

EXPERIENCE—MARY WILLIAMS, BRONX, N.Y. A LIFE OF VICTORY AMID HARSH REALITIES

Mary Williams learns how to live the meaning of the phrase ‘the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat’ while overcoming obstacles both professional and personal.

I come from a dysfunctional family. My father, while a successful businessman, was for many years unable to achieve personal happiness. Although my mother is a gifted artist and writer, she never attended college and did not fulfill her own intellectual and artistic dreams. My parents were divorced after 32 years of marriage.

Perhaps because of their own disappointments, both my parents valued education and hoped their four children would excel. I graduated from a prestigious college and served in the Peace Corps, when I chose teaching as my vocation. I wanted a career that offered intellectual as well as emotional satisfaction.

Before I received the Gohonzon, I had completed a master’s degree in teaching English and was enrolled in a doctoral program. I was happily teaching at Hostos Community College when my world fell apart. In rapid succession I lost my job and got divorced, a few months after giving birth to my second child.

Like my parents, I had struggled mightily to sustain a bad marriage. My husband, while loving in many ways, was emotionally and physically abusive. After repeated attempts to get marital counseling, which he refused, I asked for a separation and he threatened to kill me. We were divorced in six weeks. Our son was barely 3, our daughter just under a year old.

Resourceful, I was able to get another job as English Department chair at a good suburban high school. However, my dream of getting a doctorate receded. Fortunately, a close colleague, who had lost her job, encouraged me to appeal my non-reappointment at the previous job. My appeal was granted unanimously by an arbitration panel nearly two years later. Although afraid, I returned to the college.

A few years later, my daughter’s nursery school dance teacher, Margie Joffe, introduced me to Buddhism. When asked what my dreams were, I immediately replied that one major goal was getting a doctorate.

Just as I got started again, I became pregnant with my third child at the age of 42, a son born out of wedlock in December 1985. I had deeply desired a third child, so his birth, despite my not being married to his father, who suffered from clinical depression, was tremendous actual proof of my practice. My two older children, then 9 and 7, cherished and supported the family’s “fortune baby.”

Although my younger son’s father was well educated, with a doctorate in physics and a good job as a research scientist, I suffered from a similar, albeit more passive, abuse in my relationship with him. Because of my practice to the Gohonzon, I was able to summon enough wisdom to terminate this relationship before, rather than after, marriage.

Despite, or perhaps because of my assiduous practice, obstacles continued to appear. Over the next three years my ex-husband and others filed nine reports of child abuse. Eventually I was able to “turn poison into medicine.” I found a wonderful caseworker who became my protector and advocate. My pediatrician also supported me by saying, “You

need not fear the truth.” After countless hours of chanting to the Gohonzon and receiving guidance from my SGI leaders, all of the reports were eventually deemed “unfounded.”

Although beset with heavy personal and financial challenges, I still dreamed of getting a Ph.D. Armed with strong prayers to the Gohonzon, I was able to take advantage of a doctoral completion seminar, and in six months I finished writing my dissertation. I graduated in May 1992, with my three children attending the graduation ceremonies.

Encouraged by members and colleagues to continue excelling, I applied for appointment to assistant professor. I was awarded tenure in 1996. The next spring I was elected chair of the English Department and immediately ran into severe obstacles. Since many students failed the Writing Assessment Test, mandated for graduation by the Board of Trustees due to insufficient preparation before college, the college president resigned. The new president promptly asked me to resign. The president of the Student Government and the chair of the Student Senate also asked publicly for my resignation, amidst accusations of my own and the department’s incompetence.

Nichiren Daishonin writes in “The Eight Winds”: “Worthy persons deserve to be called so because they are not carried away by the eight winds: prosperity, decline, disgrace, honor, praise, censure, suffering, and pleasure. They are neither elated by prosperity nor grieved by decline” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 794). After chanting about the president’s request, I told her I could not resign because my department had elected me.

While attacks on the department did not diminish immediately, three years later, at the end of my term as chair, the president warmly thanked me for my service to the department and the college. The student government leaders began smiling at me and saying: “You’ve changed. All the students like you now.” Many of the students had great success passing the new writing test after attending my writing workshop. The department, under review after our recently completed self-study, received a glowing affirmation.

My dreams today include getting another degree, a master’s of fine arts in creative writing. I am looking at ways to apply for appointment to associate professor. My personal life has also changed dramatically. I have been seeing a man for over two years. He is emotionally stable and financially secure, with much insight and a good sense of humor. He respects me, my children and my Buddhist practice.

As for my children, my older son, now 25, is in his second year of teaching oral English in China and is thinking of becoming a teacher when he returns to the United States. My daughter, almost 23, has become a serious student, majoring in philosophy in Los Angeles, after spending a year in Shanghai, China, and another in Paris after her high school graduation. My younger son, the “fortune baby,” now almost 16, is a typical teenager, more interested in the ladies than in school. However, this past summer he took to the stage in the SGI-USA Family Youth Festival at Madison Square Garden.

Throughout my 17 years of practice to the Gohonzon, I have received countless benefits. I have used my challenges to encourage others. Today I am able to rejoice when obstacles appear, because I know that my daily practice, coupled with encouragement from SGI President Ikeda and my SGI family, will help me to overcome and use each struggle as a springboard to my happiness. I am determined to practice for the rest of my life and to help others do the same.