

**CHALLENGING RELATIONSHIPS  
EXPERIENCE—PENNY PARKER, ANNANDALE, VA.  
MY HAPPINESS IS CONNECTED TO OTHERS' HAPPINESS**

**Penny Parker says, 'I am convinced that everything I have learned in the SGI about how to care for others enabled me to help guide my family to face our hardships.'**

Before I began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism 27 years ago at age 14, I found it difficult to feel compassion for others. I loved nature — animals, plants, even rocks and soil — and was concerned about environmental protection. However, I could not seem to well up the same concern for other human beings. If some awful disaster with a large number of fatalities struck, I would think to myself, "It's for the best because the world's too populated anyway." This perception also clouded my feelings toward family members. I had no empathy for my parents, who both had big emotional hang-ups and quarreled constantly. I had nothing but contempt for them and had even entertained homicidal thoughts toward my unhappy, bullheaded father.

However, through chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, studying Buddhist teachings and engaging in SGI activities to share Buddhist wisdom with others, I gradually came to understand that my happiness is profoundly connected to others' happiness. I started to realize my happiness increases when others are happy, and that I experience deep fulfillment in life only when I take committed action to help others awaken their joy. Based on this realization, I started making more efforts to be nice to, and spend time with, my family. But, frankly, this was not easy for me, and I still kept my emotional distance from them. They did likewise.

At that time, I didn't feel strong enough to directly face their unhappiness. So, instead, as a youth, I focused my energies on participating in many SGI activities and helping friends and fellow members. During this period, I felt my sense of self — my own true identity — gradually develop and strengthen. Little did I know how much this strength would be put to the test.

In May 1993, my mother was diagnosed with tumors caused by melanoma — an aggressive form of skin cancer. Surgery was quickly scheduled because the situation was very serious, and the doctors offered little hope. I began to fear I'd soon lose my mother, and I cried for days at the thought. Why I so feared losing my mother is that I felt she had always emotionally shut herself off from others, including her daughters. I was scared that she would die, and I would have regrets because we never truly bonded.

I was in hell and sought the advice of a trusted friend in faith. She reminded me of the power of the universal law of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo and urged me to pray and act with the conviction that, even if I only had one month left with my mother, I would completely resolve any issues with her. This encouragement enabled me to pray and support my mother with renewed hope for her happiness and the strengthening of our relationship.

My mother's surgery was successful. But soon there appeared another tumor for which surgery was impossible. She underwent radiation therapy, and that tumor went away. However, more growths came, followed by rounds of chemotherapy.

As difficult as all this was for Mom, her spirits remained high. Actually, during her illness, my mother started dealing with emotional sufferings she had always held inside. Until then, she had a tendency to avoid emotionally difficult situations. If she had a

conflict with someone, she'd simply avoid that person and retreat into her shell. And, if someone raised an unpleasant topic in conversation, Mom would ignore it by immediately changing the subject. She kept everything to herself, never discussing her feelings with anyone.

The more I chanted for her happiness, the more I realized that I too, behaved similarly. I became determined to show my mother through my own example what it meant to change these unproductive habits. I stopped judging her and started listening carefully to whatever she said. And I began to notice Mom was genuinely changing for the better. For example, she agreed to meet with her sisters with whom she'd had a falling out. She started opening up about some of the painful experiences she had undergone as a child and in marriage, and seemed happier and more at ease. I was amazed at her progress.

A few months after Mom became ill, my father underwent major surgery to correct a painful ankle condition. Since he was severely diabetic, the lengthy surgery was risky, but he got through it successfully. Although the surgery removed Dad's terrible ankle pain, it rendered him unable to walk easily. My ailing mother, who had always taken care of my father, could no longer manage him.

Meanwhile, I was working full time, going to school at night and taking responsibility as the young women's leader for the SGI-USA Virginia Area. My normal tendency would be to jump in and handle matters by myself. But I realized that caring for two sick parents while trying to juggle all my responsibilities demanded that I use good judgment and work as a team player with my sisters. I chanted intensely for the wisdom to care for my parents. My sisters and I started talking and engaging with one another in ways we never had done before.

I initiated family meetings where we discussed how best to care for our parents and started to open up more to my sisters. They responded in kind. Based on our growing bonds of respect and love for one another, we came up with unique, effective ways to support our parents' needs and worked as an excellent team. Even medical staff would comment on our family's remarkable cooperation.

These extraordinary difficulties provided the perfect opportunity for our once emotionally distant family members to support one another in meaningful, loving ways. I am convinced that everything I learned in the SGI about how to care for others enabled me to help guide my family to face our hardships with remarkable good will and cooperation.

My mother lived four years beyond her initial diagnosis, and I am confident that she died with a happy heart. Her appearance at death revealed great peacefulness. And I felt our relationship had grown deeper and stronger than I ever could have imagined.

Shortly after Mom passed away in April 1997, my father's health worsened dramatically, and I decided to move in with him to manage his care. Relatives urged me to put Dad into a nursing home. Even my sisters couldn't help much because they all had families of their own. But, because I understood that taking actions for another's happiness expands my own, I had to step up to the task of supporting my father in his hour of need.

Due to an infection, Dad had to have his left leg amputated, and the powerful antibiotics he was taking further damaged his already weak kidneys, which shut down, forcing him to go on dialysis. In a procedure preparing him for dialysis, my father's nerves were damaged so that he no longer had full use of his right hand.

But with each new medical problem, Dad grew more determined to challenge his circumstances. The personal attributes that had always made him so hard to deal with —

his bullheadedness and intense intellectualism—started revealing their positive qualities: His stubbornness became perseverance, and his intellectualism turned into a fascination about life. It was a stunning transformation.

As I exerted myself on Dad's behalf, the Buddha's wisdom and energy continually emerged in my life. And, again, our family's tribulations served to draw us all even closer. My father, who had always found it so hard to praise others, started saying things to me like: "I'm so proud of you." "I don't know what I would have done without you." He also started appreciating my sisters more and, in turn, they felt more love toward him.

In the few days before his sudden death in April 1999, Dad declared how fortunate he was and repeatedly praised his medical support staff, neighbors and family. He had concluded his life in—a state of complete joy.

What I had always dreamed of and prayed for—truly bonding with my parents and uniting my family—had happened. Witnessing this has convinced me that, even though it may take time to appear, our efforts toward others really do have an effect on them—a profound effect.

I appreciate SGI President Ikeda, whose many messages to me both personally and through his articles in the *World Tribune* have led me on the path of becoming a real contributor to my family, friends and community. And I could never thank enough all of my fellow SGI members who have supported and inspired me to persevere and win over my hardships. I am winning!