EXPERIENCE—ALAN WITTERT, SANTA MONICA, CALIF.
LIVING A MEANINGFUL EXISTENCE

Alan Wittert expresses his appreciation for being able to contribute to others' happiness.

As a man in my 50s, I cherish my appreciation for life and having other men of my generation to know and trust. I know it's no accident that we're sharing this time on earth together.

That our generation has a shared history means something: Vietnam, the civil rights movement, the drug culture, and so on. Individually, we've gone through a lot. So far, 25 years, since I've been practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, the worst stuff I've gone through has helped me develop the most appreciation.

I want to talk about loss for a minute. Nichiren Daishonin founded this Buddhism, and in 1280 he wrote a letter to someone whose family member died: "The cherry blossoms, once scattered, have again come into bloom, and the fruit, once fallen, has formed again on the trees. The spring breezes are unchanged, and the scenes of autumn are just as they were last year. How is it that, in this one matter alone, things should be so different from what they were, never to be the same again?" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1043).

There are people I miss who, because I practice this Buddhism, I know I owe so much to. I miss them and feel like they're still there; I just can't see or touch them. But I can't just miss them; I have to do something with the appreciation I feel toward them.

We came from somewhere; we know our histories are grounded in our parents' generation.

Sometimes my wife, Elaine, tells me or my son, "It's not the end of the world." I tell her, "You don't know that." I was raised by people who grew up when the end of the world wasn't so far off. Their generation was shaped by horrific, globally violent events.

Our parents were the babies during the "War To End All Wars," when millions of young men were killed. And our parents were the kids, the children, when global economic depression tormented many of their parents to suicide. And they were the young parents, many of them, just in time — for the next world war, when men killed tens of millions of women and children, and each other. Our parents' generation didn't talk about feelings. But inseparable from those events was their hunger, fear and despair. And that emotional fabric is what gave birth to and shaped (among other things) ... us.

That they lived during those times means something.

I say this as someone who's seen thousands of people derive tremendous happiness through this Buddhist practice — their living through those times meant that you and I could lead the best of lives. Even though my parents are dead, I don't believe that I can't still respond to them, communicate with them and influence them.

I read SGI President Ikeda's comment (he was another child of war): "There is no greater way to repay the debt of gratitude to your parents than through faith. Your faith guarantees that an infinite number of your ancestors and descendants will attain Buddhahood. Such is the wondrous power of the mystic law. How profound and important is your existence" (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 188).

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I felt that part of living a meaningful existence meant being in a profession where I could express my appreciation, and put to work my intuitions and desire to be able to communicate with anybody. (This desire came from my determination to communicate with my first wife, Ava, when her brain cancer made it impossible for her to speak or move.) So, at 46, I went back to school for five years to be a specialist in communicative disorders.

I work with, among others, kids who don't develop the way most of us do, and people who decided not to talk because they've had speech scared out of them, and people who had strokes that tossed a wrench into the sounds and logic of their speech. A lot of people I work with have been labeled or pitied. They're laughed at, or naturally grieved over or said of by parents, "She's not the person I wanted her to be." Or maybe they're spoken about by friends or lovers who whisper: "He's not the person he used to be. He can't even make sense any more."

My mentor in this field has a motto: "Not being able to speak doesn't mean you have nothing to say."

You know how people will knock themselves on the head and say (in ValleySpeak), "HELLO-O. IS ANYBODY HOME?" meaning, is there a self somewhere in the person you're talking to? We've all been treated like we didn't have a self, like we're not home. It hurts and makes me angry.

Therefore, I decided to operate in my profession based on the hypothesis that I wasn't smart enough to tell who's home and who isn't. I decided, logical or not, everybody's home. And that makes me good at my job.

My profession is based on a medical, scientific, logical model; my Buddhist practice shows me how to open my heart to when it's time to replace logic with wisdom, and communicate in important ways.

In February, when my mom — who I love a lot — was dying, it looked like she'd lost her mind. Or maybe we all lost ours. Anyway, she kept saying, "I'm going to fall, I'm going to fall," and man, she meant it. Nothing anybody said could make her believe otherwise. Her nurse told her, "Tobey, you're not going to fall." She said, "Yes I am, I'm going to fall." My sister said, with infinite tenderness, "Momma, you're not going to fall; the rails of your bed are too high." Tobey firmly said, "Yes I am."

All this time I'd been quietly chanting for her. I said: "Mom, you're right. You are going to fall. That's why we have all these beautiful, fluffy pillows all over the place, so when you do, it's not going to hurt a bit." Tobey was happy. I was chanting for her and because of that, I could relieve her anxiety, like she used to do for me when I was a child (when she wasn't giving me more of it).

In any case, she wasn't demented or gone; "going to fall" was her metaphor for dying. She died, and I still communicate with her.

One of my clients is a 78-year-old WWII veteran who had a stroke. The stroke didn't just hurt his ability to think; it also made his speech sounds come out garbled. The first time I saw him I got so angry at his condition that I made a commitment to help him. The second time I saw him, before I left I told him I'd come back soon. He motioned to his wife to bring him paper and pencil. This guy who was a math genius and brilliant violinist laboriously wrote with his non-paralyzed hand, "Q-I-C-K-L-Y," then smiled as he handed me the note. He did that because he could see I knew there was somebody home in there. The next time I came over he told me his first understandable sentence (he'd been practicing it with his wife). He said, "You are a *mensch*" (Yiddish for "a kind, real human

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being.")

Now, my informal research and clinical experience has shown that the people with the biggest communicative disability are — people who are dead.

That's a disability even a wheelchair ramp doesn't help. How can you communicate with them, repay debts of gratitude and contribute to their happiness?

We communicate with them in our prayers for their happiness, and our appreciation for them becomes the bridge for them to communicate with us. My life is continually refreshed as I let the absence of loved ones become the greatest and most terrible gift of all when — through my prayers — I allow that absence to teach me to be kind, and then demonstrate the courage to base my actions on that, in work, family and this organization.

Through my chanting — that absence, "...this one matter alone..." that makes things "...so different from what they were, never to be the same again" — fuels my growth.

From kindness and courage, I develop friendships and trust with other men, and understand that we do not have to fear each other. And that alongside those who came before us, we can create the greatest possible legacy with and for each other, and for generations to come.

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