

EXPERIENCE—MARC GOLDENBERG, WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. KEEPING A PROMISE

Through 25 years of practice, Marc Goldenberg has learned the importance of prayer and commitment.

When I was growing up, every Friday evening at my grandparents' house the entire family shared Sabbath. My grandfather read the *Siddur* (Jewish prayer book) assiduously in the morning and evening, attended *Shul* (synagogue) twice a day, and gave me a deep appreciation for sincere religious practice.

The discussion at dinner usually centered on news about the family or remembrances about who survived World War II and who made it to Israel. Some of my grandmother's family and friends were forced by the Nazis to walk into a river, where they were shot. I grew up feeling that the so-called "chosen people" had suffered a great deal.

In October 1973, a girlfriend introduced me to the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. At my first discussion meeting, I felt extremely negative, wondering if I was praying to idols. I was so angry afterward, I couldn't talk to my friend for three weeks. Then, once I got hold of myself, I agreed to try chanting on my own to prove my friend wrong. I decided I would read the sutra book and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as an experiment for a month, and then stop for a month to see how I felt.

When I went to synagogue, I noticed what seemed a constant discussion of illness among the attendees, but none at Buddhist meetings, so I assumed that Buddhists must have a higher life-condition, although I couldn't articulate this at the time. This was a large part of the reason, at the age of 18, I decided to receive the Gohonzon. I remember feeling as if bricks had been removed from my shoulders, and that I no longer had a ball and chain tied around my foot pulling me toward a certain destiny. I began practicing with an SGI-USA district in North Kingston, R.I.

I also became very curious about Japanese culture. So much so that the following spring, I became an exchange student so I could study in Japan. Once there, I met many other Soka Gakkai members and began practicing with the organization. This is also where I met my future wife, Hisae.

When I returned to the United States in 1976, I did not know what direction to take with my life. My parents had finally divorced after years of bickering. At school, I had been a pharmacy major, but ended up graduating from the University of Rhode Island in 1978 with a degree in political science. Once out of school, I got a job in New York with Mitsubishi International Corporation handling logistics in the ferrous raw materials department, but was let go just before Hisae and I got married in May 1980.

I participated in many SGI activities, including SGI President Ikeda's visit to New York in 1981, however, I was struggling to find steady work. I drove a truck for a printing company, worked at a number of fast food places and pumped gas. I hustled, doing anything to make money. Quite honestly, I felt lost. I remember my eyes began to tear up every night on the graveyard shift at the gas station, as I thought about sharing my struggle with my leaders. But I would always decide not to.

In 1981, we had a new baby, Charles, and because of financial pressures, things began to go from bad to worse. I was practicing Buddhism, but more out of habit than commitment. I began receiving unemployment insurance and food stamps, and my wife

and I discussed whether we could afford to go to McDonald's for hamburgers. At one point, out of anger and frustration, I even struck Hisae in the face. I was suffering, and so was my family.

After nine months of living with my mind closed, I finally decided to call one of my leaders for advice and encouragement. But before I could, he called me. I remember his words very clearly: "You have to pray." I will never forget crying to him on the phone, asking, "What is prayer?" Looking back, it was as though, after seven years of practice, I didn't understand the simple profundity of honest prayer to the Gohonzon.

The Daishonin wrote: "You must pray to the heavenly gods with all your heart. Be ever diligent in your faith so that your desires will be fulfilled" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 452). Using this passage as a touchstone, I began to see how serious my prayers had to be. I began to chant differently, with more of a purpose, and I began to devote more energy to my activities in the organization. Once I did this, things began to change.

I eventually landed a position with the Civil Service of Westchester County as a buyer and was promoted just eight months later to senior buyer, which is the position I hold today. I purchase electronic and telecommunications equipment, lab and medical equipment, bulk chemicals and clothing for the county. This job has not only allowed me to establish stability for my family, it has given me a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. I have been with the county for more than 15 years.

The second important change had to do with my father. For quite some time, my relationship with my father had been strained. I have clear memories of growing up, when my father would come home, listen to music, yell at my mother and then go to sleep. There were times when he would literally push me up against a wall and grill me about my homework. Oftentimes he and my mother would fight, and I got involved in extracurricular activities at school just to stay away from the house.

But after I began chanting determined daimoku with a clear purpose, our relationship began to change. I realized he had always shown concern for my education and been open-minded toward new things. He supported me when I went to study in Japan and came to Japan when my wife and I were married. And now, he has even visited the SGI-USA's Florida Nature and Culture Center. I have really grown to appreciate him.

For the last five years, we have spoken nearly every day, and today I am responsible for my father's retirement investment funds. By supporting him, I have discovered that I enjoy and have a talent for working with investments. I now plan on taking Securities and Exchange Commission exams for investment counseling. Although my career with Westchester County continues to improve, I am considering starting my own investment company.

Looking back at my practice of Buddhism, I can see I have really changed. I have developed the wisdom to take care of my family, my career and my responsibilities within the SGI. I have the courage to realize my dreams.

My wife and I have been married now for 21 years and have raised three wonderful children who never cease to amaze us with their resilience and strength. Our oldest son, Charles, is now attending Brown University on a scholarship, and our other children, Sandra and Brian, are both doing well and practicing with the SGI organization.

Twenty-five years ago, I made a promise to myself that I would make the most of this Buddhist practice. I am now beginning to see the great value of that pledge.

I know that my growth, and my family's growth, would not have been possible without the support of our family and our friends in the SGI. With that in mind, I will continue to do whatever I can to create a harmonious family and a strong SGI-USA organization.