

EXPERIENCE—JOANNA JECZALIK, LONDON, ENGLAND MY ENVIRONMENT—A PERFECT MIRROR

Joanna Jeczalik tells how Animality determined her choice of career and the way in which she perceived her environment.

“There are many people today who do not see anything wrong about the strong winning over the weak. This is the Law of the Jungle, but I think such an attitude is foolish because it is mindless. As in the world of animals, it involves no wisdom, no reasoning, no will.”
(Daisaku Ikeda, *Life: An Enigma, a Precious Jewel*, p. 102)

At the time, it seemed a strange choice for me to go into advertising. I was a studious and hard-working 21 year old, who measured my self-worth in “A” grades and first-class honors degrees. I had no idea what attracted me to the high-powered and glamorous world of advertising, except perhaps that it was so different to the life I was used to.

In my last term at university, I went to all the interviews at the big London agencies, but was only offered a job at one—a small, inconspicuous agency in Paddington.

There was only one place I really wanted to be and three years later, in 1980, I was offered a job there as an account manager—Saatchi & Saatchi, the agency that dominated the headlines every week in the advertising industry’s trade paper, *Campaign*. The only agency that people outside the business had heard of. The big one. The famous one. The successful one. It was already a legend within the industry.

Maurice Saatchi’s famous quotation, “It is not enough for us to succeed. Others must fail,” was bandied about in the agency pubs with a mixture of fear and admiration. The relentless energy of the agency, combined with its single-minded determination to be the biggest at any price, gave it an unforgettable aura and charisma. Working there brought me extraordinary highs, bizarre and uncontrolled behavior, combined with iron discipline, and inevitably, crucifying lows when campaigns were thrown out, clients unhappy or whole accounts lost.

I was, at once, captivated and enthralled by the place, and terrified of it.

It didn’t destroy me, but I saw plenty of people less lucky than myself, and I had no doubt that this was a dangerous place for me to be.

In 1985, I moved to another agency, a huge U.S. conglomerate involved mainly with global brands. The London office in Berkeley Square had a reputation for being gentlemanly, kind, good to its staff. After five years dangling over a pot of boiling oil, I felt ready for a change. The joke at my leaving party was that I was retiring from the business altogether. Moving to Berkeley Square was compared to buying a bungalow in Barnstaple. Privately, I was half hoping that this would be the case.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. Soon after I moved there, the entire agency network was taken over by the ex-financial director of Saatchi & Saatchi. The maelstrom was on my tail. Profit targets went up, costs had to come down, the familiar smell of fear was in the air.

It was to be here, in the leafy environment of Berkeley Square, that I was to confront the appalling suffering of total despair, a hell state that would propel me inexorably toward the Gohonzon.

The recession hit in 1989, the same year my first daughter was born and my husband's rock band split up, leaving him with no recording contract and an expensive legal suit. I was managing the European advertising for a well-known Dutch lager that involved long hours, a lot of traveling and complicated politics. The head office of the brewery was keen to run a single advertising campaign across Europe. The individual countries were not keen. Neither were our local agency offices.

This situation created enormous tension, not just between the agency and the brewing company but also and more distressingly, between myself and my own colleagues in our various European offices, many of whom had become close friends over the years. While struggling with this at work, I recklessly had another baby, which meant that on a good night, I would be lucky to get as much as four hours' sleep.

My body was exhausted but my brain was permanently hyper, over-stimulated, mad. Often I would hallucinate and my mind would become blurry and disorientated

In January 1992, I suffered a severe nervous breakdown. My mind gave up. Stretched to a breaking point, it simply collapsed and me with it.

My heart goes out to anyone who has suffered in this way. This is truly the state of Hell. Life is the size of a pin prick. Every stimulus is agony, even the tinniest sound of a knife being put down on a table. Sleep is only achievable with drugs, and panic whirls ceaselessly around in your stomach.

Now, seven years later, I am profoundly glad for this experience. It revived my seeking spirit, brought me to my senses. I had to find a meaning for it, an explanation, and soon after, I met the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

While chanting brought many benefits, I didn't immediately get to the bottom of this terrifying experience. In fact, I felt quite well recovered from it and was happy to paper over the deep cracks that were still there.

It is not through one experience but through many, that I have come to understand what happened and to place this frightening period of my life into a continuum of cause and effect.

The agencies I worked with were driven by Hunger, Animality and Anger, three extremely powerful forces in my own life. Indeed, I have a vivid image of myself wrestling with the darker side of these energies, like wrestling with a huge snake, so great is their capacity to rule my life. If I had to pick one life-state which has dictated my actions and emotions more than any other, it would be Animality, as I recognize with total familiarity the feeling of both prey and predator deeply embedded in my life. In fact, while chanting to have the wisdom to write this experience, I felt that this dominant state of Animality had been mine for many lifetimes and had wreaked its strange and unthinking havoc within and around me countless times before.

As Nichiren Daishonin says, "It is the nature of beasts to threaten the weak and fear the strong" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 302). This explains so clearly, and so beautifully, the conflicting and confusing emotions which rocked the foundations of my life in that turbulent period. My all-consuming fear contaminated my perception of my environment: fear of failing to achieve a European advertising campaign for the lager brand; fear of achieving it and upsetting the local distributor; fear of losing the support of my own colleagues; fear of blowing the whole project and losing my job; fear of having no income and being unable to support my family.

Before I started chanting, I saw all these different pressures as causes of the nervous

breakdown. Now, with the benefit of much daimoku, I can see them as effects. The cause was in my life, all the time, waiting to become manifest. Although this might sound a bit theoretical, this was a stunning and liberating realization for me!

If the nervous breakdown had been caused by a random and unfortunate sequence of events, it could happen again at any time. But it wasn't. It was caused by me, living my life in a state of Animality that was perfectly reflected in my environment. I could not have had a clearer mirror.

Nichiren Daishonin also says, "Foolishness is the world of Animality." Again, my involvement with the global marketing of the Dutch lager provided a clear image for my own foolishness. It never occurred to me to wonder whether it was right to impose a single marketing strategy for them across Europe. I simply accepted that this was the job I had been given and, if I didn't do it, I would be fired. I was, as President Ikeda so succinctly says, operating according to the "law of the jungle" and therefore without wisdom, reasoning or will.

It is, I think, another feature of Animality that you have no sense of your own individual identity when you are in this life-state. This is not a lack of self-worth; it is a lack of self. With the benefit of daimoku, I recognize this as a striking feature of my life. Ever since I can remember, I have followed orders mindlessly, rarely questioning or assessing them.

So now, with two years of practice behind me, I can feel the bright light of Buddhist wisdom shining deep into my life. I can see that I have to let go of the need to please, to succeed, to be special, to be wealthy, to be liked. Most of all, I have to let go of the fear and insecurity beneath all these needs. My life is, indeed, special, but not in the way I had thought. It can only flourish and be creative to the fullest when it is based on the Buddha state: on wisdom, courage and compassion.

I am still very far from achieving this glorious life-state in any kind of consistent way but, if I drift back into my old habit of Animality, the suffering is sharp and instantaneous and brings me back to my senses quickly.

Thanks to my extraordinary good fortune in meeting the Gohonzon, I know that my karmic habit is changing gradually, but profoundly, and that provided I persevere, I can base my life on the majestic and all-encompassing state of Buddhahood.

Thank you, Nichiren Daishonin and the SGI, from the bottom of my heart.

This experience is courtesy of the UK Express.