

**CHALLENGING RELATIONSHIPS
EXPERIENCE—CAROL LUEDEMAN, NEW YORK
DEVELOPING THE CORE OF MY LIFE**

‘Whether I am married or not, no one can give or take away the feelings I have about myself,’ says Carol Luedeman.

Nineteen years ago, I could never have said that I loved my life. My practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism has helped me grow in all areas of my life, but the most fundamental changes have occurred because of the growth in my relationships—with my family and friends, in my jobs, with the world around me, and, especially, with men. It wasn’t until seven years ago, though, that I realized that the most important relationship I needed to work on was the one with myself.

I grew up in a good family that was predominately tranquil, which sounds great, but in reality it came at the expense of no one really expressing their feelings. The result of this was that I felt completely powerless in my relationships, always feeling pushed around by what was happening with another person or in my environment. I had no idea of the dynamic law of cause and effect in my life. So, even though I had good circumstances, I didn’t know how to enjoy and appreciate them. I only knew how I felt. From the outside, I was perceived to be a lucky girl from a good home with no problems. On the inside, I was confused, angry, negative and defensive. The worst part was that I had no idea why I felt this way.

My only refuge from this pain was my creativity. After I graduated from art school, I started an apprenticeship at a photo studio in New York City. It was at this first job that I was introduced to Buddhism by a co-worker Victor Podesser. I was so not interested in the practice. I thought religion was a crutch.

Just around the same time, I remember ending yet another relationship with a guy. Another painful cycle of intense rapture that soon turned into the hell of misunderstanding and hurt. I determined, “That’s it, I’m done with relationships.” I was only 21.

Looking back, it is not surprising that it was precisely because of the relationship that I had with Victor and his deep caring for my happiness that I started attending SGI meetings. He became my mentor in photography, and even though I fell in love with him, I remained suspicious about his motives. I thought: “Why should he care for my happiness so much? What does he want from me?” It took a while for me to trust him, but as I did we became the closest of friends. I started chanting not really knowing why, but Victor knew why; he could see my pain, and he never gave up on me. Because of our friendship and the SGI-USA organization, I began to have hope that I could challenge those weak and negative parts of my life.

Two years into my practice, I attended a huge meeting in San Diego, Calif., with 20,000 youth and SGI President Ikeda. I came away from the weekend with the determination to work on myself and not to focus on a boyfriend.

In fact, I became so focused on myself and on helping the other young women in my district to grow, that I got used to being alone. The few times I did start dating, I knew I was not ready for it yet.

It wasn’t until my late 20s that I started to chant for a boyfriend. All of my old insecurities came flooding back. My question was: “How is it possible to meet someone

and actually want to spend my life with him?” The idea was overwhelming.

At the same time, I was forced to work on a difficult relationship at work. My boss was abusive, demeaning and controlling. I received guidance to support her, but also to tell her how I felt. I was scared to confront her, but I did and it was a huge victory. In five years of working together, I started to change what I learned were my passive aggressive tendencies. I grew stronger, which turned our relationship into a positive one for both of us.

After many hours of chanting for a boyfriend and trying not to lose hope, I met and started dating someone in my early 30s. I was scared and elated. Amazingly, for the first time I was able to communicate with him and not just through sex. We became so close. The problem was I didn't know whether I wanted to get more serious with this man. But I chanted and was sure that I needed to continue the relationship. I fell in love with him but could not explain why I did not trust him. I really doubted myself. It was as if my heart and my head were doing battle.

When he proposed two years later, what should have been a happy event was not because I didn't know what to say. I went to a senior for guidance. Her first words were, “The reason you are confused is because the core of your life is gone.” I cried when she said this because I thought that is all that I have been trying to do all these years, to build a strong core. She shared President Ikeda's guidance that happiness is something that you create with your life. Marriage, a relationship, will not create happiness. Marriage is not a goal—if it will help me grow than OK, but if it will make me regress then I don't want it. I chanted and cried and read this guidance hundreds of times to understand it with my life.

I went into a depression; I could not sleep or eat. Every day was complete hell. I don't know how I made it through each day at work. I thought, “If this continues, I don't want to live.” I felt that there was something terribly wrong with me, so I chanted, asking the question, “What's wrong with me?” I went to a therapist.

In therapy, I learned that depression comes from anger turned inward, and that I had been depressed on and off since I was a teen.

During this time, I kept chanting as best I could. I also studied and cried because this philosophy seemed to be the only thing I understood and that made me feel better. Three weeks later, I was chanting at the New York Culture Center about the priesthood issue. I still can't explain how, but after this chanting, the worst feelings lifted.

Months later, I still could not make a decision, yes or no. My boyfriend gave up and started dating another woman. I was devastated about his decision. Thoughts of missing him and why I couldn't commit tortured me through the next year. I really wanted this thinking of him to stop. I had a deep realization that to live in either the past or the future was too painful; that I would sink back into depression if I didn't live in the present.

Finally something happened that showed me clearly that he didn't truly respect my feelings. It took a lot for me to realize this, because deep down I felt this was what I deserved, but as soon as I did, the obsessive thought “What's wrong with me?” ended.

I started chanting in a new way—to see my Buddha nature. I read one of my favorite writing from Nichiren Daishonin, “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” over and over, especially where it says to “summon up deep faith that Myoho-rence-kyo is your life itself” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 3). I started to think about myself differently, treating myself better. I started running. I went for facials and manicures.

One year later, at 37, I graduated from young women's to women's division. I still held

some bad feelings, because I felt I should have a boyfriend or be married.

After the graduation ceremony, my feelings completely changed. For the first time I felt truly happy, so light as if all of the benefits of struggling as a young woman all those years were deeply embedded in my life as fortune. All I could feel was pure joy from within to be me.

I finally understood with my life that I didn't need to be with someone or be married to be happy.

Exactly one week later, a guy that I had worked on a job with years ago called me because he wanted to learn about this practice. Of course, I said yes. Mark and I met and there was an instant attraction. He said he "could feel my strong core." This blew me away. I have to say that the timing was definitely amazing, because if he had called me even a few weeks earlier, he would not have seen such a happy woman. After nine months of dating, he proposed. I had no hesitation to say yes.

He is the perfect person for me; we just fit. The impossible became possible a year ago last July, when we were married in a beautiful Buddhist ceremony that truly came from our hearts, with our families and friends. I know now that whether I am married or not, no one can give or take away the feelings I have about myself. I feel completely free to improve myself without beating myself up in the process. I truly trust the Gohonzon and my Buddhist practice.