

PERSPECTIVE: You Only Have To Be Human
By FLETCHER DALTON
Boston

To an audience observing Martin Luther King Day in a suburb of Boston, a 15-year-old revealed a long-kept secret: that she has been HIV-positive for 14 years.

“As a person who is HIV-positive,” Elizabeth Kaplan said, “I believe in equality for all people. Like Mary Fisher [who roused the 1992 Republican National Convention with a similar declaration], you would probably never expect me to have the virus. I am not gay or a drug addict. It just happened, the way people who are black were just born black.

“You only have to be human to be part of a minority — you only have to be human to get AIDS,” she said.

As Buddhists, we can relate to this Newton North High School student’s observation. We have learned through our years of practice that simply by being human we may fall prey to or be seriously affected by the many obstacles presented to us by the four sufferings: birth, old age, sickness, and death.

The factors of how, when and where the suffering originates almost don’t matter (in Elizabeth Kaplan’s case, it was infected blood from a transfusion). But the lessons we learn, how we move ahead, and how we encourage others make all the difference.

Perhaps this is what makes us human.

In some sports, there is the concept of a handicap. One dictionary describes the term as “a race or contest in which advantages or compensations are given different contestants, according to their varied abilities or experience, to equalize the chance of winning.”

When I visit the Florida Nature and Culture Center, I see all these happy people, apparently without a care in the world. However, upon getting to know them, the entire Pandora’s box of human sufferings bursts open and revelations of all kinds are made.

It is obvious there, as elsewhere, that because we have brought the Gohonzon into the center of our lives, our chances of winning are equalized. SGI President Ikeda has written: “There is no such thing as a life without trials and tribulations. A life without obstacles is a weak one. One cannot depend on someone who has not had to overcome difficulties. A person becomes stronger and grows by persevering through adverse circumstances.”

Like Elizabeth Kaplan and Dr. King, whose life she was celebrating, we can become longtime survivors of life’s problems, dilemmas, trials, pains and limitations and simultaneously encourage others. Isn’t this one aspect of our practice that gives us credibility as Buddhists, individually and collectively?

We needn’t withhold information of our personal suffering for years and years. By acknowledging our own humanity and that of each member of our diverse organization, and by reaching out to share encouragement with one another as we go along, we will equalize our chances of winning and accelerate the arrival of kosen-rufu.

President Ikeda writes: “Nichiren Daishonin’s is the Buddhism that benefits all living beings equally. It is therefore the highest of all philosophies, one that truly inspires people with a love for human beings. Now the circle of friends who embrace, study and practice this Buddhism is spreading across the world. Thus we may say that the Soka Gakkai is playing a major international role in promoting the peace of the world.”

Saying it another way, we only have to be human to experience suffering, but by being truly human we can guarantee the peace of our world.

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