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**'Life Is the Most Precious Treasure'**

I was very surprised and impressed by the people I met at my first Buddhist meeting — a mixed, integrated crowd of confident, friendly people, very united. I decided right then and there to receive the Gohonzon. That was 10 years ago.

I jumped into young women's division activities like Drill Dance and often traveled early in the morning from Staten Island into Manhattan for activities.

I met Festus at college, where I studied social work, and we married soon after graduation. It was a happy time for me: I had a good job in my field and knew my life had grown markedly with the Gohonzon.

My husband was in the military, and we soon transferred to Kansas, where I felt uprooted and lonely. I had trouble with military life and this unfamiliar environment.

Soon, my new marriage was clouded by my uneasiness and negativity. I resented leaving a good job in New York. I felt like a misfit in the military compound. The only job I could get was custodial work, an insult after I had worked so hard to earn my way through college.

Festus, who does not chant, was very patient, kind and supportive, and I then felt a lot of compassion and guilt. I got guidance often and was told to chant to appreciate and support him. That was a turning point in my practice.

I chanted earnestly to make the best of things in Kansas. I got up at 6:00 a.m. every day to sit in front of the Gohonzon. Little by little, things began to feel better. I was learning about both the stand-alone spirit and how to be a good wife — that is, how to really commit to my marriage. It was the crucial foundation for my family life, which made it possible for me to survive what was to come.

After six years, Festus decided military life was not right for him anymore. We came back to New York in high spirits. I returned to my same old Manhattan district with a great sense of reunion. Two weeks later, I found a good job again as a social worker.

Then, almost a year later, I was pregnant. I was confused and downhearted — this was completely unplanned. Festus and I discussed abortion because we did not feel ready.

I chanted a lot about my decision, and gradually came to feel that this might be my only opportunity to have a child. I developed courage through my daimoku and decided to have the baby.

Five months into the pregnancy, complications with my pregnancy began. My life began to revolve around the many doctor visits — the waiting, the bouts of illness and the uneasy feelings. I chanted mornings, evenings and in between, shuttling back and forth on my daily three-hour commute to work, exhausted.

In mid-August '95, I started having severe back pain. Doctors prescribed total bed rest for a week, and I used the time to chant for my baby. Two days after returning to work, I felt a sudden need to go to the community center to do an extra-powerful evening gongyo. Just as I returned home after that special gongyo, contractions began.

My husband rushed me to the doctor, who told us I was having a miscarriage. Festus passed out on hearing this — I remained calm and helped him. When he revived, I was sent directly to the hospital.

Daimoku had made me calm. I was still leaking fluid and, of course, very troubled, but I felt protected and was not really in pain. I continued chanting — what else was there to do? I would not lose control. I would fight for the baby.

At the hospital, I remained in an elevated, stretched-out position for hours, chanting

upside down. Festus stayed up all night with me. The next day, I was still upside down and leaking and now on antibiotics. We had averted the miscarriage, but the baby was still in grave danger. I had to stay in the hospital with strict and absolute bed rest, unmoving, for weeks. I felt paralyzed. I had to face my whole life. I cried often, worried for the baby's life.

To make matters worse, my kindly Dr. Herzog was getting pressured by the hospital administration, who apparently saw no point to his efforts for my baby. At five months, they felt, my baby could in no way survive. It was not worth this extraordinary effort to keep going.

After all I had done to reach my decision not to abort, and then to fight for my baby's survival, now they wanted to force me to abort after all.

But I had the Gohonzon, and my determination grew so fiercely that it communicated itself to my doctor. He became equally determined to do whatever it took to save the baby's life.

Dr. Herzog decided to transfer me to another hospital, in spite of the risks, where they would be more likely to fight for my baby's life. A mere two hours after the transfer, my water bag finally broke for good. I was terrified, but I kept chanting. I asked my doctor finally, "Am I losing the baby?"

He said, sadly: "Yes, Cathy, you are. But I know you tried."

That whole night, I was in a terrible, hopeless labor. All this agony to give birth to a dead fetus. I was concerned for Festus and did not want him near me in the delivery room to see the dead child being born. But my husband insisted on being with me no matter what. He would face anything now.

Everyone kept telling me how sorry they were that the baby had died, after all my efforts. There was no movement or sound, and the fluid was disgusting. I cried a little, but overall began to feel peace and acceptance and kept chanting through the labor pains.

Dawn came as the labor approached 14 hours. A bit later, something possessed my dear Dr. Herzog to put the fetal monitor back on me "just for the heck of it."

Lo and behold, there came a strong little heartbeat! "THIS CHILD IS STILL ALIVE!" the doctor cried. Everyone around me sprang into action. I was weak; my fever and blood pressure were still climbing. The baby had to be gotten out quickly to save my life as well.

Because of other complications, they opted for a regular delivery, not a Cesarean. I was in a lot of pain and so worried about the baby's condition. Could it possibly live?

When my little girl was born, she was perfectly intact, but she was very small, incredibly small — smaller than a can of soda, less than one pound.

The Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit sent an emergency team of specialists. I asked a passing doctor, "What will happen to my baby?"

"I really don't know," he said. "She's only at 23 weeks, so it looks doubtful...." And then they whisked the little bundle away and wheeled me out in a daze.

I named her Faith. Members visited me in the hospital and called me on the phone, telling me over and over to have strong faith — there wasn't a more appropriate name for my little precious one.

The NICU director told me that babies like Faith have only a 1 percent chance of survival. I determined 100 percent that my baby would be in that impossible 1 percent. Daimoku gave me strength and courage.

There were nonstop ordeals for a child born 17 weeks ahead of nature's timetable. The hard part for me was that, after all this, I could not hold my baby because of her extreme vulnerability to germs. I could only occasionally poke my sterilized finger through a little hole and whisper daimoku.

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My little girl was screaming and suffering, straight jacketed with tubes from head to toe, pumped with fluids and medications, and deprived of human touch and play. Every week brought new life-threatening, heart-stopping scares. She needed all the daimoku that could surround her. Members were sending it from everywhere, I knew.

Festus was working two jobs and totally supported us. He drove me to the hospital whenever he wasn't squeezing in extra shifts to pay for everything. When he was working, I would journey for hours every night to see Faith, with knots in my stomach, not knowing what to expect, facing her endless series of illnesses and infections. Each time, it was life or death.

“WAIT and SEE and PRAY” was my motto for six long, agonizing months. Slowly, she gained a few ounces — two pounds, then three. Finally, one day, incredibly, the doctors said that she could come home. She had survived. Faith was a proud member of that 1 percent.

Faith turned out to be the earliest, tiniest, most premature baby ever to survive in Staten Island. Because of her, I showed everyone the power of this practice.

This experience changed the way I view life and challenges. A New York newspaper even ran an article about how I “kept the faith” and about the little wonder baby who survived incredible odds.

Faith is now 20 months old and going strong. She has more energy than I do, sometimes. She celebrated her first birthday last fall, happy and healthy and surrounded by friends, children, well-wishers, members and a birthday clown. There are many challenges in everyday life for our family, including financial and health struggles, but we're doing great.

Because of my experience giving birth to Faith, I reawakened my lifelong dream to care for others. This fall, I will begin to study nursing! In this way, I can give back some of the wonderful care I received when I most needed it.

I read Nichiren Daishonin's Goshō “Reply to Kyo'o” with new understanding now. I take special comfort in knowing it was written to encourage another struggling mother of a baby fighting for her young life: “A sword will be useless in the hands of a coward. The mighty sword of the Lotus Sutra must be wielded by one courageous in faith.” Another passage that touches me is from “The Gift of Rice”: “Life itself is the most precious of all treasures. Even the treasures of the entire universe cannot equal the value of a single human life.”

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