

EXPERIENCE—RUTH GALLOGLY, NEW YORK FINDING THE POWER TO DIRECT HER LIFE

Ruth Gallogly faces her fears and suffering through her Buddhist practice and finds her voice as a writer.

I would like to dedicate this experience to Lydia Fort, who spent three years introducing me to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and another eight months after that supporting me on the journey from sporadic chanter to fully practicing member. And, for all her encouragement ever since.

I began practicing this Buddhism in March 1998. At that time, I was working for a demanding and difficult boss while attending graduate school for creative writing part time at New York University. Since my job required lots of overtime and was emotionally demanding, I was not left with much time or energy to concentrate on my studies. I decided that I'd need to leave my job and take out student loans in order to really concentrate on my degree.

At the same time I came to this decision, I attended the March World Peace Prayer meeting with my good friend and then co-worker Lydia Fort. I'd gone to Buddhist meetings with her for years and enjoyed myself, but had never expressed a desire to chant. The truth was, I was afraid of it. However, the experiences at this meeting really hit home for me, and I decided that I should try chanting myself.

That September I left my job and started school full time. While I did chant, I chanted sporadically, basically when I needed something, had a free minute or felt I needed a little extra support from the environment. I was enrolled in a yearlong novel-writing workshop, and spent most of the fall semester in a depression, trying to work through my fears of writing.

On Jan. 1, after an amazing meeting, I decided to really commit to the practice. I began chanting and writing every day.

My work would be critiqued in class at the beginning of the spring semester. I hadn't been sleeping well for weeks due to stress, and was physically exhausted and emotionally wiped out. Before class, I went to the culture center to chant for a helpful, educational critique from my peers. Instead, a classmate really tore into my prose, going so far as to crack jokes about the way that I'd phrased things. Her comments really hit at the heart of my fears. I'd always thought I'd had good ideas, but awful prose. And here she was making fun of it. I was devastated. Another classmate ripped into my novel, too, condemning it on many levels. It seemed all my fears were coming true; I was really a horrible writer; I should never have left my job to go to school full time. And I should have listened when people told me my writing should be a hobby, not a career.

I called Lydia for encouragement, and as always she came through for me, telling me that every obstacle is an opportunity for growth. She told me I needed to chant to find the benefit that was lying behind this event.

So, I started chanting for that. I also joined a district and I kept chanting for my students' and my classmates' happiness.

My novel, however, was going nowhere. I kept rewriting the same chapters, very rarely moving forward. The belief that my writing was horrible grew stronger and stronger each day.

Now to graduate with an M.F.A. in creative writing, I would have to write a 70–75 page creative thesis. It was due by the end of April. As March was approaching, I had about 35 pages done and I wasn't getting far fast.

Also, my novel workshop had changed. By the middle of the spring semester, the class was full of tension. Everyone seemed to have a problem with someone else. It was getting harder and harder to go to class, and I was constantly griping to friends about why it made me so miserable to be there. But the hardest part was watching the other students uncover their "voice." I was happy for them, but it only highlighted the fact that I didn't have a voice in my own work.

In early March, my young women's leaders brought me a passage from SGI President Ikeda that really resonated with me: "Faith enables us to receive the eternal joy derived from the Law. So let us engrave in our hearts this point: We ourselves receive this joy. Because we receive it ourselves, our happiness does not depend on others. No one else can make us happy. Only by our own efforts can we become happy. Therefore, there is no need to feel envious of others. There is no need to bear a grudge against someone or depend on another person for our happiness. Everything comes down to our state of life. It is within our power to take our lives in any direction we wish" ("SGI-USA Study Department Entrance Exam Study Material" booklet, p. 18).

I realized that I'd been letting my environment rule me, and began chanting to find out why I was miserable. Not why so-and-so made me miserable, not why my class made me miserable, but why I was miserable. After all, if no one but me could make me happy, than no one but me could make me miserable.

Things started coming together for me. I saw that I wasn't writing about what was truest to me, but what I thought I was supposed to write. I was hiding my true voice because I was scared of letting that which was deepest in me free, of letting it be visible to others. What I needed to do, as difficult as it seemed six weeks before deadline, was throw out what I was working on and start fresh.

I was scheduled to hand in work for class critique in two weeks' time and I decided to hand in the first 20 pages of my new novel in progress. It was the only work I had ever done that had felt somehow true to me. And for that exact reason, it scared the hell out of me. Sharing it seemed an impossible task.

The night my work was discussed, I went to the culture center to chant for a good critique. When I finished chanting, I realized that no matter what happened, I'd made the right choice and that I wouldn't let my classmates sway me. I was enjoying my writing for the first time, and felt I was finally finding my voice in my work. I had discovered the opportunity that lay behind the obstacle. And the truth was, if that January critique hadn't made me so miserable, hadn't made me face up to my fears, I probably wouldn't have changed my thesis and discovered a new way of working.

That night, I received the best critique I ever had in the program. My class really supported the new work. The girl who had made fun of my prose actually said good things about it, complimenting me on the voice of the piece. And the other student, who had commented negatively on my earlier work, wrote me three pages of notes outlining why he thought the work was so good.

Of course, this was only the beginning of my obstacles to actually finishing my thesis. I wasn't able to complete it by the April deadline, but worked on it throughout the summer while moving apartments, working full time and administering a trip to Ireland. I handed

it in on time to graduate this past September. And by the end of October, I was hired to work as a writer/editor for a Web site. I now write for a living.

I committed to this practice exactly one year ago on New Year's Day. While the last line from President Ikeda's guidance, "It is within our power to take our lives in any direction we wish," is truly the hardest thing for me to believe with all my being, I know that when I do, doors just open for me. So this coming year, in addition to finishing my novel, finding an agent and selling my novel, I'm determined to believe this phrase with my whole being and to really fight for everything I want. But not only that, I'm determined to encourage everyone I know to believe it with their whole beings, too. If I do both these things with my whole heart, there's nothing I won't be able to achieve.