

PERSPECTIVE
LEARNING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN
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My oldest brother, Rudolph Perry Jr. of Akron, Ohio, died on the morning of March 19, at the age of 49 in an accident involving his private plane. There were no other human casualties. In 1991, my brother was preceded in death by his 16-year-old son, Rudy III, who was killed by a drunk driver as he and his father were attempting to help a stranded motorist. Rudy Jr.'s wife, three adult daughters, parents, sisters, brothers and many other loved ones survive.

The words of condolences from my SGI family, co-workers, neighbors, friends and others have meant so much to me. Even when the person offering the words was only a casual acquaintance, the acknowledgment of my brother's life and of our family's loss touched me in the most profound way. I can't express how deeply I was moved when SGI members who never knew my brother came to his funeral in support. I would never have thought that just showing up or saying "I care" could mean so much. I've learned a real lesson in what it means to be human. It's a lesson I want to build upon and never forget.

The following is a sharing of the words I offered at my brother's memorial service along with some additional reflections on my brother's death: "When your...deceased [loved one] hears the sound of your voice chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, he will delight in his Buddhahood" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p.1066). For days after my brother passed away, I've recited the Lotus Sutra and chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo before my altar and quietly while walking through parks, listened to birds' morning songs and looked up at the bright, shining moon on clear evenings.

In those moments, my tears flowed freely as Rudy's face came smiling back at me, and the words in this Northwest Indian memorial poem by an unknown author express the feelings I had in my heart: "Do not stand at my grave and weep. / I am not there. / I do not sleep. / I am a thousand winds that blow. / I am the diamond glint on snow. / I am the sunlight on ripened grain. / I am the autumn rain. / When you awake in the morning hush, / I am the swift uplifting rush / Of birds circling in flight. / I am the stars that shine at night. / Do not stand at my grave and weep. / I am not there. / I do not sleep."

When I heard that my brother Rudy had died, after experiencing the initial shock, one of my first thoughts was of Mrs. Green (not her real name), a neighbor that has lived across the street from my parents since before I was born. Mr. and Mrs. Green had two sons, now grown. Mr. Green had died suddenly and unexpectedly of heart failure only a month before my brother died. Although I offered prayers for Mr. Green's life, I had not given any condolences to the Green family. I had to work on the day of the funeral, so I hadn't attended. I bought a card, but never mailed it. I planned to telephone, but as days went on, I felt awkward about doing so, because I hadn't done it so far. So I continued to offer prayers whenever I thought about Mr. Green, but did nothing else.

Then on the evening of my brother Rudy's death, I walked across the street from my parent's house to speak to Mrs. Green. Standing in her driveway that chilly, starlit night, I deeply apologized for my insensitivity. "Oh, I understand. You've got your children to take care of, and everything," she assured me. "That's no excuse," I told her. "I am so very sorry for being so thoughtless."

We two women stood in Mrs. Green's yard reminiscing, crying, hugging, sharing, and

laughing. She told me that my brother, Rudy, had called her when he learned of Mr. Green's death, and that he had come to the funeral. Later, one of my nieces, Rudy's daughter, told me, "Daddy would go to anybody's funeral." She said he would go even if his schedule only allowed him to drop in to say, "I'm sorry."

After Mrs. Green and I had talked for about a half an hour in her yard that evening, I asked her to come across the street to talk to my parents, especially my mother who was taking my brother's death hard. "Oh, I don't know what to say, and I look a mess!" protested Mrs. Green. I remembered the story that SGI President Ikeda relayed about how Shakyamuni Buddha once consoled a mother grieving over the loss of her child by simply sitting quietly by her side until the woman gained the courage to continue. It was in the spirit of just being there for another conveyed in that story that I'd finally made my way to Mrs. Green's house. As we talked, I knew that if she would only accompany me to my parents' house, her own burden would seem a little lighter, just as mine did because I was supporting her. Finally, Mrs. Green agreed to go. Once she was in my parent's kitchen, Mrs. Green and my mother cried and hugged, shared and laughed, until I felt that it was alright for me to say "Goodnight," and return home to my husband and children. Later, my mother told me that she, my father and Mrs. Green were up talking until two o'clock in the morning that night.

"What does Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's profound respect for people signify? The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha...lies in his behavior as a human being. The wise may be called human, but the thoughtless are no more than animals" (WND, p. 852).

Although my brother was a devout Christian and I am a devout Buddhist, he said something to me not too long ago that makes me think deeply about what it means to be a person of faith. He said that many people claim to believe in this or that, but don't live up to what they say they believe in. He said that what matters more than what a person calls her or himself is how that person acts.

Now that my brother has passed away, I can't help but think about the way he acted. Sure, we had plenty of disagreements. With him being the oldest brother and I the youngest sister, we butted heads on more than a few occasions. He once told me in frustration over something I'd done that he didn't like: "LaVora, you always just go on and do whatever you want to do!" And I replied: "That's right. It's my life. I can't live it the way somebody else thinks I should."

Come to think of it, Rudy and I were a lot alike in that regard. He did what he wanted to do too. He was just usually a lot more respectful about it than I was; he didn't give my parents nearly as much "back talk" as I did. But whether he was flying his airplane, sailing his boat or traveling overseas, my brother lived life on his own terms. He also did something that I am just now learning to do. He was a master at letting the other person's shortcomings slide. He was a master at forgiveness, at seeing the good in a person or a situation. He was a master at holding human relationships as the most precious treasure of all.

An example of how my brother sincerely valued people in general and his family in particular was how, starting last year, he had made a habit of coming by my house to see my husband, Cedric, and I and our three children once a month before attending church in Cleveland. My children, Nia, Jarod and Jahci had so much fun with him on those Sunday mornings filled with video camera shots and good conversation. Just before his last visit, when I told my oldest, Nia, that Uncle Rudy was on his way, she said with excitement,

“He’s going to bring juice boxes!” My sister-in-law told me that before his visits, Rudy would ask her to make sure to buy just the right kind of juice — the one the kids liked best. The one with the most real fruit juice in it. My mother told me that Rudy said he came on those mornings so that he could get to know the kids better. He wanted to make sure they knew who he was. That’s the kind of man I was blessed to have as a brother. A man who truly cared about people, from the youngest to the oldest.

As a Nichiren Buddhist, I believe that in the depths of his life my brother was a Buddha and that in beginningless time he and I promised to be born as brother and sister in this lifetime so we could help one another bring forth Buddhahood, or enlightenment, from within our lives.

In the days following Rudy’s death, the following translation of a passage from the verse section of the “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, which Nichiren Buddhists recite daily during our morning and evening prayers, filled my mind constantly: “In order to save living beings / as an expedient means I appear to enter Nirvana / but in truth I do not pass into extinction. / I am always here, preaching the Law. / I am always here, / but through my transcendental powers / I make it so that human beings in their befuddlement / do not see me even when close by” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 229).

To me, seeing the Buddha “when close by” means not only realizing that the essence of my deceased brother’s life is ever present, but for me to constantly strive to manifest my own Buddha nature and to strive to see the Buddha in the lives of others, too.

I pray that Rudy is quickly reborn into good circumstances in his next life, so that he can wholeheartedly embrace the Mystic Law and continue fulfilling his mission. As I pray this way I am profoundly aware of how, through his death, my big brother challenges me to really learn from his example. To respect everyone no matter who they are or what they’ve done. To be able to disagree with someone without holding a grudge. To realize that during difficult times, along with the prayers I offer for them, people, including people of strong faith, need to be told that I care or may need me to simply be there. My brother Rudy challenges me to act like he did, and truly be the best person I can be toward everybody. Taking up this challenge causes me to deepen my prayers like I’ve never done before. I now chant to show true compassion for all people. Because I am compelled to pray in this new way, and the act of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is in itself enlightenment, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my brother Rudy for helping me attain Buddhahood in this lifetime.

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