

EXPERIENCE—JUANITA H. MABERRY, ALEXANDRIA, VA. STRONG FAITH TRANSFORMS FAMILY FEUD

After 20 years, Juanita Maberry and her husband break down the racial barriers that divided her family.

Twenty years ago, my husband, John, and I began preparations for our wedding. It was a time of conflicting emotions. I was happy because I was getting married and beginning a new life; I was sad because I was doing so against my family's wishes. My parents and I had, to put it mildly, an argument, which resulted in my being exiled from the family.

I was going against the "rules" of the family. I am a black woman who was considering marriage to a white man. They both were worried about what our relatives and others would think and say. As well intending as they may have been, I did not feel they were considering my happiness, my future or my ability to make decisions.

My father had very strong memories of how some white people had treated him and his family in the past. Although I understood his concerns, I had become the type of person who did not live in the past. I knew what I was doing was right, yet I couldn't make my parents understand.

After agonizing over my decision, I chose to disobey my parents and follow my heart. Even if the marriage were not to last and I were to find out later that I had made a mistake, it had to be my mistake to make. For the first time in my life, I didn't do what my father said.

Right after John and I announced our intention to marry, my father threatened to kill us. I knew that he was capable of carrying out his threat, and I was scared to death. We went from family member to family member to try and get them to intervene. That only made matters worse. My father was having me watched. Even though I never noticed anyone watching me, he could tell me what time I came home, especially when I had been out with John. My brother and his wife started trying to arrange dates for me with eligible black bachelors. They invited me over and tried to talk me out of my marriage plans. After I was not convinced to change my mind, the family gathered to tell me how I was a disgrace to the family.

I was also forced to sell my house, co-owned with my father, and move into an apartment. Drawing on his past experience—my father's aunts had been taken advantage of by some white men, and had a general distrust of white people—my father was convinced that John was going to quit his job and I'd be supporting us both. Right! On my government secretary's salary. I don't think so. John had just passed the Virginia Bar, and today he has a good job with the Fairfax County Government. I've since moved from the secretarial field to my current job as a publishing professional for the Army.

John and I considered moving from the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area—to California perhaps. As things went from bad to worse, we finally sought guidance from a fellow SGI member. We were told that by considering a move, we were using strategies other than the Lotus Sutra. He said that we could move, but we couldn't escape our karma. We had to chant for my father's happiness and to have a successful, safe wedding. We decided to follow this advice, and as we did, I knew it could be 20 years before we would reconcile our differences. It might be a long time before I would see my family again.

I decided to revitalize my sometimes inconsistent practice. My husband and I began to chant an hour or two a day. I started doing full morning gongyo on a regular basis, something that had been a rarity up to this point. When someone threatens to kill you, you find a way to get up and do morning gongyo before going to work.

Our wedding went off without any problems—but also without any of my family attending. We invited our co-workers, and the Buddhist ceremony gave us an opportunity to introduce them to Buddhism. We had been praying to be able to get married safely, without an incident—and we did.

From my wedding day forward, I was able to chant for my father's happiness more earnestly than before. I felt a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders: my fear had disappeared. I no longer feared that my father would be waiting for me with a gun wherever I went.

My hope was to get my family back together again. Through it all, I would remember a passage from "Happiness in this World": "Though worldly troubles may arise, never let them disturb you. No one can avoid problems, not even saints or worthies.... Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life and continue chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, no matter what happens. How could this be anything other than the boundless joy of the Law?" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 681). Even today when I'm going through hard times, this passage encourages me to persevere.

My husband and I continued to chant for my father's happiness as we started a new life together. Right before a trip to Japan, I called my father for the first time in two years and we had a brief conversation. Shortly after I found out I was pregnant with our first child, I called my father again. He was surprisingly happy. This positive response fueled the fire of our faith and my husband and I continued to chant for my father's happiness.

My husband's goal was to be able to shake my father's hand by the end of that year. I thought he was crazy to set such a goal, but then, I had become pregnant when I had been told I couldn't, so why not? When my parents came to the hospital to see the baby, my husband took this as an opportunity. My father shook his hand. Our family was back together again, and only two years after we were married.

Today, my father is 83 and suffering from Alz-heimer's disease. He forgets that he's been to my house; he forgets that he just asked me how everything is going; but when I call him, he never forgets my husband. He always has something nice to say to John when we're over and scolds me for not bringing him when I visit by myself. Dad always lets us know that my husband is included in the family and that he thinks well of John. Their relationship far exceeds my expectations of 20 years ago.

I feel all our family relationships are better than ever as a result of the split and subsequent reunion. We don't take one another for granted, and when we see each other, there is an appreciation I could never have imagined. A unity I will always treasure.