

## EXPERIENCE—NEIL CITRIN, LOS ANGELES VICTORY THROUGH PERSISTENCE

**A former ‘starving artist,’ Neil Citrin changed his arrogant and self-centered tendencies through his Buddhist practice, and ‘evolved into a capable professional, able to respect others.’**

Until 1974, my senior year of high school, I didn’t know what direction my life would take. That changed with one class. For one of my projects, I had the option of writing a story, and the experience hooked me. I knew I would devote my life to the arts.

Despite attaining a double bachelor’s degree in journalism and English in 1980, my life steadily deteriorated. Maintaining a job and an apartment proved difficult. By the time I was introduced to the Dai-shonin’s Buddhism in 1984, I was scraping by as a courier on the graveyard shift. Over the next six years, I hung onto my dream through a number of ups and downs.

In 1990, this began to change. In February of that year, SGI President Ikeda arrived in the United States for a historic visit that would dramatically transform our organization and my life.

Amid health problems and a precarious financial situation, I participated nonstop during those two weeks. At the end of that time, I returned to my daily life. Nothing had changed. I was several months behind rent and my utilities had been turned off, as had my phone. I knew that if I didn’t change something in my attitude and develop a career, I would need to move to my folks’ home in Phoenix. I considered that a defeat, but the thought of pursuing a regular job distressed me. After all, I was a writer, an artist. I believed society owed me a living.

Still, President Ikeda’s encouragement in his recent visit rang in my thoughts like a warning bell: “Please advance steadily with the awareness that you are building a foundation for the next thousand years...” and “...life is like a marathon, as is faith. Though you may lose the lead in the middle of the race, victory or defeat is decided at the finish line...” (*Seikyo Times*, March 1990, p. 9).

Tired of being a starving artist, I decided to find a profession in which I would feel comfortable. That weekend (the middle of March), I settled down to chant and I realized that, other than in front of my typewriter, I was most comfortable in a library. With that as my new focus, I continued to chant. On breaks I scoured the papers and laid out my plans.

The next day I phoned the companies I had selected. I went on seven interviews and, by the time I got home, I had four job offers. One was in the library field and, though it paid slightly less than a couple of the other positions, I chose it.

Despite that victory, I continued to struggle. Though I intellectually recognized my arrogance in supposing society owed me a living, changing that mindset proved far more difficult. Employers recognized my attitude, and I bounced from job to job. Living situations changed as well, though not as frequently as in the earlier years of my practice.

In the middle of this struggle, one of my friends in faith observed that I spent too much time dreaming of what I wanted to do. Cracks, potholes and other obstacles marred the path in front of me. If I only looked into the future and didn’t pay attention to the path immediately in front of me, I would constantly trip and fall on my face.

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At this point, I also focused on Nichiren Daishonin's writings, particularly this passage from "On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime": "Unless one perceives the nature of one's life, one's practice will become an endless, painful austerity" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 4).

It appeared my life was heading in this direction, so I took both pieces of advice and, in early 1992, renewed my determination to pursue both of my professions.

A few months later, I survived a near-death experience. I had developed gallstones that became infected, then gangrenous. Because I didn't have medical coverage, I had ignored the warning signs — pain that often lasted for hours and completely incapacitated me. The final attack occurred in early August, one week after medical coverage for my customer service job went into effect. This convinced me that my SGI activities and chanting had saved my life, and that I was steadily changing my fortune.

Even though I drifted through several more job changes, I continued to fight for my dreams. I entered San Jose State's School of Library and Information Science, Fullerton program, in 1993, then moved to San Jose in 1995 to finish the program there.

The two years in San Jose were difficult, but I persevered. When I returned to Los Angeles, master's in hand, I thought I now had it made. Once again, however, the universe decided I needed more challenges.

I spent a year living with a friend "crashing" on his couch, and bounced from temp job to temp job. Though I interviewed for a variety of library jobs, primarily at universities and colleges, I could never get the position.

Finally, after a talk with another friend, I began to chant for a position in my field without limiting myself to academia. After a few forays, I focused my search for librarian positions in Southern California.

One interview I set up in January 1999 was with the city of Los Angeles. This was a civil service position, with the interview weighted at 100 percent. The score determined where a person ranked on a hiring list; those who placed too far down rarely got a call. Two years earlier I had interviewed with them and scored 70 percent, the fourth level down.

In preparation for this second interview, I chanted a lot. Chanting revealed to me, for the first time, my lack of confidence in myself and my ability to function in this position. I had failed at so many jobs, and I felt that I would fail here too. Contrary to my pretensions of artistic arrogance, I felt that I didn't deserve to win. But through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in the days leading up to that interview, I changed. I knew that I did deserve this job.

To further prepare, I used the World Wide Web and found lists of questions asked at professional librarian interviews. I also decided to improve my wardrobe. Dressing for success had never been my strong point, but I needed to eliminate any reason for an interviewer to reject me. On the day of the interview, I decided to relax, be natural and inject humor.

I felt, after the interview, that I had done well, that I had improved on my previous score. When the result arrived a week later, I had to double-check the number: I had scored a 99! Not only did this put me in the top echelon, I was the top candidate.

Within a week I received a call from the head of library personnel. Normally, he said, they wait until they have all the paperwork together before they call a candidate with a job offer. They were so impressed with me that they didn't want me to get away and called early. I accepted the position of adult librarian at Venice Library, 15 minutes by car from

where I live.

Since the day I started, April 12 of last year, my passion for this job has increased. Part of this is due to the varied intellectually stimulating environment. I have numerous responsibilities from helping to select items our branch will purchase, to arranging author readings. I also teach beginning Internet classes. Another reason is that I actually enjoy working in the public sphere—quite an admission from someone who started to chant as an arrogant, elitist, anarchist writer. Finally I work in an environment where my co-workers and boss respect me.

The writing continues, of course. In the last year, two of my poems were published in local journals. I've written four screenplays and I am currently at work on my second novel.

In the past I focused on my writing at the expense of my job. Now my two professions complement each other.

Reflecting on this experience, 10 years after President Ikeda's historic visit, I see clearly how my life has changed. From being a person who was arrogant and self-centered, yet lacking in confidence, I evolved into a capable professional able to respect others. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, with studying the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and President Ikeda's encouragement as support, I will continue along that path toward my future, one step at a time.