thought to what I could do about making changes to the system. It was not until I was approached by a representative of the Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless about its need for an attorney that I became aware that there were others fighting for the rights of the homeless. I immediately began to think about Nichiren Daishonin and the successive presidents of the Soka Gakkai.

In particular, I was reminded of SGI President Ikeda's many words of encouragement to youth division members about the importance of discerning good from evil and always standing up with courage for the common people. I also thought about the current priesthood situation and just how many times, after studying this issue, that I had encouraged members to challenge corrupt authority and not be satisfied with the status quo.

I felt ashamed for having been so caught up in self-satisfaction and my own security that I had failed to recognize such an important need. In my heart, I had already made up my mind to resign my position as assistant public defender and go to work for the task force.

But I didn't want to make a hasty decision that I would later regret. As the sole provider for my family (I'm married with two children) and with job advancement opportunities with the city, this was not a simple matter. Also, the task force could not guarantee funding for my position after one year.

This, I knew, would be troubling to my wife, Janice. We had just experienced a severe financial setback attempting to open a day care center. To my surprise, Janice gave me her

unconditional support. It seems that all of the human revolution (and daimoku and dialogue) we experienced in our failed attempt was now serving as a new, stronger foundation of communication and unity between us. I felt that she clearly understood that this was more than a job decision — it was an opportunity to fulfill our missions as Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

After chanting daimoku, talking with family and friends and receiving guidance in faith, I found the courage to make a confident decision. I began working for the Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless on Jan. 2.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once stated that “we have to be careful when we talk about love and compassion, because it is so easy to love everyone in general but to love no one specifically.” In observing the humble and tireless efforts of so many who work so hard to address the specific needs of each homeless individual, I have come to understand the living spirit of a bodhisattva.

In getting to know homeless people as individuals, I have learned more about myself and others. I no longer leave my work at the job when I go home. My job is now my life and I am determined and totally confident that I can, in this lifetime, deeply respect the inherent dignity of all people’s lives, regardless of their race, religion or personal circumstances.

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