

EXPERIENCE—DENNIS MERIMSKY, ISRAEL 'SEEING' WITH HIS HEART

Previously estranged from family and friends, Dennis Merimsky finds joy through Buddhist practice and mends his relationship with his son.

I was brought up in England, and since 1973 I have been living in Israel. I have been a Buddhist in belief since I started to think about religion as an adolescent. But for years I provided an example of negative actual proof. In *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint Exupery, there is a very important line: "It is with the heart that one sees rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

My intuition seemed to work in reverse. In theory I had intellectual answers but you can't sell misery, and after two failed marriages I was estranged from family and parents. Then three years ago, I put an ad in the local newspaper's personal column and met Pnina.

With Pnina I got a really great package deal: the love of my life, five more lovely children (I have two lovely children of my own) and the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. Bit by bit, I started to show actual proof in changing myself and my environment. Today I think I am the happiest person I know. It is written in the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings": "Joy means delight shared by oneself and others. When both oneself and others have wisdom and compassion this is called joy." This is the story of how I tackled the biggest obstacle in my life: my relationship with my son.

For the last 21 years, I carried within me my own personal "Berlin Wall," a barrier of sadness and remorse, built from my failed attempts to maintain contact with my son, Rami. My only souvenir from this forbidden land was a large envelope of legal correspondence, Rabbinical court proceedings, and psychologist's reports collected 16 years ago in futile attempts to reach Rami, at the age of 5. These lines from Henley's poem express so aptly my feelings of despair after being turned away from Rami's doorstep after meetings that lasted three or four minutes at most, consisting mostly of a monologue, in which I tried to induce some response from Rami: "Beyond this place of wrath and tears / Looms but the horror of the shade, / And yet the menace of the years / Finds and shall find me unafraid."

I had planned to approach Rami at the end of his military service, out several months ago. I decided not to wait another six months, because I wanted to make the breakthrough before my 50th birthday. I applied to the army liaison office for Rami's army postal address, which I was immediately given, and then spent some days chanting. I had to write a letter that would impel Rami to reply, so I chanted to be like an archer who has exactly one arrow to reach his target. This was the chance of my life, and I had to get it right the first time.

I wrote about how I had been waiting all these years to reach Rami as an adult. I wrote about the pain, the longing, and about wondering about Rami's appearance and personality. Then I spoke of my vision of adding Rami's photo to the 13 family photos hanging on the wall and of hearing his laughter echoing through the room at our family gathering, sitting at the octagonal table surrounded by his brothers and sisters. I likened the quest of acquainting father and son to two scouts groping in a dark tunnel, in search of one another and ended with Nichiren Daishonin's words that a lantern can light a place

that has been dark for thousands of years.

Rami replied one day before Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, because he has been brought up to think of me as the evil incarnate. I spent the whole day chanting about how to reply. Luckily I had kept all kinds of documents (like proof of alimony payments), but I had never before found the strength to eradicate real slander in my life. Before I wrote this letter, I had to chant about changing that part of me that saw my life as a script of victimization. Nichiren Daishonin wrote, “Bail the sea water of slander and disbelief out of the ship of your life, and solidify the embankments of your faith” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 626).

I “bailed” my “sea water” for a number of weeks until I was ready to reply. It was, by far, the most difficult letter I have ever written. I so desperately wanted Rami to understand that both his divorced parents were real, loving, three-dimensional people, and that only by choosing this approach could he live in the real world.

Rami’s reply astounded me. There was no stamp on the envelope. He had delivered the letter personally—so he must have considered the possibility of a chance encounter. The wall between us was starting to crumble. He asked me to send him family photos. I replied suggesting a meeting and leaving him my home and work phone numbers.

Weeks went by and nothing happened. Then one day I returned to my office at work to find that he had phoned. I waited for an hour, my heart pounding. I realized that in a short time I would hear a new sound in my life—my son’s voice. When he phoned again we had a very functional conversation fixing a time and place to meet (in a cafe in a few days time).

I drove to the cafe, listening to a tape of Elgar’s Enigma variations. This music seemed to epitomize the tide of my emotions. Elgar sought to make English music “broad, noble and chivalrous and healthy,” and I yearned to fashion my life, and in particular my new relationship with Rami, in the same spirit.

I had no trouble picking out Rami in the cafe. We were the only two customers there. It was rather like a weird kind of blind date, except that we were kith and kin and so the implications of success and failure were far greater. There was a Peter Pan quality about Rami. Something in him had remained frozen at the age of 5, and was now beginning to thaw. I was immediately impressed by Rami’s sincerity, his total lack of bitterness and sarcasm. From his point of view, I had failed to be a father to him for 21 years. I gave him the only present I could—I promised that from now on I would always be there for him. I was starting a voyage to make amends not just for one lost child, Rami, but also for my own inner lost child as well. T.S. Elliot wrote in his poem, “Burnt Norton”: “What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present. / Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Toward the door we never opened / Into the rose-garden.”

I wanted to find a point of contact with Rami for our second meeting, so I arrived at the cafe with a selection of poems, which I had reason to believe would appeal to him. However, Rami was not in the mood for poetry, so I put the books away. Then I had an idea. I told him how excited his sister Yonit was about the meeting and how she had chosen two poems for Rami to read. This caught his enthusiasm so he read the poems.

Nevertheless, our conversation dried up. I imagined that it would take at least six months of meetings between the two of us before we could widen the scope, and I didn’t fancy another meeting in the same place. Perhaps we could go to a cinema, but I wanted Rami to make a suggestion, so I asked him what he wanted to do. “Perhaps I could try

drawing to find out whether I have any family talent,” he said. I had told him that both Yonit and I painted, but his responsiveness surprised me. “We could only do that at home,” I said, pretty certain that he wasn’t intending to venture into the “lion’s den” in the next year or so. “I’ll come over then,” he replied. “I promised Yonit that she would be the first other person to meet you,” I added. So I phoned Yonit from Rami’s cellular phone and we arranged to meet the following week at my home.

At that meeting, the first ever between brother and sister, Yonit made a breakthrough. She had at long last gained the elder brother she had been waiting years to meet.

Since then, Yonit and Rami meet every week on their own. Rami and I have painted together and are breaking new ground in every meeting. One Saturday, Rami and his girlfriend joined the family gathering for lunch at the octagonal table. He hasn’t yet laughed at my jokes...but I shall go on trying until I succeed.

As Robert Musil wrote: “In his potentialities, plans and emotions, man must first of all be hedged in by prejudices, traditions difficulties and limitations of every kind, like a lunatic in his strait-jacket, and only then will whatever he is capable of bringing forth perhaps have some value, solidity and permanence.”