

EXPERIENCE—NANCY SIMMS LEE, LOS ANGELES REPAYING DEBTS OF GRATITUDE

Nancy Simms Lee reevaluates her relationship with her mother and realizes that things were not what they seemed.

I'm giving you this red carnation on Mother's Day as a reminder to you about your mother, to whom you've not begun to repay your debt of gratitude."

It was Mother's Day, 1992, and I was nearing the end of a two-week SGI Training Course in Japan. These rather strict words came from SGI President Ikeda, as did the carnation. I sensed that President Ikeda was aware of the distance between my mother and me.

At that time, my mother and stepfather were living in my hometown of Santa Fe, N.M., keeping themselves busy caring for their collective crew of nine children and their spouses. My father was living a very quiet and secluded existence in another state. Well on their way to establishing their careers and families, my three younger siblings were living in various Southwest states.

President Ikeda's words spurred me into thinking about my relationship with my mother. My memories of growing up were basically pleasant. However, when I tried to chant about her, there was a battle raging between what I believed in my heart and what I thought in my mind. Walls were up between us. I thought she was disappointed in me and didn't accept my Buddhist practice.

If I'd learned anything from President Ikeda, it was that Buddhism is about the heart—opening one's heart to oneself and to others. What could I sincerely chant for—not out of formality, but from my heart? Certainly, not for her to practice Buddhism, I thought, because she's strong in her own faith and active in her church.

Soon, I began wholeheartedly and consistently chanting for my mother's and father's happiness and good health. I fully expected that my prayers would be answered, I just didn't know how.

About six months later, I was talking with my mother on the phone and she said: "Yesterday, I was talking with my Episcopal minister about my four children. I told him, 'I have two children who are practicing Christians, one who is a non-practicing Christian and one daughter who is a Buddhist.'" I took a deep breath, expecting the worst.

"I told him," she continued, "I have more respect for my daughter the Buddhist than anyone on this planet, because she is so intent on helping other people."

I was astounded. Clearly, it wasn't my mother who was putting up the wall between us; it was I. She wasn't judging me. I was judging her. She had unconditional love for me. Did I have the same for her? The answer was painfully clear to me—no. Determined to eradicate my shallow, negative attitude, my prayer got a little deeper. A few weeks later when I suggested she chant to help her insomnia, she cheerfully agreed to do so.

This was a wake-up call and the beginning of the meltdown of the ice around my heart. I began to face my resentments that I had kept tucked away for so long.

I resented my mother because I believed she was living in a dream world, not dealing with the emotional needs of her family members, including me, especially when our family was falling apart.

I resented my father, because in the face of seemingly insurmountable financial and

legal problems, he had become overwhelmed with guilt, thrown up his hands and left.

Looking deeper, I realized that I was the one causing my own suffering because of my judgment of my parents. My resentments had to go. In reality, my parents loved each other and us. They simply didn't have the capacity to overcome their obstacles together at that time. Forty years later I know they tried their best.

Slowly, like taking arrows out of a wounded heart, I continued my quest to purify my life. On another occasion during the training course, President Ikeda said: "You can devote your life to your friends and family and put forth effort toward their happiness. However, please do not be swayed by these responsibilities. Please live for your own sake, pursuing the life you choose."

Live for my own sake? I had simply defined myself in accordance with the roles I played—I was a wife, mother, daughter, editor, teacher and leader. And as far as the path I was following—well, others' expectations of me and my seeking approval from them determined it.

It became painfully clear to me that I was in so much denial that I was very insensitive to others' feelings and the cause of much angst among those around me. I wasn't taking personal responsibility for myself on a fundamental level. And this included my attitude toward my parents.

About four years ago my dad became deathly ill with emphysema. My brother and sister and I convinced him to move back to Santa Fe. At the age of 72, he went back to work with his former construction partner and slowly began coming to family functions. He re-established old friendships and made new ones. His health has been restored and there's no sign of his emphysema. Now he spends every holiday with us—including my mother and stepfather—thoroughly enjoying his grandchildren.

Two years ago, I visited my mother to help her put together family photo albums. I learned things about her during this period that I had never known. When my mother was 18, her mother committed suicide after a long battle with addictions, which began when my physician grandfather had treated her tuberculosis with morphine. Hearing for the first time the intensity of my mother's suffering, I found it amazing that she was able to raise four basically healthy children.

During her 78th birthday dinner, my high school friend serenaded her in Spanish, singing the song, "Marta," which she said her mother had sung to her when she was a child, some 60 years before. Seeing the vulnerable look of a newborn baby on her face, I began to cry. I felt as though my heart was about to burst with joy.

I'm finally at the point of having no unfinished business or regrets concerning my mother, only appreciation that we have come around full circle to the pure love of a mother and daughter again. I feel strongly that the karma of the women in my family seven generations in the past and in the future is changing, just as Nichiren Daishonin promises in his writings.

It's with a sense of awe that I'm now witnessing the beauty of my daughter, Flora, who at the age of 26 is carrying the legacy of the women in our family. Flora is a strong-willed, incredible woman. Her grandmother, my mom, financed her master's degree program, from which she graduated with honors. A very talented educator, Flora was named Rookie Teacher of the Year at her elementary school. She's given much thought to how to include her extended family for her fall wedding. She'll be honoring both her father, Jerry Tangen, who passed away almost 10 years ago, and her stepfather, Bob Simms, when she dances with Bob for the "father-daughter" dance. She has asked both my father and stepfather to

walk her down the aisle, knowing of their mutual respect. They have agreed to do so. My 89-year-old stepfather, Allen Stamm, is even considering buying a tux for the occasion.

My mom and I visit frequently these days, as her health is fragile. I truly cherish each moment we spend together. Last Christmas, we were driving through a snowstorm together when Mom said that she wants to take me on a cruise this year. “No, Mom,” I said, “I want to take you on a cruise, to repay my debt of gratitude.” Several weeks later I won a cruise for two to Bermuda.

On one level, I feel I’m just beginning to repay my debt of gratitude. But on another, deeper level, I feel that within the realm of mother and daughter, there is infinite potential within each and every moment to continue to repay one’s debt of gratitude.