

## EXPERIENCE—MARKUS PARILLO, TORONTO, CANADA OUR STORY: MARKUS AND ANGELA

**It was June 16, 1997, around 9 p.m. when I parked my car in a small public parking lot overlooking a ballpark close to my home. I had been there many times before, not wanting to go home. But tonight was different. Tonight my wife, Angela would confront me with the issue of what had become of our marriage of nearly a quarter century. My intention was to drop the proverbial nuclear bomb: I would inform her that I had found another woman and was intending to continue seeing her.**

One last time I weighed in my mind every aspect of our long relationship, from its love-at-first-sight initial encounter to the personal hell it had become. Tonight the courage to finally confront my longest-standing suffering head on was with me. Beyond this coming storm, I felt a new life awaited me. The opening lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* aptly described my feelings at this moment: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..." (p. 5, M.A. Donohue & Co., Chicago).

Passion is the single word that best describes our early years together, both in love and in the discord between us. There were some good years early on in our relationship, but as time passed a marital cold war set in. The good times began appearing in smaller increments and passionate love was nearing extinction. Despite the arrival of this "ice age" in our relationship, we both remained dedicated to raising our daughter, Trizana. Other bright rays of sunshine came with the hosting of SGI district meetings in our home. We both had challenging careers, Angela with the airlines and myself in the entertainment industry. Those aspects that were missing at home I sought to fulfill outside my marriage.

There were many attempts to revive our relationship, but the wall between us grew insurmountable year by year. The solution, I thought, was to defuse Angela's anger, which lingered like volcanic lava just beneath the surface at all times. Was there a medical solution to this anger? Was there deep emotional baggage that needed to be off-loaded? Or, I asked myself, was this just the way our life together would be, "till death do us part"?

In the early '80s, I went on a pilgrimage to the original Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin, in a quest to accomplish my own personal evolution as a human being in hopes that my home life would finally improve. I made, on this trip, a promise of marital fidelity that lasted for more than a decade and a half.

Upon my return, the ice age of our marriage began in earnest for me. By the end of that time, every aspect of a separation from my wife had passed through my mind hundreds of times. Our growing daughter was an ongoing deterrent to setting a final "zero" day for separation. At this point in her life, it would have turned her whole world upside down.

Life was filled with numerous sad memories: the lovely purple flowers sprawled on the kitchen floor on Mother's Day, the family dinner turned fiasco on our daughter's birthday, the Christmas that never was and the countless days of silence between us at home. I promised myself I would not spend my 40s living this way.

As Trizana reached her 20s, she was maturing and becoming more independent. I began to feel that she could finally endure the devastating effects of the separation of her parents. In "The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra," (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 1000–01),

Nichiren Daishonin makes three admonishments: to have faith, prudence and courage. I thought that it was just a matter of employing courage to implement a final separation in order to live a happy life from here on.

Flashing back to Angela's earliest days of practicing Buddhism, the most prominent determination in her heart then was to locate and re-connect with all her close relatives who were scattered over the Western Hemisphere. Within a few years, Angela had introduced her sister Annie to the practice, enabling her to completely overcome some horrifying hardships in her life. Annie lived in the same building as we did at that time. Other close family members visited from Jamaica, including Angela's mother, whom she had not seen in many years. Increasingly, Angela became her family's global focal point. She supported them in their times of suffering and rejoiced in their successes. But her two brothers and father remained long lost.

From the time Angela was a little girl, she never had the benefit of a father in her life. She had neither heard from him nor seen him for more than 40 years. Then one day he called her on the telephone. It had been more than 20 years since she first determined in her prayers to reconnect with her father. Angela's reaction was one of vastly mixed emotions.

I saw this as an opportunity to put to the test the theory that Angela's deeply seated anger stemmed from this issue. Her father's words over the phone rung in tones of reconciliation after his more than 40-years' absence. I made every possible effort to facilitate a father-daughter reunion for two years, but my persistence eventually withered. During this time, Angela would occasionally talk on the phone with her father, but the thousand-mile distance between them remained, both geographically and emotionally.

Two years later, in a casual conversation on an unrelated subject, Angela expressed a willingness to finally see her father. Within days, in a very brief, cordial visit, for the first time in her entire life, Angela was able to experience love from her father. In the weeks that followed, a great new hope arose in me. The great glacier of our marital ice age seemed to hesitate for a moment in time. Would it now recede, I wondered, and allow our lives to flourish together once again?

Although the sharp edge of her anger had dulled significantly, in time I became resigned to the fact that life between us would go on as it had. I decided I must summon the courage to radically change the course of my life by leaving Angela.

This is the frame of mind I had reached on that night in my parked car, overlooking the ball field. I sat in my car for nearly an hour. Then I went home with the resolve to terminate our relationship.

To this day, and for the rest of my life, I will never forget the agonizing sounds of that evening. My world turned from a frigid ice age to a blazing hell in the blink of an eye. For many months there were tears and endless conversations leading nowhere, fanning the flames of anger all the more. There were numerous late night domestic dispute calls by the police to our home. At times I would call; at other times Angela did. Angela would often cry long into the night. Her overall health deteriorated. She frequently booked off from flights, which aroused the attention of her employer.

Now I was the one who became filled with anger. In the ensuing upheaval of my life, I stepped down from my responsibilities within SGI. My greatest apprehension was that those whom I had been practicing among would feel as though I was walking out on them.

Finally the season arrived to list our house on the market to sell. I assumed we would sell our house quickly, separate and establish new lives, and some day we would be able

to develop some rapport again between us. To Angela, however, I was still her husband and she was adamant that this was all a passing nightmare. She had been receiving support from some of her seniors in faith. SGI Canada Chairperson Mrs. Izumi encouraged Angela to never give up. Angela's long morning chanting sessions became an irritation to me. I assumed she was hopeful she could re-establish our marriage, but I was convinced that lay firmly in the realm of the impossible.

Throughout this time, Angela's father was calling and writing her frequently and being on call at all hours of the day and night whenever she needed him to talk to. Then Angela received news, weeks after the fact, that one of her two brothers had passed away. Her dear brother whom she hadn't seen in years was gone.

At the same time Angela had finally located her closest sibling, her oldest brother, but it was a bittersweet victory. She discovered he had terminal cancer. She made hasty plans to visit him in England and they quickly re-established their close ties. He even became curious about her Buddhist practice and learned to chant. Just days after she returned from this visit, he quietly passed away.

Angela was facing one devastating disaster after another. Before she returned to England for her brother's funeral, I chanted with her for her brother. My tears flowed and I could barely chant. They were tears not so much for her brother, but for Angela and all her suffering, much of it my own doing.

In the spring of 1998, our house was achieving the status of the house that would never sell, despite the fact that houses of lesser quality were selling all around us. My work was slowing to a halt. The long-time tenant of our basement apartment gave us notice that he was vacating by midsummer. At the same time, a long-time friend of mine passed away after a long battle with cancer.

Amidst these circumstances a great opportunity to participate in the SGI Friendship Festival arose. I had no formal responsibilities within the SGI and this became my opportunity to once again contribute in a broad capacity. In my lifelong career in entertainment, I had never functioned as a production manager. To assume that role in the festival was challenging indeed. I was overjoyed to jump into something intense with all four paws and totally immerse myself.

Then I received an acting contract for a wonderful role that was to shoot for three weeks in Romania. My plate of endeavors was beginning to overflow. I felt whole-hearted support from Angela in these challenges. As I departed for Romania, I noticed tears welling up in her eyes. As my taxi drove away, she was still waving good-bye to me from the door and when I unpacked my belongings in Romania, I discovered a very supportive and encouraging letter she had written to me.

Upon my return, I was faced with the question of what I should do with our vacant basement apartment. Inspired by the need to find affordable short-term accommodations for myself on a business trip to Vancouver, I decided to attempt to turn our basement apartment into a fully equipped short-term rental unit. Despite the oncoming crunch of activity with the Festival, I found time to refurbish and equip the unit and research the short-term rental market. It was during this time that I realized my extra-marital relationship was in a state of gradual demise. I quietly pulled the house off the market and after three days of advertising, booked my new rental unit for seven months for nearly double the rent it used to bring in.

With the festival nearly upon us, Trizana was to receive her own Gohonzon in Ottawa. Due to an airline strike, Angela and I could not fly but would have to drive the five hours

to Ottawa and back. It was a tense prospect for me. On the way, we stopped for a sandwich and as I went to and from the washroom, I overheard a conversation Angela was having with the gas attendant. I was moved by the optimism in Angela's voice. The atmosphere on the return trip was actually peaceful and harmonious, with both of us marveling at this milestone for our daughter.

Angela was also participating in the Friendship Festival and the momentum leading up to the festival was energizing and revitalizing both our lives. During the festival, there was an accident back stage. I rushed to bring the SGI volunteer doctor to the underground dressing rooms. The injured dancer was bleeding from a head wound. She had sustained a rather serious gash, yet she had gone on stage immediately afterwards and performed flawlessly. I was deeply moved by this and in this state, was returning to my station at the back of the theater.

On my way back, Angela and her performance group were filing through a backstage corridor, heading for their performance on stage. I took her hand and we held on for a moment and looked into each other's eyes. Something between us was vastly different.

Long after the show, a few people lingered outside the main doors of the theater. Mrs. Izumi was among them. "Are you and Angela back together?" she asked me. I told her that seemed to be the case. It was a significant moment for me, to acknowledge this for the first time.

Since then, a new age for Angela and me has dawned and given new life to our whole family. The glacier has receded, the wall between us has crumbled to fine beach sand. Our home feels bountiful and bright. We go out together like we used to, decades ago. Eating dinner together has become one of our mutual daily joys in life. I sometimes find myself talking casually with her at times and realizing that she has put whatever she was doing aside and is listening intently. I would like to achieve the same attentiveness to Angela when we talk together. In fact conversation together itself has become a joy in life. She is my wife, my lover and my friend.

In a wonderfully profound visit, we took Trizana to Florida to meet her maternal grandfather for the first time. We have recently bought a brand new condominium that, once completed in the summer of the year 2000, will overlook Toronto Harbor. Planning and organizing this has provided endless excitement for both of us. We are making travel plans months in advance.

This is the Angela I fell in love with when I first set eyes on her a quarter century ago. This victory of a long-fought battle for harmony between us has shed a brilliant light and given profound meaning to all that we have endured in the past together.