

ELIZABETH AND JIM HILGENDORF, LOS ANGELES After 25 Years —A Fresh Start

ELIZABETH: On Nov. 8, 1996, Jim and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary. We decided to continue to celebrate until Jan. 7, 1998, the 25th anniversary of our practicing Buddhism together. We'd like to share what happened during this time.

JIM: First, I'd like to talk about our marriage. We met in Boulder, Colo. I was a hippie with a beard and love beads, and I was working in a broom factory. About two years earlier, I had gone through a very painful divorce and had left Chicago. When Elizabeth and I first met, we had almost nothing in common. Looking back, it seems strange that we married. We came to Los Angeles in December 1972, and within a few weeks we were both practicing this Buddhism.

About four years later, we separated and lived apart for exactly one year, then got back together again. At that time, I remember feeling strongly that something still had not really changed in our relationship.

The years passed. We lived together, had good times and bad, and practiced Buddhism hard. I think at that time we would both have said we had a happy marriage, but there was always something else there. That something else — my karma — came to a head about eight or nine years ago. I went absolutely crazy and wanted a divorce.

We went for guidance several times, and I literally screamed and yelled, demanding a divorce. The leader was very strict with me and yet warmly took time from his busy schedule to stay close to me for about six months, during which time he kept encouraging me to chant through the situation, and that it would change — although I was telling him it would not.

Elizabeth was a bulwark of strength and faith, chanting tons of daimoku and utterly determined to win. Without her, I would not be here to tell you that gradually the karma did melt down and change. From that turning point, our real marriage has continued to this day to blossom and unfold into something extraordinary. We're still very different people, but we have something between us that is as strong and brilliant as a polished diamond.

This year, we celebrated our marriage with a trip to England and Scotland, ending up with a week in Paris. Also this fall, we realized another dream when we spent a week together at the height of the fall foliage in New England.

ELIZABETH: I graduated from high school in 1963. It seems as if I needed to spend the next 34 years working out the problems that kept me from getting a college degree.

After high school, I entered a four-year women's college in Missouri, where I studied for two-and-a-half years until my sister died of cancer. Exhausted and emotionally spent from this family tragedy and my own lack of direction, I dropped out of school.

From 1966 to 1971, I attended one year at the University of Colorado as an English major and got all D's and F's, did a few drugs, got on the dean's academic suspension list — and met Jim.

When I first saw Jim, I immediately felt a very strong connection to him. We later discovered that we lived in the same boarding house, his room adjacent to mine.

After coming to California, I attended Santa Monica College, off and on, for several years. In the spring of 1979, I made a determination to go back to school full time to major in pre-physical therapy at California State University Northridge, but I couldn't handle the physics. And I found out that I didn't really like physical therapy. By this time, I had accumulated 114 units of college credits.

From 1980 to 1995, I worked at various sales jobs, one of them with a Fortune 200 company as an account executive, a job I had campaigned hard in terms of my Buddhist practice to get.

To my dismay, I got what I chanted for, then found that it wasn't what I wanted.

What I really wanted was to fill the hole in myself of not having completed my degree.

On May 29, 1997, I graduated from Cal State Northridge with a bachelor's degree in family consumer sciences and a minor in journalism. I was on the dean's honor list for the last three semesters and enjoyed the learning process and the school environment for the first time.

JIM: When I began practicing Buddhism, I made a list of all the jobs I'd had — about 75 jobs.

I secretly dreamed of making films. It seemed so ridiculous that I didn't even talk to anyone about it. I never had any training or experience in filmmaking. It wasn't until about six years ago that I decided to go for it.

My brother and I grew up in Indiana, and one day I said to him, "Let's make a beautiful film on Indiana."

I bought a video camera and began shooting and learning. During 1991, I traveled 10,000 miles around my home state, often living out of a car. I learned filming, editing and scripting. I composed the music. My brother and I ended the year with a one-hour film called *Indiana: A Tribute*, which included history, music and interviews with people, all in a very positive light. The film was reviewed in 26 newspapers throughout the state, and is now shown in almost all the schools in Indiana. We also sold a lot of tapes through the mail.

With the profits, we went to St. Petersburg, Russia, and made a 50-minute film on that city, *St. Petersburg: A Tribute*, which the president of the Los Angeles–St. Petersburg sister-city association called the most beautiful film on the city he had ever seen. We also made a film on Los Angeles. In October 1993, Elizabeth and I went to St. Petersburg and, through a remarkable series of events, these two films were shown back-to-back all over Russia to about 80 million TV viewers as part of a friendship exchange between the two cities.

In 1997, my brother and I completed the taping of three more films — one on Mexico, one on New England and one on California. My goal is to use these films in schools and on television to build bridges of understanding and friendship among different peoples and countries.

ELIZABETH: I remember dreaming of a husband and a home — a home of our own — from the time I was a very young girl.

Jim and I have rented apartments galore over the last 24 years. We even lived in a 1969 Chevy pickup truck for a month because we had no money. Jim and I never quite felt we had a home or a place in a community other than the SGI.

This summer, I told Jim I finally felt that Los Angeles was our home, and I started looking for a house to buy. In October I saw a house that met all the criteria I had been chanting for: a fireplace, lots of good lighting, a flower and vegetable garden, hardwood floors, a nice kitchen and a large Gohonzon room. Jim and I moved into our dream house on Nov. 21.

There is a community feeling in the neighborhood of Westdale where our house is. I feel the SGI-USA's neighborhood reorganization parallels the reorganization going on in my personal life. There is a good feeling of being part of a community of friends in the SGI-USA as well as in the community where we now live.

Looking back at the ups and downs of our life together, I can see how all our Buddhist activities plus guidance and encouragement from fellow Buddhists allowed us to make the causes to change ourselves and keep on track to win in our lives and in our marriage.

Both Jim and I have big dreams for the future, and this is only the beginning.

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