

CURIOSITY, A KNOCK ON THE DOOR, AND A NEW LIFE BY EVIE SULLIVAN, BEVERLY HILLS, CALIFORNIA

This is the story of how a friendship changed the lives of three women. Evie (above, right) and Elisabeth (left) were two young actresses in Vienna and best friends. Then Evie moved to the United States, leaving Elisabeth alone and sad during her pregnancy with daughter, Valerie. But when Evie found Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, it changed the lives of all three.

When Elisabeth and I first met in 1976, we were both young and upcoming actresses at the Austrian National Theater, the Burgtheater, in Vienna, Austria. We shared a dressing room for the children's play "Little Red Riding Hood," in which Elisabeth played a vicious serpent and I had the title role. Elisabeth, the blond, blue-eyed, statuesque serpent and me, the tiny, dark-haired Little Red Riding Hood didn't have much in common.

Elisabeth was a sincere and highly respected member of the theater, whereas I was a bit flighty, egocentric, as well as a bit of a party girl. Looking back, I often wondered how we became such great friends and confidantes of one another. As a matter of fact, I never had a girlfriend who was as close and reliable as Elisabeth.

When in 1981 my lifestyle got out of hand and I sought solace in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, it was Elisabeth who stood by me in my early sobriety. She was continually comforting me and she never gave up on me. I sometimes thought that I got sober in spite of myself and to not disappoint this precious friend.

I survived my wild years but my career did not. In 1982, I was laid off from the Burgtheater. My world crumbled in pieces. I had only one goal: to leave Austria and start anew at a different place. I applied for a scholarship from the Austrian Minister of Arts and Education and was able to attend the Lee Strasberg Institute in Los Angeles. At the time, Elisabeth was a newlywed and pregnant with her first child, Valerie. When I told her about my plan of leaving Vienna, she was sad and angry. How could I leave her alone with her pregnancy — not to mention that I wouldn't be around to watch the child grow up? Nevertheless, I left.

"You're going to get benefit from the practice."

At first, I suffered major culture shock in Los Angeles, but after a while, I adjusted to my new way of life. Before long, I found a nice apartment in Santa Monica, California, and an even nicer roommate. Charley always seemed to be upbeat and positive about everything. She was divorced but she and her ex-husband Kevin shared custody of their son, Sean.

Kevin used to come frequently to our home and every time he was there, Charley and he would retire into her room and make funny humming noises together. I couldn't figure out what they were doing. One day, my curiosity got the better part of me and I knocked at Charley's door. Kevin shouted immediately: "Come in!" as if he had waited for that moment.

I will never forget the picture of the two: they sat on the floor in front of a little box with a paper scroll in it and muttered funny words. "We're chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo," explained Kevin. "We're Buddhists." Charley wrote the words on a piece of pink paper and I tried to keep up with them by reading the words over and over.

Charley knew that I was a sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous. I had shared with her that

I was looking for a form of prayer and meditation that was right for me to fulfill the twelfth step of the program. I'd tried Zen and Yoga, Vipassana and even visited the Hare Krishnas. Nothing seemed right for me. I am a "Type A" personality, always in motion, always doing ten things at once. Sitting still and contemplating my navel was practically impossible for me. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, however, fit my profile to a T. Even on the evening of introduction, I didn't want to stop chanting. "You're going to get benefit from the practice," Kevin explained.

The first person I told about my new passion was, of course, Elisabeth. As with every other event in my life, good or bad, she was always the first to know. Elisabeth listened politely but she didn't seem to share my excitement. She was at a very low point in her life, not sure about her marriage and unhappy with her career. I always admired and respected Elisabeth tremendously. Therefore, I shied away from giving her advice about how to live her life. But now, the shoe was on the other foot. I knew that if she just would chant, the answers would come to her and her life wouldn't be such a riddle anymore.

Elisabeth wasn't open to what I had to say but that didn't stop me from talking. However, I didn't just use my own limited words, I used SGI President Ikeda's guidance and his wisdom to penetrate her life. The concept of the mentor-disciple relationship is foreign to most Westerners. At first, it was foreign to me, too. But I was convinced that President Ikeda knew more than me, therefore, his wisdom would benefit Elisabeth. So, I kept sending her excerpts of the *World Tribune* and passages from the writings of Nichiren Daishonin. It took some time until I got her to repeat Nam-myoho-renge-kyo after me on the phone. When I heard her say the words, it brought tears to my eyes.

We encouraged each other to 'turn poison into medicine'

I chanted for her every day and it didn't take long until Elisabeth's life reached out for Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Shortly after she received the Gohonzon, her husband joined the SGI as well. Over the past seventeen years, Elisabeth and I have grown tremendously as we exchanged our life stories under the auspices of our Buddhist practice. What a difference that has made! Whatever happened, we just encouraged each other to "turn poison into medicine" with our chanting. I have had the good fortune to visit Vienna at least once or twice every year, spending time with Elisabeth and her family, watching her three beautiful children, Valerie, Rosie and Phillip, grow up. Elisabeth has raised them with the firm conviction that "Myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion." I feel as if the three are like my nieces and nephew. Valerie and I share a great love for literature and I always joke with Elisabeth, telling her: "She got that from me!" Elisabeth, over the years, became the sister I never had.

When Valerie expressed the wish to study at Soka University and was a little insecure about how she could reach her goal, I reminded her to read *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and encouraged her to chant vigorous daimoku. Through her strong determination, the good fortune the whole family has accumulated over the years, and through their united Buddhist practice, Valerie is now a first-year student at the university of her dreams: Soka University in Aliso Viejo, California. President Ikeda's foresight and wisdom have resulted in the establishment of a unique, world-class university, where we expect a new brand of humanists, politicians and professionals to emerge — the kind of leaders who place peace and understanding first and will make this world a safer, better place. It fills me with great pride and gratitude to see that Valerie is among them.

Valerie has reached her dreams, and come to think of it, it is amazing to see how far we've all come as we've applied our Buddhist faith to our lives.

A DREAM COME TRUE FOR ALL OF US BY ELISABETH MELICHAR-AUGUSTIN, VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Although lost in despair, in 1985, on an island in Greece, Elisabeth Melichar-Augustin watched proudly as her daughter stood among students from around the world—the first class of Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo in 2001. And she owes it all to a friend who introduced her to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

In summer 1985, on the island of Crete, I experienced the deepest sense of hopelessness ever in my life. I had left my husband, my child, my job—everything—to try to make sense of things. Although I was busy as an actress at the national theater of Vienna, Austria, where I am from, and had a wonderful husband, I suffered from depression and felt that marriage imprisoned me.

My husband, Rudolph, and I considered a divorce, and separated for a while, but this didn't change my dark life-state. And my eldest daughter, Valerie, always got sick with fevers or upset stomachs when her father was not there. Perhaps her message to us was that she wanted us to be happy together.

I had hoped that a trip to Greece would help me sort everything out as it had before. But this time I found no comfort—only a lot of tears. I could not help feeling that I was a loser, that I lived life void of my authentic self. I felt so alone.

We became friends almost instantly

In my despair, my best friend Evie Sullivan's encouraging words echoed back to me: "Try chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. It will help you."

I had met Evie, who was also an actress, in the theater in Vienna. We became friends almost instantly. By nature she was very explorative, willing to try just about anything once, including a number of spiritual practices. I, too, sought a deeper understanding of life and, following Evie's lead, tried meditation, relaxation therapy and other more traditional therapies. But these practices all seemed to be incomplete. After a while, I stopped experimenting and just watched Evie jump from one thing to the next.

Six months earlier Evie had called from Los Angeles (where she now lives) to tell me she was practicing Buddhism. She assured me this time that chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo was the "real thing." But I thought it was just another one of her phases and didn't pay much attention.

While in Crete, I remembered that I brought the Buddhist prayer book Evie had given me. Through tears, I tried chanting in my small room with the windows closed. Though I didn't know what the words meant, simply repeating them for a time seemed to lift my spirits. Afterward, I took a shower and went for a walk, taking in the sea and the blue sky. After more chanting and self-reflection, I decided to go back to my husband and family as soon as possible.

When I returned from Crete, I called Evie to say I had begun chanting. She was ecstatic. Little did I know, Evie had taught me the law of cause and effect and the essence of real friendship.

Like many newcomers, I had many questions. So Evie would send me the speeches of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, and his words allayed my fears and doubts the moment I read them. After a long search for a spiritual home, I had finally found it in this practice of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, in President Ikeda and in the SGI.

I learned that I was responsible

Half a year later, I received the Gohonzon, became a group leader, attended a European summer conference on Buddhism in the South of France, and decided to fight for kosen-rufu in Austria.

Shortly afterward, Evie came to Vienna to congratulate me and brought a little toy dog for Valerie. Valerie named the dog Jona and she slept with it in her bed all the time; Jona became her favorite toy.

Little by little, as I practiced, I learned that I was responsible for my happiness and could no longer blame my environment. I also learned to express my feelings, and Rudolph and I healed our relationship. Because I changed, my husband began to practice and we discovered a stable base for our relationship: to chant daimoku together for kosen-rufu and for our happiness. Many other family members and friends saw this growth and happiness develop and began to chant, too. Soon after we had our second child, Rosalie Yoko.

Of course, in sixteen years of Buddhist practice, more dreams have come true than I could have ever dared to imagine.

In his letter “Reply to Kyo’o,” Nichiren Daishonin writes: “Those who embrace the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra will be protected” and they will “enjoy peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 412). Just as this practice promises, our great fortune encompasses our loved ones.

When my daughter, Valerie, was born, Evie came over from America to welcome her. She saw her little face and said: “This child is happy to be here. She is your treasure. She will guide you in the future.” And she loved her from that first moment on.

In 1992, President Ikeda came for a short visit to Vienna. The members waited for him in the Vienna Stadtpark at the Johann Strauss monument for a group photo. I walked with Valerie and Rosie a few steps in the direction from which we expected him to come. When President Ikeda arrived, the children began to run toward him full of joy. Somebody took a photo of this moment. I have a copy, which remains a treasure in my life. It is also a very meaningful picture for Valerie. President Ikeda stretched his right arm toward her and said: “You are a nice girl.” This all happened within a few seconds.

Years later, when Valerie was a teenager, she went through a very difficult time, an emotional crisis. We suggested that she receive the Gohonzon and strengthen her practice with a fresh perspective. We wanted her to understand how important her life was. This action helped propel her life forward, helping Valerie to see that her life had meaning and that she could create value. On the day we enshrined her Gohonzon, my husband and I felt profoundly certain that Valerie was on her path toward happiness.

My friend was very determined Valerie would attend Soka University

Two years ago, Austrian General Director Yoshio Nakamura told us that Soka University was opening in Aliso Viejo, California, just outside of Los Angeles. He is a very direct man who treats the members as if they were his own children. “I want Valerie to apply from Europe,” he said.

I thought it would be wonderful and hoped Valerie would consider it. My friend Mr. Nakamura was very determined that Valerie would attend Soka University, despite Valerie’s concerns of leaving friends and family and our reservations about finances, and he chanted resolutely with us.

To make a long story short, I’ve come to Los Angeles to visit my dear friend Evie. In all the years past, it was she who came to Vienna to see and support me. Now, for the first time, I’ve

come to see her in her romantic apartment in Beverly Hills. Together Evie and I brought “our nice girl” Valerie to Aliso Viejo on Saturday, August 18, to help her settle in as a student of the first class of SUA. Valerie brought just one suitcase filled with her clothes, her sutra book, many big goals, and, not to mention, her toy dog, Jona.

I am so proud that Valerie has challenged herself to come to the United States to attend Soka University of America. This is a big step. It’s her first trip outside of Europe and, of course, being so far from her friends and family will not be so easy. Yet I have confidence in my daughter; I see a courageous young woman blossoming with a wonderful future ahead of her and so much to contribute.

Since my visit to the beautiful SUA campus with Evie and my daughter having met the faculty and joined in the entrance ceremony, I realize Valerie will be well cared for. As the founder of Soka University, Daisaku Ikeda remarked in his message to the students at the entrance ceremony: “Each person has a purpose that he or she alone can fulfill. A person who pursues the fulfillment of this mission to the very end, whatever the obstacles, is a true victor in life” (*World Tribune*, September 7, 2001, p. 9). She is on her own path of victory now. I feel as if a dream has come true, not only for Valerie, but also for so many of us. From the depths of my heart, I want to thank all the people who have made this dream possible.

ACCEPTING OTHERS THROUGH ACCEPTING MYSELF BY VALERIE MELICHAR

Nineteen-year-old Valerie Melichar traveled half-way around the globe in search of a unique education—and found herself. She is becoming the change she wishes to see in the world.

The past nineteen years of my life growing up in Austria have been very comfortable, protected years. I grew up in a peaceful country and Buddhist household with great parents who always respected my feelings and opinions. I have a wonderful sister and caring friends who always support me. All my life I felt loved and secure. Nevertheless I have often felt that my life lacked any purpose. I knew I wanted to contribute to the society I was living in but did not know how I could do this. The political situation in Austria and the mentality of many Austrians often made me very angry. In October 1999, the new government was elected. The Austrian Liberal Party (“Freiheitliche Partei Oesterreich”) gained a great number of votes in that election, in fact they received nearly thirty percent of the total votes. This was very frustrating to me because this party stands for many ideas I cannot accept. Their campaign had been very racist and intolerant, trying to arouse the Austrians’ negative feelings toward foreigners and refugees. Many of their slogans suggested that the foreigners were the ones committing the majority of crimes, dealing drugs and the like. What disappointed me most though, was not the fact that it was possible to have a campaign like this in Austria, but that it appealed to many Austrians.

Are all crimes committed by foreigners?

I had many conversations and arguments with people who did not share my opinions and usually I felt helpless and frustrated afterward. I saw that my anger, my crying and my frustration did not change a thing. I felt paralyzed. I knew I wanted to fight injustice, prejudice, racism and intolerance, but I did not know how or where to start.

One day I called the hotline of this particular party and talked to one of the employees for

about half an hour. I was just asking him questions and I tried to stay very calm. I asked him why one of the party's brochures made it sound like all the crimes in Austria were committed by foreigners. At the end of our conversation, the man understood the point I was trying to make and apologized to me for the ambiguous way his party's brochure was worded. He even asked me if I would like it if the party leader, Mr. Haider, called me to talk further about my concerns. I said I would very much like to speak to him. Then I had to tell the man my age (I was seventeen at the time — not a potential voter) and that was the last I heard from them.

Again I felt helpless and frustrated because even if I had the potential to create a change in my environment, I was not old enough and not educated enough to be taken seriously. I was a member of a political youth organization for a while, but the main focus of this group was to organize parties and events; we did not really get involved in the political situation of the country.

This August I came to Soka University of America as one of the first 120 students of this university. My first few days here were very hard and very confusing. For the first time in my life, I found myself in an environment where there was no one I knew and no one I could run to for comfort when I felt insecure. This situation caused me to think a lot about myself. I realized that many of the things I wanted to fight were actually in me. I acted unjustly at times, I had great fears, and often my insecurity turned into anger or aggression.

During my first week at the university, Arun Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, gave a lecture on nonviolence. One of the things he said made the problem I was having much clearer for me. He said that if we want to change anything in this world, we have to start by changing ourselves, because the violence in the world is the reflection of the violence within us. I realized I could never achieve anything if I felt weak or if I was led by a negative energy such as anger. For me the only possibility of converting this negative energy into a positive energy that can enable me to create value is through daimoku and education.

I want to live a contributive life

Daisaku Ikeda says, "The mission of Soka University of America is to foster a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life." I think this is the key to my frustration: I want to live a contributive life. I think the education I will receive here at SUA will be the foundation I need to reach this goal. Before trying to change things, I have to understand how this world works. I am still not sure in what way I will be able to contribute to society, but I feel a very strong energy within every single student of this university. I think that we are all very courageous and determined to do everything we can to promote peace and justice in this world. It truly encourages and motivates me to be surrounded by people who are constantly striving to improve themselves and their environment.

One of the problems we have here at SUA though, is that we are still quite secluded from the community. There is a shuttle bus that will take us to local markets or stores, but other than that we spend most of our time on campus. I think this can easily cause us to forget that not everyone shares the same spirit and the same values we have. I think it is important for us to keep in mind that it is much harder to stand up for one's beliefs when one is confronted by people who oppose and criticize them. I hope at SUA we will be able to acquire the strength and determination we need to overcome any obstacle in our way. I know that I will never give up this fight as long as I have faith in the Gohonzon. My Buddhist practice helps me to believe in myself and to overcome my weaknesses.

In the past month, I have realized a lot about myself while I was chanting. When I first came here, it was very hard for me to bond and create friendships with the other students. I was starting to feel very unhappy with myself, because I thought there must be something wrong

with me since I could not open up to others. I now think the root of the difficulties I had related to honesty. I realized that if I could not be honest with myself and accept myself, it would be impossible for me to be honest with other people. Once I realized this, I started to chant about it and I began to feel more open.

I've met so many amazing people that I am now able to call my friends. Already I feel a strong connection to many of them. I feel that I am taking a different approach toward friendship now. For the first time, I do not feel I have to prove anything to anyone nor do I feel inferior or superior to anyone. I think the reason for this is that I have stopped making these judgments about other people.

This small example in my own life has shown me that sometimes a difficult situation is necessary for change to happen. The change for the better in me was only possible when I was away from the security of my home, thrown into a completely new culture and environment. I have now made the determination that I do not want to let myself become discouraged, no matter what difficulties I face. Instead I want to use obstacles as the catalyst for improvement in myself and in my environment. If I manage to do this, I am converting negative energy, like anger or fear, into the positive energy I need to promote peace and justice wherever I am.