

## **'Happy To Be Me'** **By Mary Zir**

I was born in Rockland County Psychiatric Hospital, where my mother had been a patient for seven years. I was immediately taken from her; I never saw her face or heard her voice. From there, I was placed in an orphanage where I languished for three months. I was the only one of my parents' seven children who was given up like this.

Then my foster mother came into my life and literally rescued me from the jaws of death, as I had been simply wasting away from lack of caring. My foster mother provided a wonderful home physically, but I was always haunted by the feeling of being the only one left out of the family, who wasn't wanted, who belonged to no one.

As a girl growing up in the '50s, I saw that all the women around me — my foster mother, my relatives, the neighbors — were broken somehow: old before their time, disappointed, bitter, sad. Everything I knew about my natural mother's life told me the same was true of her. She was a beautiful woman severely marred by a car crash in her 30s. Feeling that her only worth lay in her looks, she became depressed and succumbed to alcohol abuse and eventually schizophrenia.

My foster mother underwent a breakdown at the time of her menopause. Feeling that her entire worth lay in her ability to bear children, she became depressed. She stopped washing, acted strangely and lost all her previous joy. My foster mother's despair filled the house. It was as if a sustained but silent wail were cleaving the air and clinging to the walls. This happened when I was becoming a woman.

By the time I was in my teens, I could barely tolerate being embodied in a female form. It was as if I were trapped and wanted to claw my way out of my skin. Just being alive was pure hell. I attempted suicide twice before I was 20.

But somehow, something kept hope alive, and I clung to the dream that one day I would be free and proud and happy to be a woman.

Then, in 1982, I joined the SGI and began practicing. For the first time, I saw hundreds of women who were free, proud, ageless — simply beautiful. By practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with people who supported me, I attained a measure of happiness and self-love I never thought possible. Yet, I have to say, there was still some self-loathing left. I was not 100 percent comfortable in the core of my being.

In 1995, pain started to blossom out of nowhere, centering in my bladder. The doctor treated me for an ordinary bladder infection. I remember the mounting disappointment as each day passed and I waited for the relief I needed so badly, but it did not come. It was as if a red hot needle were being plunged into my bladder, like a very bad toothache. The rest of my pelvic area had a duller, warmer kind of pain radiating all around. I felt as if I had to urinate all the time. My body was in a constant state of alarm and agitation.

When the first doctor could not help, my husband, Stan, and I went to another and another. I didn't talk much about the state I was in to others — it was my karma and I simply had to change, so I continued to do activities, confident that I'd overcome this.

After the first couple of months, I learned to push the pain aside and ignore it while I was doing an activity, but when I got home, I would collapse. During this time, I could not work, so our financial situation was sorely distressed as well.

Often, I wanted to give up. When I ask myself how and why someone like me, who is basically selfish and likes to take the path of least resistance, was able to go on, I know it is because the members had opened their lives to me; they trusted me. Together we shared a dream of a beautiful country, a beautiful Queens. I believe Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism

is the only hope for the planet; from this, everything else can blossom. As SGI President Ikeda says, those with a dream are strong.

One day last summer, the condition flared up with savage force. It had been almost one-and-a-half years since the pain began. Four doctors had not been able to help. I had struggled and now it had gotten worse. My nerves were shot. I'd reached the end of my endurance and was exhausted by the struggle. The constant barrage had worn down my resistance and my confidence that I could win.

When my husband came home that night, he found me curled in a ball, crying pathetically. I told him: "Stan, I can't do this anymore. I can't go on."

"That's it," he said. "You've gone as far as you can go with this thing. You've made every good cause you can make. Now you have to rest."

President Ikeda had just given compassionate guidance about moving together as a flock of geese rather than a herd of buffalo. He said that when geese fly together, they fly in formation, and that when the lead goose becomes tired or sick, it falls back into formation until it recovers. He said this is the way we should proceed.

With this guidance in mind, I decided that I had to step back, had to try complete rest. I did the only thing I felt I could do in that situation: I took a leave of absence, letting my co-leaders know the situation.

There was one last medical hope; a doctor who claimed he had a cure for the symptoms I had. But when I saw him, at first he offered only pain killers.

I took the pain killers, which knocked me out completely. One day, two weeks later, I woke up in the middle of the afternoon. The house was a mess; I hadn't cooked or shopped or cleaned. Because of the medication, I hadn't chanted much either. I had absolutely no energy and, worst of all, beneath the haze of the medicine, the pain was still there. That was when I became totally frightened and depressed. I was all alone. I thought: What kind of life is that? What do I have to look forward to? A life of pain? A life as an invalid, dependent on my husband?

I couldn't think of a single reason to live. There was no life ahead of me that I could believe in. I felt, what good is chanting? I've chanted for 15 years, always on the front lines, and what good has it done? I always end up, somehow, at the place I started from, the feeling that life is worthless, not worth living. I had no joy, no desire, no will to live.

This was probably my most fortunate moment: By working for world peace in spite of discomfort, I'd built the fortune and courage to finally face my own demon squarely — the demon of self-hatred, of plain, simple, irrational despair.

Though I didn't feel like chanting and had no hope in it, there was nothing else to do. After a little while of a sort of automatic chanting, I began to really, urgently, directly connect to Nichiren Daishonin. And I searched desperately to see what it was in my life that was causing me so much agony — not just the physical symptoms, but what was deep in my life that was causing this effect.

The very next day, out of the blue, my friend gave me a book called *Woman's Bodies, Woman's Wisdom*. It explained that symptoms can be cured without healing the underlying problem. What was needed was healing. This was exactly in line with Buddhism and with my own intuition.

The author maintained that negative thought patterns, leftover energy from destructive experiences, can actually end up as physical symptoms. She gave practical exercises to uncover and then let go of negative emotions or beliefs.

In the weeks that followed, with my newly respected woman's intuition, I cloistered myself. The book became, along with daimoku, my guide, a way out of the darkness. Very soon, I didn't even think about pain killers. I was experiencing the gradual return of my

Title: Happy to Be Me

Subject: World Tribune 04/18/97 n.3135 p.7 WT970418p07

Author: Mary Zir

Keywords: Experiences Happy Health Illness Mental

health, and it was an awesome process: the miracle of healing, the miracle of life.

Emotionally, I had faced and let go completely of all the self-hatred I had on account of being a woman, all the self-slander. And I felt good but not yet 100 percent. I was not only determined to regain my health but my vigor.

I realized I had allowed myself to become distracted from the most fundamental issue we face: the disruption of the unity of believers by a man named Nikken. I had become passive, allowing others to do the work of protecting the Law. So I began chanting once again for the absolute protection of the purity of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and for slander to be washed out of our country, our borough, our neighborhood.

Within the first hour of praying this way, all the pain disappeared. In the days that followed, it flared up a bit, but each time I defeated it by chanting with more vigor and more sincerity for the protection of the Law.

I have been absolutely free of all pain and all symptoms since the first week of October last year. I can hardly express the joy I feel. Sometimes, just being able to walk down the block without pain brings tears to my eyes. I recall President Toda's words: "Absolute happiness means that just being alive itself is a joy."

I have been working full-time, and I have returned to activities for kosen-rufu. Our finances are getting healthier, and we made a good financial donation to the SGI. But the best thing for me is that I have been freed from the suffering I carried all my life: self-hatred. Now, I feel so happy to be me! Wonderful, wonderful me!

President Ikeda says the 21st century will be the century of women. I think we have a long way to go before we even begin to know what *woman* is, and it is something far different from merely being a very good imitation of a man. How marvelous our organization and the world will be when we really begin to honor and celebrate the feminine side of life.

**WT**