

PERSPECTIVE: An Auspicious Beginning
By SHAVAWN M. BERRY
Los Angeles

I got a phone call early one morning recently telling me that my friend, Melissa Braff, died in a hang-gliding accident Sept. 7 near my home of Bellingham, Wash. She was a young woman: vibrant, passionate, shining with promise and life. She had planned to visit the Florida Nature and Culture Center this weekend. She graduated from college this past June and was burning with excitement and plans. That her life ended while she was still so young saddens me. However, I find that I am encouraged by reports of the sheer magnitude of her happiness at the end of her life.

I took care of Melissa when I was a young women's division district chief in Bellingham several years ago. Mostly I chanted for her at the time because she had stopped coming to meetings, and I did not know how to reach her for more than a year. I kept her name on my altar and chanted for her each day.

When she reappeared 18 months later, I found she had joined another district. I saw her soon after she had returned and she ran to me, kissed me and thanked me repeatedly saying, "I could feel you chanting for me. That's how I found my way back." Tears ran down her face and she embraced me. I have never forgotten that moment.

I left Bellingham in 1994 and have only seen my friend occasionally since then. She always showered me with joy and gratitude whenever we met, almost an embarrassment of riches, I might add. She never forgot to acknowledge the debt of gratitude she felt toward me. It made a difference in my life many times, when I felt that I might not be able to continue. She was a constant reminder to appreciate my own life.

I have a picture of the two of us sitting in a restaurant with a gaggle of other young women, eating dim sum during the holidays of 1994. She is sitting behind me with her arms thrown around my neck, her face glowing with happiness. I remember that day clearly: how I cried all through the meal over the losses I was experiencing and how she sat smiling and encouraging me, telling me that I was a beautiful young woman, that I would overcome the deep suffering I was feeling. I have always loved that photograph, keeping it with me as I have moved from place to place. Now that Melissa is gone, I treasure it as a reminder of her bright, giving spirit.

This morning after I did gongyo, I opened up *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and re-read "The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life." In it, Nichiren Daishonin writes: "For one who summons up his faith and chants Nam-myoho-rence-kyo with the profound insight that now is the last moment of his life, the sutra proclaims: 'After his death, a thousand Buddhas will extend their hand to free him from all fear and keep him from falling into the evil paths.' How can we possibly hold back our tears at the inexpressible joy of knowing that not just one or two, nor only one or two hundred, but as many as a thousand Buddhas will come to greet us with open arms?" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 22).

Today, my eyes fill with tears, knowing that these are the beings that greeted my Melissa. At the end of her life, she was flying in her glider, carried by strong winds, high over a multitude of evergreen trees and the glittery surface of Silver Lake. The world must have stretched out before her, under that dome of sky, in a way she had never previously known. A friend I called today to tell of her death said she was sure that Melissa reveled in her "last look" at this lifetime, in the minutes and hours before the accident.

I feel sure Melissa is preparing for the next phase, the next place she will emerge and bloom. I wish her a speedy journey, untroubled by all she left behind. I loved her fierce,

funny, light spirit so much. I cannot believe she is gone. But I comfort myself with the fact that she lived her life ablaze with joy, that until her last moment she burned her life to ash.

What a victory! What an auspicious beginning.

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