

EXPERIENCE—VANESSA PRESTON, OVERLAND PARK, KAN. HELPING OTHERS IS TRUE FRIENDSHIP

Vanessa Preston, 14, helps her friends through difficult times with her Buddhist practice.

Do you know what it's like to be alone? Do you know what it's like to have a split personality where one holds a knife to your wrist and the other pushes it away? This was a question I was asked by a friend who desperately sought my help. It's scary, isn't it?

I'll never know what drove Nancy, Sue and a total of eight of my good friends to hurt themselves as their only way out of their struggles. I looked at their lives, searching for what would make them so desperate to take such drastic actions. I didn't realize that when you are on the outside looking into another person's life, things that seem minor to you could be traumatic to them.

I didn't want them to know that I knew the cuts on their wrists were self-inflicted. I was sure that it would make them feel embarrassed around me, or they might think that I would think differently of them. This perception was about me and not about helping them.

Chanting Nann-myoho-renge-kyo has always worked for me. I was born into a family that practices Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, and based on the past six years of personal experience with chanting, I knew that anytime I needed help I could turn to the Gohonzon.

I didn't always have this confidence in my Buddhist practice. But through my efforts to overcome struggles with school, friends and at home, I have learned that all my prayers are answered in a way that is best for the situation. I may not realize it at the time, but looking back I know that I have been fortunate that the answers to my prayers always turned out for the best.

What I hadn't learned was that I also have the power to help my friends through my Buddhist practice. This past semester in high school, I had the opportunity to use my practice in a way I never had before. Within a week's time, I found out that at least eight of my friends were so desperate in their suffering that they were physically inflicting pain on themselves. Then on Friday of that same week, my friend Max told me that my best friend Nancy had slit her wrists the night before. Fortunately, she survived but still needed mental and emotional help.

I didn't know what to do. I felt discouraged and ultimately scared out of my mind to know that the lives of my friends were in danger, and that they were looking to me for help. What if I tried to help them, but they got angry with me? What if I did the wrong thing? Then I remembered a quote from second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda that my mother often uses to encourage me. He says, roughly, that if you put a pot of rice on to cook and chant for it to boil, it will never boil until you turn on the flame. In other words, you can't just chant for something to happen. You must also take action.

I decided that I should definitely talk to Nancy. I found her in the lunchroom and asked

about how this situation would affect my relationship with my friends rather than taking quick action to help them?

Nancy and I spoke for some time and I finally convinced her to see our teacher. Later that same day, my other friend Sue approached me and wanted to go with us to see the teacher. I had no idea that Sue was also hurting herself. The three of us went to Mr. Smitters, whom we knew had helped other kids with the same problem. There was another teacher who was not supposed to be there. She overheard our conversation with Mr. Smitters and took it upon herself to tell the school principal and the counselor about Sue and Nancy. The principal called them to the office and made them both call their parents. When I found out about this, I became mad and upset; I knew that neither of them was ready to talk to their parents.

When I got home, I desperately needed to chant. I was now even more confused. I had chanted all week as my friends approached me, and now that I finally had the courage to take action, I wasn't sure that I had taken the right action. It seemed like everything had gone wrong. I chanted desperately for them to be okay and for their parents to understand.

However, late that night I got a phone call from Sue. She was calling from a phone booth. Sue's parents thought that she was a failure and a disgrace to their family. Her mother kicked her out of the house, and Sue had to call her grandmother to come and pick her up. I still hadn't heard from Nancy and didn't know how she was.

Now, I was even more discouraged, but my mother kept encouraging me. We spent most of the weekend chanting for Nancy and Sue. I chanted to understand why this had all happened. I thought I had it all figured out: I would help my friends and everything would turn out fine. But it didn't. Nothing seemed to come out the way I had planned.

By Sunday, I realized through all my chanting that Sue's grandmother was providing her the loving home that she needed. In less than a week, her mother called her begging her to come home. They now go for counseling, and Sue's doing fine.

Nancy called me that Sunday evening and told me how she spent the entire weekend having quality time with her mom. Nancy and her mother now have a better relationship, and she can tell her mom things that she never could before. After the whole ordeal, I asked Nancy if I had helped her, and if I had done the right thing. She said, "Yes, I'm not alone anymore."

Through this experience, I learned two things. I knew that even though things don't always turn out how I plan them, my prayers are always answered. But this time it was more difficult to hold on to my faith. I learned that especially when I'm confused and things don't seem right, I have to chant even harder to not give up.

The second thing I learned was the importance of not only practicing for myself but also for others. With my practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, I know I helped my friends overcome their sufferings. But without chanting, I would not have looked beyond my selfish perspective of the situation and sincerely reached out to my friends.

I am currently studying SGI President Ikeda's poem "Soar Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century!" and I feel there is a connection here for me:

*or discriminate among them
whoever they may be—
this wise and clever friend;
this person wracked by
poverty's pain;
the person plagued
by the deepest sleeplessness;
this person isolated
in the remote regions of being different...
I share life with them all,
live in profound meaning,
live as a good friend to each."*

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