

BROOKE BUNDY, LOS ANGELES
Fighting Against Death

When SGI President Ikeda was in the United States last June, one of his messages was to chant for our personal happiness. I set out on a journey to do just that with no preconceived strategy — just to focus on becoming absolutely happy. I was determined to be happy, whatever that meant. I just trusted my life, my Buddha wisdom and the Gohonzon.

But I never had a clue that learning to live would bring me so close to death. After all, I had never been seriously ill, let alone hospitalized.

My odyssey began in the most auspicious of places, the bathroom. In fact, the bathroom floor. That was July 21, 1996. I lay on the floor in unbelievable pain, more pain than I'd ever known before (and I have experienced a lot).

It wasn't the first time I'd been there, but it was certainly the worst. Why was I there again? Why was I still accepting this as OK? Ever since I was a teenager, I've had to take laxatives; I was virtually imprisoned by constipation. It was so embarrassing that I avoided, among other things, intimate relationships. But it was just a part of my life that I accepted. I was in denial that it was a real problem.

This time, however, I couldn't move. I couldn't get to a phone. All I could do was travel in and out of delirium, sometimes muttering: "Help! Help!"

Throughout that day and what was to follow, I never questioned the Gohonzon, but there was one semi-delirious moment when I questioned my practice. Maybe if I prayed to God, I thought in confusion, the pain would stop. No! No! I immediately recalled Nichiren Daishonin's words in "The Opening of the Eyes": "Foolish men are likely to forget the promises they have made when the crucial moment comes" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 180). Eventually I managed to crawl back into my bed and somehow fall asleep.

The next morning, still in excruciating pain, my mind was clear and focused. A voice deep inside of me said: "You have acute peritonitis and you have 20 minutes to save your life. Get to the wall phone in the kitchen. You must stand up. Don't lie down. Call 911. NOW." I did not doubt the wisdom of that voice. My colon had ruptured.

I crawled to the kitchen phone and called 911. When the dispatcher asked where I lived, I didn't know (the bacteria in my body had already muddled my mind). I knew enough to stay on the line so she could read my address off her screen, then I passed out.

How did I know that I was dying of acute peritonitis? After all, it's not often that I get a clear, accurate self-diagnosis in a burst of cosmic insight. But I remembered that, 26 years ago, a dear friend had almost died from peritonitis when her appendix ruptured. She is a physician and explained to me in great detail this medical emergency. I had forgotten it all until this crucial moment.

The paramedics arrived within minutes. My neighbors saw all the commotion and helped break into my house (my dog would not allow anyone else). I remember thinking, "Oh, good, they're here."

And I went into cardiac arrest. Flatlined. Died. Right there on my kitchen floor.

People say they've seen a light, among other things, when this occurred. I didn't. I just heard voices whispering seductively: "Come on, let go. It's not a big deal. You're in so much pain. It'll be over if you just let go. You'll be back. Come on."

I felt that if I left my body, though, I'd never come back. I fought to hold on to my body and thought: "No, I can't die. My daughter needs me. And the members would be so discouraged."

So I screamed in my mind, “No, motherf—!” It’s not a word I’ve used often, but that’s how angry and adamant I was. I was determined to live.

The paramedics defibrillated me and revived me. But on the way to the ambulance, I flatlined again. The whole process was repeated, voices and all. Only this time, I was really mad and fought even harder to live.

I continued fighting at the hospital. I kicked and flailed against the doctors and nurses trying to help me, who kept saying, “We’re losing her, we’re losing her.” Finally, one of the nurses said: “She’s a fighter. I know how to deal with fighters.” I was so happy to hear this, even though it meant they put me in restraints.

Basically, I was in a major bacterial crisis. My immune system was overloaded and beginning to fight (there’s that word again). It was fighting everything — including the antibiotics.

Here’s where my fortune from 10 years of practice kicked in. My trauma team consisted of two super-specialists in immunity and their nurse, who suggested I might be a candidate for a new drug that allows the immune system to accept antibiotics and other life-saving medicines. I became part of a double-blind study to test the drug’s efficacy.

My daughter and her husband, who had rushed from Seattle, signed release forms for me to take part in this study. Apparently, constipation was only part, perhaps even a small part, of this whole episode. A large part of it was stress. When blood had not reached my colon, it had, in a sense, broken down and died.

They prepared me for surgery. Later, I found out the doctor told my daughter that I would probably not survive it. All I know is that I came through and the doctors were thrilled and surprised that I did. (To this day, I don’t know if I was given the experimental drug or perhaps a placebo. I won’t know for another year.)

The surgeon told my daughter that he had done all he could and had removed 80 percent of my colon. The operation, he said, was a success. I would have two ileostomy bags attached to my small and large intestines, which were now protruding from my abdomen. I would need a second operation, he added, to re-attach my intestines and what was left of my colon.

At one point during my two-week stay in the hospital, doctors wanted to give me an angiogram. I was so scared, I was shaking. But there were two members visiting me and one of them said simply, “Gongyo.” I don’t know how she got gongyo out of me, but it was the turning point. The results of the angiogram were fine.

Even through the pain, the death experiences, barely being able to think or recognize faces, I knew that this episode was an answer to my prayer to become absolutely happy. I felt hope and had no doubt. I knew I’d be all right. I had so much confidence in the Gohonzon. All the doctors commented on my high life condition during my stay.

Friends came day and night to chant with me. I felt the power of their prayers. One member, who hadn’t chanted for awhile, started chanting again for me. She said, with a big smile, “Look what you made me do, you little snot.” My neighbor (one who had helped the paramedics break into my apartment) chanted in the hospital with me and later came to a discussion meeting.

I made a determination to leave the hospital by Aug. 5 with one ileostomy bag. I did. I was required to stay at home for another month. My boss kept me on salary for the entire six weeks.

Members cleaned my house until it sparkled. They even pulled up the carpet, which I had been trying to do for weeks. They not only brought food and made dinner for me, but every night for two weeks one of them would curl up on my couch to make sure I was not alone at night.

I returned to work on Sept. 2. My high life condition had contributed to my speedy recovery. I was even able to do AIDS Walk Los Angeles.

I had started my job only the previous February and entirely out of the blue. I had been a children's agent and suddenly found myself in one of the most prestigious agencies in America, handling major adult stars. I kept wondering: "Why am I here? How did I get here?"

Before this, I had no health insurance, but that was OK — after all, I was always healthy and had no reason to expect any change. Two months before my crisis, I received health coverage through this new job. Could that be why I was there?

I think it was, because I was unexpectedly terminated in late November. This didn't bother me as much as the possibility of losing my health coverage before my second surgery, scheduled for Dec. 2.

I chanted furiously to change whatever I needed to inside myself so I could reach my boss' Buddha nature. As a result, my boss arranged several weeks of severance pay, which meant my health coverage would remain in effect through December.

On top of this, my surgeon, not part of the insurance company's network, volunteered to perform the surgery for free. All I could think was, "What protection." It was amazing.

The second surgery was a complete success. I left the hospital with no ileostomy bag.

My health is great again. I feel free, grateful and so happy to be alive. Both of my parents died in their 50s, so I feel that I've broken through a deep family karma.

I never thought I could exhibit the kind of courage and unshakable faith that I had only heard about, but now I know it's possible. I never felt any doubt, never thought "Poor me." This alone is so amazing and encouraging to me. I have gained an appreciation for life, especially for the lives of others — and the quickness with which it can be gone. I cherish my relationships with family and friends and my connections with others.

And I have also learned that Buddhism is reality, not denial. My determination is not to co-exist with denial anymore.

It will be hard, but not as cold and hard as the bathroom floor.

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