

Donna Pomarico, Sacramento, Calif.
A Constant Reminder of My Vow

It happened one sunny, lazy autumn day in 1995. I was in a terrific mood: I had just received a nice raise at work, my bills were all paid, and the San Francisco 49ers won their game. Things were going my way.

My 24-year-old son and I drove to the Mom and Pop store in our neighborhood to get something for dinner. As we parked the car, we saw an altercation. The owner of the store was accusing some youths of stealing liquor. I recognized them as gang members living in my neighborhood, who had recently beaten up a woman about my age, stolen \$10 from her and left her to bleed in this very parking lot.

The gang members, who were African American, were shouting obscenities and racial slurs at the owner, who had emigrated with his family from China. I could tell that they were pretty well inebriated as well as high on drugs.

The family who owned the store had been good to me since I moved into the area. I treasured this relationship. Friendly and open people, they trusted me enough to cash my two-party, out-of-state checks.

Wanting to return their kindness by doing something to help them, my son and I bolted from the car. One of the gang members raised his hand at the owner and shouted that he would kill him and everyone in his family. From our position, it looked like he had a gun in his hand. My son yelled out: "Hey! What are you doing?" The man lowered his hand, and we realized that the object he was holding wasn't a gun. The entire group turned its rage on us, yelling obscenities and racial slurs. One of them threw a rock. I grabbed my son and the owner and took them into the store, thinking that would be the end of it.

But when my son and I left the store later, they jumped us. By the time their physical attack was over, we had been beaten unconscious. My son's nose was broken and one of his ribs cracked. My facial bones were shattered.

Throughout this horrendous beating, no one helped us, not even the owner. He wouldn't call the police or the ambulance. He later said that he didn't want to get involved. So I was left in the parking lot, unconscious and bleeding. Other witnesses called the police from a pay phone. But when questioned by the police, they refused to involve themselves further. I was hospitalized for several days with a concussion and excessive bleeding in my nasal cavity.

In the hospital and after my discharge, I felt nothing but rage and wanted revenge. I fantasized constantly about how I would kill these animals that did such a ruthless thing. I fantasized about going down the road with an Uzi and shooting everyone who looked like a gang member. I fantasized about putting plastic explosives on a known crack house in my neighborhood and blowing it sky-high. I sat in my house and just let this evil take root.

My SGI leaders all came to visit me in the hospital, as well as at home. But I could not, would not, hear anything they said. I even shouted at my women's division chapter leader that I didn't have time for her. I just didn't want to hear how I had "attracted" this situation to my life or how it was all "my karma." I became bitter. I stopped chanting. I could not face the Gohonzon with this rage inside.

This period of time was particularly hard on me because I never considered myself a prejudiced person. I grew up in a Navy village, where everyone was of such mixed origins that the local people often called us Navy mutts.

When I entered high school during the turbulent 1950s, I caused quite a bit of controversy for being friends with the African American children I had grown up with. I

never gave up my childhood friends in spite of being victimized by white children who called me names and once beat me up in the girls bathroom at school.

Now my heart was full of hate, and so I became mentally confused. I knew that this wasn't just the natural emotional aftermath of an outrageous attack nor because I had had some bleeding in my brain. I was fully aware of raging against all African American gangsters, based solely on their skin color.

A lifetime of experience with living in harmonious interracial communities, priding myself on not being a prejudiced person, having a beloved best friend in faith who is African American — all that just melted away. I couldn't rationalize nor justify this new hatred, but I couldn't stop it, either.

My mental confusion deepened, until I became a recluse. About that same time, a sheriff's detective showed me some mug shots. I thought I had definitely found my attacker, and the youth whom I identified was arrested the next day.

Seeing that youth's mug shot triggered something within. I found myself curious about him. I asked how old he was. He was 17. Shocked, I asked about his parents. They were incarcerated, I was told.

The tragedy of his life experience filtered through my awful life-condition. Subconsciously, immediately, I was picturing him as a little boy being dressed up by a relative or a friend to be taken to a prison visiting room, where he would learn how to hate. And I cried while visualizing this scene.

Here was a human life, so full of potential if he had had the right beginning. Instead, his future was coldly stomped out by the hatred his parents passed on. He would never know the fun of a school dance or graduation day or the joy of accomplishment as he landed his first job. He would only know the sound of prison doors shutting behind him. There was no future or hope in his brief 17 years of life.

I turned to my Gohonzon for the first time in four months and cried while I sincerely chanted for him, for his parents and for everyone in his shoes.

Some time later, I was told that the teen whom I had identified was not the one who hit me; he was in juvenile hall when my assault took place. But by that time, I was beginning to feel true compassion and understanding. I liked feeling this way. And knowing that my assailant was probably still on the streets didn't change my feeling.

I slowly began to release not just my anger but also my hate. I could chant again! And over the next six months, I could feel myself returning to normal. I knew that I had at last controlled my anger.

It was then that my transformation really began. I began to deal with racism and stereotyping in my life. I understood how my attitude of being a member of the so-called superior race affected my relationships with people of other races. I vowed to recognize my thoughts and feelings when they arose — and to stop them.

It has been almost three years since this incident, and a lot of things have changed in my life. I have learned to truly recognize injustice both inside and outside SGI, and why many members say, "If SGI-USA can't overcome racism, no one can." Through open dialogue with my beloved best friend and because of her courage, I am getting stronger about helping other members recognize their racist thoughts and comments, however unintended.

In President Ikeda's poem, "The Sun of *Jiyu* Over a New Land," he writes:

*Seek out the primordial "roots" of humankind.
Then you will without fail discover
The stately expanse of Jiyu
Unfolding in the depths of your lives.*

Title: A Constant Reminder of My Vow

Subject: World Tribune 09/18/98 n.3209 p.16 WT980918p16 Sacramento, California

Author: Donna Pomarico

Keywords: California Constant Discrimination Diversity Experiences Prejudice Racism Reminder
Sacramento Worldview

This is the life-condition I strive to attain. The transforming aspect of my experience was compassion welling forth for my assailant. It felt exactly like “the stately expanse of *Jiyu*” unfolding in my life. This is the life-condition I wish for all SGI members — and eventually all humankind.

I sincerely believe that this is the greatest practice of all, and that, together, we in the SGI can and will make a difference. This experience has shown me absolute proof of that.

The scar that runs between my eyes and down the bridge of my nose is a constant reminder of my vow to achieve world peace.

— *as told to Donna Parten*

Title: A Constant Reminder of My Vow
Subject: World Tribune 09/18/98 n.3209 p.16 WT980918p16 Sacramento, California
Author: Donna Pomarico
Keywords: California Constant Discrimination Diversity Experiences Prejudice Racism Reminder
Sacramento Worldview